

Interview with YA Mystery

Author Valerie Sherrard

By: Brianne Carter

Valerie Sherrard is a Canadian author of children's and YA books. From 2002-2008, she published the *Shelby Belgarden* mystery series, which tell the story of Shelby Belgarden, a teen who solves mysteries in a small New Brunswick town. I had the opportunity to interview Sherrard about the series, the process of writing mysteries, and her thoughts on the mystery genre in general.

Brianne Carter (BC): What drew you to writing mystery novels?

Valerie Sherrard (VS): I didn't set out to write mysteries. In fact, when the idea for my mystery series first occurred to me, I wasn't sure I could do it. I knew nothing about writing mysteries! In fact, at that point, I'd only written one book for teens and it hadn't been published or even signed – although several publishers were considering it. But the mystery series idea kept growing and growing and I finally decided to run it by the editor who seemed most interested in the other book I'd written. He was enthusiastic about the idea and told me he'd like to see the first

book as soon as it was finished, so I went ahead and gave it a try.

BC: What was your inspiration for the *Shelby Belgarden* series?

VS: The idea for the mystery series came to me because of my extensive work with teens in crisis over the years. Many of the teens I had known had gone through difficulties and they often engaged in very specific behaviours as a direct result of things they had experienced themselves. For example, some young people who have been victims of sexual abuse will be drawn to setting fires when they get a little older. That is what inspired the first *Shelby Belgarden* story, and when possible, I tried to work a social cause and effect into the stories.

BC: What kind of research went into the *Shelby Belgarden* series?

VS: I didn't do a lot of research for the series because I was chiefly basing the crimes on social events when possible, and those were familiar to me because of my work with young people who had experienced a wide range of life situations. So, aside from a little fact-checking, there wasn't much background information required.

BC: The *Shelby Belgarden* series is set in Little River, NB. Is there anything particularly mysterious about that town that motivated you to use it as the setting?

VS: No, in fact, I didn't even know there was a real Little River, NB until after the series was established. I also hadn't intended to specify which province the stories took place in – that happened by accident when one of the publicists I worked with wrote that it was in NB in a press release and the catalogue copy for one of the earliest books. It had been my intention to leave the location open as a small town somewhere in Canada.

BC: You live in a pretty unique house (a converted funeral home.) Have you ever drawn inspiration for your work from your home's past?

VS: No. Although my home used to be a funeral home it's pretty ordinary looking and there have been no tie-ins to anything I've written thus far.

BC: In your opinion, what makes for a good mystery novel?

VS: I enjoy reading mysteries where there are clues and red herrings and you think you've got it solved only to find out you're

wrong. A surprise at the end is great and the challenge of trying to figure it out is always fun.

BC: What are some of the challenges of writing mystery novels?

VS: The biggest challenge is giving the reader enough information to possibly solve the mystery -- so they won't feel cheated later on, but doing it in a way that they don't recognize the clues until it's too late. The other thing is having parallel stories – there need to be things happening outside the mystery, so that readers will feel some sense of connection to the main character and even the supporting characters.

BC: Do you have any favourite mystery novels, TV shows, or movies? What are they?

VS: I enjoy a lot of mystery stories – and my favourite shows/movies are mysteries/thrillers/courtroom dramas that are really clever and surprise you.

BC: What advice would you give to a teen who wants to be an author?

VS: Read. Read more. Keep reading. The more you read the better a writer you will become.