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Alan Bradley talks Flavia de Luce, and the fate of the preteen detective

By **SUE CARTER** Special to the Star

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Flavia de Luce, the intrepid preteen detective and star of Alan Bradley's internationally beloved mystery series, solves crimes using her precociously advanced chemistry skills. She adores all things grisly or revolting, and delights in corpses and graveyards. Bradley, on the other hand, was terrible at chemistry in school. He finds the old Victorian medical volumes he relies on for the series' research quite gruesome.

Maybe it's magic or some form of alchemy, but textbook science can't totally explain Bradley and Flavia's relationship.



Alan Bradley, author of *The Golden Tresses of the Dead*, from Doubleday Canada. The novel is the 10th in a mystery series that Bradley, now 80, has churned out at a rate of nearly one per year over the last decade. (Bernard Weil / Toronto Star file photo)

Bradley, 80, speaks about his character as if she is a fully realized, breathing person, almost like a co-writer. That's how she has always appeared to him through their 10 titles together, including the latest, and potentially final, *The Golden Tresses of the Dead*. She is a constant presence whispering ideas into his ear. Bradley's wife says she always knows

when Flavia has done something terrible because she can hear him laughing in the next room of their home on the Isle of Man, where they moved several years ago. Bradley grew up in Cobourg and later moved to Toronto, Saskatoon and, after retiring, to B.C. For those who haven't met Flavia, she is a quick-witted 11-year-old amateur sleuth living in a 1950s British village where bodies tend to pile up. She combines the passion of Anne Shirley with the smarts of Miss Marple and the crossover appeal of Harry Potter. In fact, like the boy wizard, many of Flavia's earliest fans are now adults themselves. Several years ago while on book tour back in Toronto, Bradley was approached by a young woman who told him a story about finding a dead body in an alley. Her first thought during the gruesome discovery? "What would Flavia do?"

Bradley realized, "That's the way I am when I am writing and Flavia comes up with the perfect solution or retort. I think, 'My goodness, I wish my mind worked like that.'"

Often Flavia will rescue Bradley from his plot problems by using chemistry. Early on, he learned not to doubt her accuracy. When Bradley was writing the second title, *The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag*, he needed to get the young detective out of a tricky situation during which she was trapped inside a dovecote with a woman dying from cyanide poisoning. Flavia suggested to Bradley that pigeon droppings contained the needed antidote.

"It's uncanny. I had to do weeks and weeks and weeks of research, digging through old books, but invariably I found out she was absolutely right," Bradley says. "I began to appreciate how that part of the universe works. Don't try to out-think Flavia, just listen to what you're being told and write it down. Don't question it."

In *The Golden Tresses of the Dead*, the hijinks begin when a severed finger is discovered inside Flavia's sister's wedding cake, followed by a suspicious poisoning. Flavia, who is now 12, has matured, and is excitedly settling into her new detective partnership with Dogger, her beloved gardener and father figure.

Bradley was a 69-year-old retired broadcast engineer when the first Flavia book, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, was published. He envisioned it as a stand-alone mystery, unaware of the wild international success that lay ahead. "It made such change in our lives," he says. "It was like being a new person with a new life and friends, in a completely new world."

At some point his characters' deep backstories began revealing themselves to him. Before he knew it, Bradley was on book six, and new ideas were still popping up in a manner that he likens to a jack-in-the-box. But when he signed the 10-book contract, he didn't understand what a grueling commitment one book a year would be.

"Although it was fabulous, it was nevertheless always labouring against a deadline," he says. "Now that I'm 80, I'm more sensitive to deadlines. I tend to worry about them more than I did 10 years ago."

While Bradley has never definitively announced this book would be the series' last, he and Flavia are taking a break to sit and mull the future while enjoying a nice cup of tea. Fans can take solace in the fact that Bradley is not completely ruling out future titles, and that there is a Flavia television series in the works for CTV.

"I almost feel as if it's out of my hands. It's up to Flavia, hugely, and whether Flavia is interested in sharing more of her ideas," says Bradley. "Although she's certainly been sharing a lot with me recently. I think she's a little bit offended that people think this might be the last thing she does."