

Interview with Allan McLeod **Author of *Barely Dead***

Reader Views is pleased to welcome, for the second time, author Allan McLeod. Allan is releasing his new murder-mystery novel “Barely Dead,” and is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for talking with us once again Allan. It is always a pleasure and we are excited to hear that you are releasing your new book, “Barely Dead.” Would you please tell us the storyline of “Barely Dead”?

Allan: In the foothills of the Canadian Rockies in a wealthy ranching town of ten thousand good souls, a twenty-eight-year-old gay man by the name of Wally Adams has been found dead, his death ruled a suicide. My protagonist, Paige Harrington, a globe trotting international journalist living in New York City, is Wally’s best friend; they grew up together and have been soul mates forever. She knows in her heart and mind that Wally did not commit suicide.

While at home to attend Wally's funeral and determined to find his murderers, old and new friends begin to tell her about Wally’s increasingly bitter campaign to defeat a hazardous \$250 million fertilizer plant and the threats made against his life. To follow leads that take her to The Garter, a seedy strip club, Paige becomes a stripper known as Tawny Lane and uncovers disturbing facts about the fertilizer plant and the murder of a young stripper that point to powerful people, including her father. Time becomes her enemy as she tries to prevent Wally's killers from murdering others, including her father and Tawny Lane.

Juanita: What inspired this particular story?

Allan: With three talented daughters and three talented granddaughters, a talented daughter-in-law and a talented wife; and a host of talented females I count as friends, I live amid strong, driven, and interesting women. I therefore felt compelled to create a strong, driven, and interesting female protagonist with an interesting story to tell, and once I had my protagonist developed mentally and on paper, I needed to find an interesting set of circumstances that challenged her intellect and still let her be the vivacious, energetic woman I wanted her to become. Then, during the idea building process, the Walkerton, Ontario water contamination tragedy took place.

That was in May of 2000. Seven people died and 2,300 became ill after Walkerton's water supply became contaminated by E. coli from manure spread on a farm near the town, AND IT ALL COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED: the Walkerton Public Utilities Commission knew there was a problem several days before going public.

This led to my researching other man-made environmental disasters, one the Piney Point, FL fertilizer plant, where the state began spraying millions of gallons of wastewater into the Gulf of Mexico to try to avert what one state regulator calls “one of the biggest environmental threats in Florida history.” State officials knew in 1995 that if the corporate owner went under, the state would be stuck with hundreds of millions of gallons of acidic wastewater in gypsum stacks on the edge of Tampa Bay, but the St. Petersburg Times reported that THE STATE DIDN'T ACT and didn't do enough to prevent an environmental hazard.

Juanita: Once again, the setting of your new book is a remote small town. Would you tell your readers where “Barely Dead” takes place, and what makes this particular town the perfect setting for your new novel?

Allan: Actually, High River, the setting for a good part of Barely Dead, is not all that remote. Unlike Largeville, the desperately remote prairie village of two hundred residents in my Death Spirits novel, High River, an energetic town with a population of ten thousand, sits just off the main north/south highway in the province and a short seventy kilometers (about forty five miles) south of Calgary, a city of over one million where the remainder of Barely Dead takes place.

I picked High River because my characters needed a setting that provided both a big city where strip clubs might operate and people exist with some degree of anonymity, and, within easy driving distance, a town large enough to have its own rich and powerful class who had no anonymity and a working class who mostly wanted nothing more than to be left alone to earn a comfortable existence. Then, to support the possibility of ground water contamination by the fertilizer plant, I needed river proximity, and to host some of the activities of my characters, a contiguous Indian reservation. Finally, I lived in Calgary for several years in the 1960's and continue to visit both Calgary and High River regularly so I have the familiarity I needed to make the story work.

Juanita: Would you give us some insights into your leading lady, Paige Harrington? Who is she, what does she do, what motivates her...etc?

