



In her new novel, *Alone in the Classroom*, author Elizabeth Hay delves into the dark side of human nature.

Aaron Lynett, Postmedia News

# Love, murder and mystery in small town

**KELLY PATTERSON  
POSTMEDIA NEWS**

**L**ate August in the Ottawa Valley, in the heart of the Depression.

Children scatter through the bush to pick berries, in the beautiful, savage landscape, with its blood-red raspberries and blueberries “abloom with ghostly light.” Later, one of the children is found in a pool of blood, raped and murdered.

That is the gripping beginning of Elizabeth Hay’s new novel, *Alone in the Classroom*. A multilayered tale, the novel is at once a love story, a journey into the darkest chambers of the human heart.

Much of the tale unfolds in the Ottawa area, evoked so vividly that you can almost taste the berries on the vine, smell the scent of the red maple she describes “staining the air crimson with its minute, discreet blossoms.”

Hay’s latest book will undoubtedly put Ottawa in the international spotlight, just as her last book, *Late Nights on Air*, did for the North after it won the Scotiabank Giller Prize in 2007.

At the centre of the new novel is Parley Burns, a chilling, strangely charismatic school principal. We see him through the eyes of Connie, a young teacher who first met him in the small town of Jewel, Sask., in 1929. Nicknamed “Parley” for his knowledge of French, he has a “tweedy, sophisticated, perverse” presence that fascinates and repels Connie: “He smiled (when he smiled) by baring his teeth, then holding the grimace to a count of five . . . a very long time if you were suggestible.” He takes a disquieting



**REVIEW**

**Alone in the Classroom**

By Elizabeth Hay  
McClelland & Stewart,  
\$29.99

interest in Susan Graves, one of his students, and falls under suspicion when he detains her after school one day; the incident soon escalates into tragedy, and he abruptly leaves town at the end of the term.

Years later, when she has moved to Ottawa, Connie discovers Burns living in the town where a girl is murdered while berry-picking. Burns is now a well-regarded high school principal, but Connie sees troubled depths in him — depths that become an object of fascination to her niece Anne, as well.

At first, Anne, the narrator of the novel, simply relays Connie’s tales, but little by little, she becomes drawn into her aunt’s story, finally becoming a part of it after she meets Michael, a former student of Connie’s, and the centre of the novel’s complex love story.

That’s just one way in which Hay intertwines the past and the present throughout the novel.

“I wanted to explore how the past resides in our lives,” says Hay, perched on a sofa in her home in Old

Ottawa South. “The past is full of riches . . . Without it, I find the present shallow and kind of empty.”

Hay honours her own ancestral past in the book, much of which is inspired by real events: The murder with which the novel opens, for example, is based on a similar tragedy in 1937 in her mother’s hometown of Renfrew, thinly disguised as the town of Argyll in the book.

Like Hay, the narrator is a writer whose father was a high-school principal and her mother, a painter. The character of Burns, who, as Hay puts it, “sets the novel in motion,” was inspired by a principal Hay’s mother had told her about years ago. Not that *Alone in the Classroom* is a roman à clef, Hay cautions: “They may have been inspired by real people, but her characters have their own personalities and stories to tell.

The past reverberates through the novel, at times acting as an almost mystical force drawing characters and places together. “You touch a place and thousands of miles away another place quivers,” Anne observes at one point. “You touch a person and down the line the ghosts of relatives move in the wind.”

This fluid criss-crossing of past and present may not appeal to all readers.

Those looking for clear-cut parallels may be frustrated: Connections are sometimes drawn and then seemingly abandoned, or replaced by parallels to other characters and events. Anne, for example, is said to resemble the fragile student, Susan Graves, but later takes after the indomitable, world-wise Connie. Similarly, many of the novel’s key mysteries remain unresolved, its characters enigmatic to the end. But Hay’s strange arche-

ology of the heart will fascinate readers who like to delve deep into the mysteries of human nature.

Parley Burns is a “devastating character,” but also a fascinating one to Anne and Connie, who “never stopped trying to get to the bottom of him,” Hay observes. “I’m always trying to get to the bottom of who people are,” she adds. “Not that I think I ever do,” she reflects. In fact, getting to the bottom of anyone is all but impossible, she says. “We have so much trouble just understanding ourselves.”

Whether or not you’re the kind of reader who embraces ambiguity, there’s no question Hay’s poetic evocations of the landscape will leave a lasting impression, as will her uncanny gift of calling up childhood, such as in this passage about paths through the woods, rich with “the deep summer smell of childhood, a tangy fermented, woody smell fragrant with wild-flowers and water.”

Alongside such transcendent prose, there are occasionally jarring passages (“he ran his finger up her bare arm . . . and clang clang clang the trolley of her arm”), but these are mercifully rare.

