

FARM FRESH AND FATAL

By Judy Hogan

One

Monday Morning, April 1, 2002. A fight broke out during the second market, but the first day of the first farmers' market in Riverdell went relatively smoothly. The third market was when the murder occurred.

Penny and Kenneth were searching madly for snails in the lettuce when Nora Fisher, their new market's manager, drove her yellow pickup in and parked near their garage apartment. "You go talk to her," Kenneth said. "I'll keep checking the Romaine. The red lettuce was the hardest. All those curlicues." He was moving slowly on hands and knees down the rows they'd cultivated with the rototiller only the night before.

When Penny caught up with her, Nora was out of her truck and standing at the chainlink fence that kept their neighbor Leroy's chickens in the orchard. "These White Rocks yours, too, doll?" Nora wore faded blue bib overalls over a man's white shirt rolled up at the sleeves. Her closely cropped curly brown hair gleamed in the sun.

"Hi, Nora. Welcome to Greenscape. The chickens are Leroy's, but he's part of our operation. He has to work today. Mostly he has them like this, out in the orchard, to pick bugs and fertilize the peaches and apples."

"How exactly does it all work? Andy lives next door?"

"Yes, he got us started when he became Shagbark's first sustainable ag agent—about three years ago." She pointed to where she and Kenneth had been working. "Our vegetable garden takes up most of his and Jan's backyard."

"Who's the guy working in the lettuce?"

"My husband, Kenneth."

"Who else works?" Her questions were pointed, sharp, and her voice harsh, no nonsense. This was more like an interrogation than Penny had expected, but then she hadn't known quite what to expect when they joined the market. At their first meeting, the farmers in the new Riverdell Farmers' Market had decided to hold up the highest possible standards, which was fine. If only the snails wouldn't count against them.

"We all work. The whole neighborhood works. Andy, his wife, Jan, their eight-year-old twins, Leroy, when he's home evening and weekends, and Kate and Belle in the big house." Penny pointed behind them. "That is, when they can. They have big job commitments. Leroy and I will do the market."

"Let's have a look at your lettuce. Organically grown, you said on your application. But not yet certified?"

"That's right. We don't think we'll focus on being organically certified, but more on sustainability—organically grown, selling locally."

"No trouble with pests?"

There was something so fierce about Nora. She didn't beat around the bush. Should Penny confess their new snail and slug problem? When they'd discovered slimy critters the night before, they'd been frantic to get rid of them before the inspection the next morning. They had decided not to bother Andy yet. Leroy had said to put down salt, and they had, but the snails

appeared to be alive and well this morning. They were hand-picking them off and cutting back the ruined leaves to give to the chickens, who were delighted with this unexpected feast.

Penny sighed. She was too much of a truth-teller to deny their new problem. She didn't know a week of rain could bring out so many slugs and snails. She'd been so happy that these spring crops were getting such a good watering. Might as well be out front with Nora, who was definitely an out front person. "Actually, we've had pretty good luck managing our pests until last night, when we started finding snails. Kenneth is picking them off right now."

These particular first two pages might be the best hook I've come up with among the sixteen mysteries I've now written. It caught the attention of Betty Webb, the Small Press reviewer for *Mystery Scene* magazine, in March of 2014, and she gave it a good review.

I didn't debate different possible openings. This was my seventh mystery written and second published by Mainly Murder Press. The contract runs out October 1, 2016, but I will re-publish it myself by December 1, 2017, and meantime there are books available, and probably will be for the year after the MMP contract runs out.

What I remember is that I first started the book with what is now the second chapter, but someone had pointed out to me about an earlier book that, when you start with a lot of characters on stage, it can be confusing to the reader. So I backtracked and started it the day before the first market when I introduce the other farmers. In the first two sentences, I let the reader know the book was about a farmer's market, that there was conflict between the farmers, and that someone got murdered.

I've learned that you need conflict in every scene of a novel, so in this one, with Penny's having their cooperative farming venture inspected while she and her husband Kenneth madly try to get rid of the snails, I'm able to set up conflict and uncertainty: will they pass the inspection? Why is she being interrogated as if she'd done something wrong? I also work in a lot of back story information about the others involved in their backyard venture, and the fact that one of these farmers is a new county agent. I introduce the straightforward but rather imperious market manager, and by the end of that scene, Nora doesn't even tell Penny that they've passed inspection. Then right before Nora leaves, she has also confided that the market board almost didn't accept Penny's good friend Sammie, and not because she was black but because she was a backyard gardener. Penny sees through this thinly disguised racism and protests that they, too, are backyard gardeners.

I don't think consciously a lot about how I'll begin a book. Once I have an idea, I work up all my characters, using Elizabeth George's character prompt from her *Write Away*. When I feel I know the people well enough and the conflicts between them, I rough out all the scenes. Then when I sit down to write, I muse on all this and wait for my mind to throw up the beginning. These first two pages came to me after I had decided to start the book with fewer characters, but I wanted the reader to be plunged immediately into the questions the novel takes up: who will get killed, why, and who did it?

Every book presents a different challenge, but it's the characters who interest me most. In a way they give me both the plot and the opening pages.



Judy Hogan brought to North Carolina in 1971 (*Hyperion Poetry Journal*, 1970-81) and in 1976 she founded Carolina Wren Press. She has been active in the Triangle area since the 70s as a reviewer, publisher, teacher, and writing consultant. In 1984 she helped found and was the first President of the N.C. Writers' Network, serving until 1987.

Her first published mystery novel, *Killer Frost*, came out from Mainly Murder Press in 2012, followed by *Farm Fresh and Fatal* in 2013. Under her own imprint Hoganvillaea Books, she published *The Sands of Gower: The First Penny Weaver Mystery* in December 2015, and she will bring out *Haw: The Second Penny Weaver Mystery*, May 1, 2016. She has published six volumes of poetry with small presses, and two prose works. She taught Freshman English 2004-2007 at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh. She does free lance editing for creative writers and offers workshops.

Judy lives and farms in Moncure, N.C., near Jordan Lake. Her blog, postmenopausalzest.blogspot.com often has reviews and interviews featuring contemporary mystery writers.

Farm Fresh and Fatal was published October 1, 2013 by mainlymurderpress.com and is still available there and through Amazon. In e-book form it's available as Kindle, Nook, and Untreed Reads, and the signed paperback will continue to be available from my own imprint Hoganvillaea Books, PO Box 253, Moncure, NC 27559-0253, for \$17, including tax, and \$20 including postage. I'll re-issue it in December 2017. I'm now doing three Penny Weaver mysteries a year.

The First Two Pages of *Farm Fresh and Fatal*, a Penny Weaver Mystery, from Mainly Murder press in Connecticut. October 1, 2013. \$15.95 paper; \$2.99 e-book.

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