Allan: Ah yes, the phenomenal Paige, the woman every man wants to have and every woman wants to be; the super smart, multi-talented rich girl blessed with a model's body, stunning good looks, and the happy faculty of being able to remain unaffected by it all. Her father, Justice P. Tillingford Harrington III is one of the leading citizens of the Western Canadian town where she grew up, and her mother, the infinitely wealthy Sally Bowles Harrington, is the grande dame of the town's society. Paige grew up surrounded by successful people with interesting and challenging lives and never expected to do other than fulfill her obligation to her birthright; success and the need to be successful are her DNA.

Paige studied ballet and gymnastics all through school, swam on Canada's Olympic team, studied in Europe and Russia off and on for five years, learning several languages in the process, became a runway model in Toronto, New York, and Paris after graduating grade twelve as valedictorian, and after a year, enrolled in Columbia University's School of Journalism. After getting her MFA, graduating magna cum laude, she worked for a collection of regional newspapers in the US before returning to New York City to try and make it as a freelance journalist. She purchased a two-bedroom apartment in The Ansonia, one of New York City's once most elegant pre-war buildings

and one that still makes a large architectural statement. One day she hopes to have her apartment unit renovated and actually live in it, but since buying it, she has been in Western and Eastern Europe writing articles for several New York magazines.

Juanita: Paige is trying to figure out whether her best friend Wally committed suicide, or was actually murdered. Her investigation turns up stunning revelations about the fertilizer plants many secrets, and another murder. Elaborate more on this and what is Paige uncovering about Wally's life as she pursues the truth about his death?

Allan: Paige knows Wally better than anyone and knows he didn't commit suicide. The problem she has is getting anyone, including her father, to believe her. Then, when she returns to High River for Wally's funeral, a colleague of Wally's secretly gives her one of Wally's personal files that contains several newspaper clippings of a stripper's murder and news clippings and Wally's notes about the fertilizer plant that point to one of the town's most powerful families. Since Wally is gay, the stripper clippings are baffling, but Paige knows Wally and knows he didn't accidentally put them in the same file. Wally is trying to tell her the two events are interrelated; when she figures out the connection, she'll figure out who murdered Wally.

Juanita: Who are the other characters in this fast-moving mystery?

Allan: Paige's childhood friend, Candy Yates, who grew up at the opposite end of the socio/economic spectrum from Paige, is the one remaining person Paige trusts with her life. Candy is a tough talking, cigarette smoking ex-con and former stripper who has lived on and survived a lot of tough streets.

When Paige, as Tawny Lane, enters the stripping world of The Garter, she meets a host of new characters who form the nucleus of the story. She wants to trust Dom Caputo, the enigmatic owner of The Garter who should terrify her more than he does because she suspects he would kill her or anyone else who gets in his way. She befriends Heather, a young stripper who seems terribly lost; and she struggles to come to terms with Red, the Alpha stripper who'd rather fight than make friends. Roy Thompson, a cab driver who seems other than he appears, and his daughter, Becky, both impact greatly on Paige's journey to the solution of the increasingly complex set of growing problems she has to confront.

She fights a physical and emotional attraction to the leader of the construction consortium, Buddy Sleighton, who she knows both as Paige Harrington and Tawny Lane, and continues to confront the Peabody family, believed to be the money and muscle behind the plant and with whom she is in constant conflict. Her parents, Judge P. Tillingford Harrington III and Sally Bowles Harrington, and their palatial estate anchor much of the story. Her brother, Dr. Brad Harrington, and two of his colleagues fresh from Montreal General Hospital, Drs. Guy and Lisette Tanguay, play important supporting roles as do Senator Jordan Lake, her father's closest friend, and Maisie, her mother's nanny who also raised Paige and Brad.

There are a number of other characters, mostly people with whom Paige went to el-hi school, who have more than Cameo roles: two town police, a policeman's wife, the editor of the local paper, the outsider wife of a rich rancher, the golf pro, etc. Sprinkled throughout are a host of other characters that provide the shadows and light that a story like this needs.

Juanita: With strong determination, Paige goes undercover as a stripper to uncover more information. Tell us more about her foray's into The Garter and the impact this has on her investigation.

