

# Detective Maggie sleuths again

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**JAN DEGRASS/ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT WRITER**

She's back. Lady detective Mrs. Margaret Spencer and her business partner Nat Southby appear in their fourth book of fiction, *Death as a Last Resort*, by author Gwendolyn Southin of Sechelt.

People who know Southin, she said, say they can hear the author's voice in that of Maggie Spencer, the feisty, pet loving, sleuth of the '50s and '60s who rejected her home in the suburbs and her pompous husband Harry for a life of crime detection.

"I suppose there must be parts of Maggie in me, but I haven't had as many adventures," said Southin. "I know Maggie's character. I can hear her and can tell when she's not quite right."

Hard-boiled detective Southby is Spencer's new paramour, and in this latest book, she must rescue Southby's grasping ex-wife from kidnappers as well as solve a connected murder. As events unfold, Spencer often jumps into danger alone or with the detective agency's eccentric secretary, Henny.

In those days, the early '60s, you had to be a real detective, Southin points out. You didn't have the labs and the DNA samples. It was old-fashioned and slow work requiring the two private investigators to visit all the colourful characters involved.

The book is a quick, fun read, in what is often in the genre of mystery novels called a British-style cozy.

"You can sit down and lose yourself in it," Southin said, a delightful preoccupation she understands well, as she is also an avid reader of mystery and adventure.

At a well-attended book launch in Sechelt last Friday, Feb. 4, Southin was surprised by her many friends when they wheeled out a cake to celebrate her 65th wedding anniversary with husband Vic (who insists he is not the ex-husband character, Harry, in her books).

Southin began her career as a novelist late in her life. She had worked as a secretary while the kids grew up and then she and Vic retired to the Coast in the early '80s. She joined a writing class with author Betty Keller, and the rest was history. Soon she was working with Keller on organizing the early years of the Festival of the Written Arts. Her own writing was evolving, and in 2000 she published her first Margaret Spencer mystery. The first one was the most difficult, she recalls. While speaking at a Vancouver writer's festival event last year, she told the audience about the power of beginning her writing career while in her 70s.

"Age shouldn't stop you," she said firmly.

She has been compared to the late, great storyteller Agatha Christie, but Southin dismisses the idea. Their styles are not similar, she said, and Christie liked to write about the British upper classes.

"I like to write about normal, ordinary people," Southin said. In fact, many of her settings are also very normal and ordinary to Coast readers. *Death as a Last Resort* is set in Vancouver with some action taking place in a dilapidated vacation resort near Pender Harbour, a locale that Southin once lived in many years ago. When the two detectives travel to the Sunshine Coast, they must go aboard the Blackball Ferry, the mode of travel in 1961.

Southin has already begun book number five, as yet untitled, and a few pages are included as a teaser in the current book. *Death as a Last Resort*, published by Touchwood Editions, is available at local bookstores for \$12.95.



Jan DeGrass Photo

Sechelt author Gwendolyn Southin, inventor of the Margaret Spencer mystery series.