

The Gang of Three

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Maria Johs follows up her first cozy mystery, *Deadly Encounter*, with another story of murder in the small town of Peartree, Scotland.

For the first time in forty years, wealthy Elmer MacFarland has taken his wife out on the town to celebrate the newly opened recreation hall which Elmer helped to plan. When they arrive home, they encounter a burglar and are both attacked. Elmer doesn't survive, and Julia suffers injuries. Detectives Angus MacLanahan and Tom Nicholson begin to investigate the crimes, which were preceded by a mysterious man falling out of the MacFarlands' tree a week before.

Johs wastes no time developing the story's setting or her characters' backstories. In fact, readers may feel disoriented by the varying clues to the time period. On the one hand, Julia MacFarland has sewn her own dress for the upcoming dance and the man who fell from the tree dropped a notebook full of code and phone numbers, which may form a picture in readers' minds of an Agatha Christie-era village. On the other hand, MacLanahan carries a cell phone, and one of the suspects owns an electronics store, indicating that the story takes place in the present. Readers who are unfamiliar with the author's first novel may not even realize that Peartree is located in Scotland until halfway through the book. Better scene-setting would help prevent this confusion.

Throughout the story, readers meet a number of characters with an apparent motive for bumping off old Elmer, including his son and daughter-in-law and the man who fell from the tree. "It was his lifestyle, sir," Elmer's neighbor explains to MacLanahan. "He was always grubbing for money, which, I hardly need to say, he didn't need. He was one of the wealthiest men in Peartree."

The novel is well-plotted with story threads that fit together well. Although Johs drops hints throughout, the identities of the members of the treacherous "gang of three" will still surprise readers. The growing feelings between Nicholson and his former fiancée who has just returned from London are skillfully incorporated and add a human element that would otherwise be lacking, due to the absence of character development.

The author has an unfortunate habit of occasionally referring to characters by their full names and titles, even long after readers have become acquainted with them. This may lead careless readers to believe that a new character is being introduced.

The Gang of Three will be most enjoyable to those already familiar with Peartree and its residents, but readers looking for a quick, entertaining cozy mystery with echoes from the past will not be disappointed.

WHITNEY HALLBERG (June 28, 2010)

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