Allan: Paige is nothing if not determined, and when she thinks the people behind the construction of a the fertilizer plant, the same people who may have murdered Wally, are secretly meeting in The Garter planning to again build the plant, she convinces Candy Yates, her ex-stripper friend, to teach her how to become a stripper. Paige covers her long red hair with a blonde wig and becomes ‘Tawny Lane, the finest stripper in the land.’

Once inside The Garter, Paige discovers she has abundant stripper gifts that easily get her invited to sit with the meeting participants where she overhears chilling plans about the fertilizer plant moving forward on the back of numerous bribes, including one paid to her father. Before learning more, however, Junior Peabody, the most dangerous member of the Peabody clan, thinks he recognizes her. Aided by the other strippers, Paige as Tawny Lane disappears; Paige knows her life will be endangered if Tawny Lane’s true identity is discovered.

But now Paige has to figure out how to carefully use what Tawny Lane knows, to determine who she can believe because so many powerful and once trusted people are part of the scheme to secretly approve the plant. Once-dependable friends won’t answer questions. New friends who try to help disappear, and she struggles to pull together a reliable support group that she needs to help find answers and save her friends’ lives.

Juanita: “Barely Dead” is the first in a series of novels in the Paige Harrington Mystery Series. What are your plans for Paige Harrington and this series?

Allan: The problem with a series is keeping it fresh. My second Paige Harrington Mystery, due out later this year or early next year, takes place in New York City. This gives me not only a new canvas, but a very large canvas, one on which I believe I can create a number of interesting ‘Paige’ sequels. Of course, having said that, the third in the series will likely take place in both Washington, DC and Manhattan, so I guess if I can find intriguing story ideas for Paige, I will let the characters take me where they need to go. I will also use characters from previous novels, likely in Cameo roles or at least not as major characters unless they demand a greater presence, something I feel they may from time to time do.

Juanita: How long have you been working on “Barely Dead” and how did this story come about?

Allan: Wow. This one goes back a long way. My first draft is dated July, 2002 when I first put to paper the idea of a rich girl from a respected family in a small town shocking her world by becoming a stripper. That idea in turn grew from thoughts and ideas I had tossed around in my mind for months if not a year or two before, all stemming from meeting two strippers working on their master's degrees. I liked the character possibilities and over time I put together a story that I felt worked to their strengths and weaknesses in a setting that I particularly wanted for Paige.

Juanita: What is the ultimate message of “Barely Dead”?

Allan: If you really believe, no matter your god-given gifts and your socio/economic status, you can make important contributions to the life and memory of those you love. I hope I create characters that inspire that feeling.

Juanita: Allan, what appeals to you in writing murder-mysteries?

Allan: The genre is a good vehicle for creating an interesting puzzle, and when a murder or two is added to the mix and the protagonist, beloved if I’ve done my work well, is constantly threatened, the questions that crop up in a reader’s mind take on greater urgency.

Juanita: I understand that from time to time you post your short stories on a blog. Would you tell us more about your blog and the interesting forum this provides to post new stories?

Allan: I currently have five short stories on my own blog (two are also in audio) at <http://wammac.blogspot.com/>, one on e-zine at <http://ezinearticles.com/?Do-Cars-Have-Feelings?&id=245102>. In between working on my novels, I write short stories that I want my readers to have easily available. Ideally, one or more will be picked up by a magazine or newspaper to greatly expand the number of people who are aware of and read my work.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about you and your books?

Allan: A good place to start is my personal web: <http://wammac.net/> and if I may, your site not only provides reviews of my books but offers excellent coverage of the *raison d'etre* for my books.

Juanita: Well we certainly appreciate the compliment and in turn, are very happy to be working with such an intriguing and inspired author. Your new book “Barely Dead” has created quite a buzz and we wish you all the best with your Paige Harrington Mystery Series. Do you have any last thought you’d like to share with your readers?

Allan: There are thousands of great stories being written and self-published by as many authors who, for a litany of reasons, haven’t cracked the mainstream agent/publisher markets. I hope your readers support these authors by purchasing their books from the host of on-line global resources like Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Chapters and specialty sources like Back of the Room.