And throughout the novel, she conveys the power plays of the classroom.

“A classroom is a very charged atmosphere, from which you can’t escape,” Hay says. Teachers watch their charges intently and children return the gaze, “studying the changes of mood and waiting for something bad to happen,” she adds. Whether we are students, teachers or even principals, “we have all had that visceral memory of feeling we are alone in the classroom — whether we are or not.”

## Summer and the City: Grade-A chick lit from Bushnell

**SUSAN CARPENTER  
LOS ANGELES TIMES**

For women of a certain age, Carrie Bradshaw and her Sex and the City pals are surrogate friends — lovable yet flawed characters who’ve collectively experienced the many and messy permutations of modern-day urban romance.

Other than reruns and the occasional movie, fans of Candace Bushnell’s best-selling book or, more likely, its popular HBO spinoff, haven’t had a lot of options for keeping up their fictional friendships with Sam, Miranda, Charlotte, and of course, Carrie.

For those fans, *Summer and the City* will be a welcome visit from long-lost friends. The novel is the follow-up to 2005’s *The Carrie Diaries*. Bushnell’s Sex and the City young-adult prequel that took place during Carrie’s senior year in high school.

Summer and the City follows the 17-year-old’s move to New York City to attend a writing workshop and her introductions to the women who will become her very best friends.

Samantha, it turns out, is the cousin of one of Carrie’s friends. Somehow,

Samantha has been charged with introducing Carrie to the city, which she does in grand style, taking her to a fabulous party attended by the rich and famous on her first night in town.

Sam is dressed in a sexy green Lycra shift, while Carrie wears “a navy blue gaberdrine jacket with matching culottes that I’d actually considered chic a few hours ago,” she writes on the opening page of a breezy book penned from her point of view and with the youthful exuberance of a New York City newbie.

The hot-pink clutch-purse cover art already indicates this series has a girly, fashionista sensibility. It’s just a retro sensibility, since the book takes place in the 1980s.

Rather than Manolo Blahnik stilettos, Carrie wears



**REVIEW**

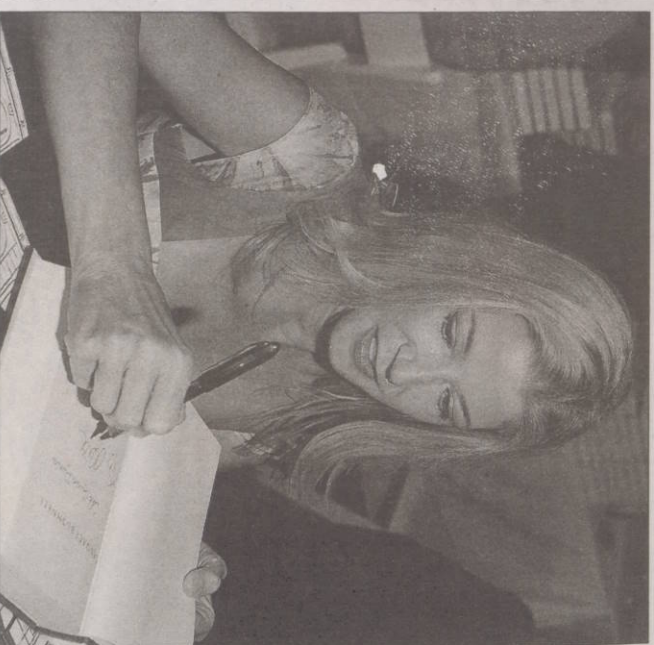
**Summer and the City: A Carrie Diaries Novel**  
by Candace Bushnell;  
HarperCollins/Balzer & Bray  
(409 pages, \$18.99  
ages 14 and up)

borrowed Fiorucci boots. She listens to Elvis Costello and the Police and writes on an actual typewriter.

As the book opens, Carrie dreams of being a writer but has yet to land her first byline. New York is merely the location of a writing workshop at the New School. It’s a summer pit stop on her way to Brown University. Even though her purse is stolen in the city, Carrie knows she never wants to leave.

Miranda enters Carrie’s life after she finds Carrie’s purse in the trash and calls the number on her address book. When the two meet, Miranda is picketing against pornography in front of Saks Fifth Avenue. Charlotte enters the book only in the final chapter, doing so in characteristic fashion. She’s flipping through the pages of *Brides* magazine in the first-class cabin of the train, headed to New York and a boyfriend who works on Wall Street.

“Guy troubles, along with clothing and body parts, are a major source of bonding amongst women,” Carrie notes halfway into the book. That philosophy is also a formula that works incredibly well for Bushnell. Summer and the City is Grade-A chick lit from one of its masters.



Candace Bushnell is extending the Sex and the City storyline with her latest YA prequel, *Summer and the City*. Eugene Goloursky, Getty Images