

Reader's Guide for the *Coigreach* Trilogy- Author's notes

For those readers who like to revisit and critique books (such as for book clubs), I offer my self-reflections on the *Coigreach* trilogy to give insight to my intent. *The questions in italics* are things I mulled over many times while writing and may serve as topics to ponder for yourself.

Titles—

Did the titles match the theme of each story? Would you have titled any of the books differently? If yes, what would your title be?

Evolution of characters—

The trilogy of *Casting Demons Into Swine*, *Prometheus Scorned*, and *Ghosts of Lost Dreams*, was a three-year journey, with Malcolm Cromarty serving as the primary tour guide. *Coigreach*, in Scottish Gaelic, translates to stranger, or foreigner, in English. At the start of the trilogy, Malcolm finds himself squeezed between several problems—he's an inexperienced practitioner with limited knowledge of farming, his personal life is in disarray, and perhaps most importantly, he is an outsider in an insular community. These complications would challenge anyone, but when he gets caught up in a series of crises that fall upon the valley, the stakes to “do the right thing” increase. Despite this predicament, Malcolm evolves more than any other character throughout the novels. Perhaps he had an advantage, after all, he was the main protagonist, and one who channeled many of the author's life experiences.

The series was intended to be more plot, rather than character, driven. However, while reading the series, one theme continues to surface. *How do Malcolm's thoughts—at times expressed through dialogue—and actions develop during the course of the story? Especially when comparing the first book to the third, what evidence suggests he gained professional expertise, more balance in his personal life, and acceptance in the community?*

Which other characters evolved during the course of the trilogy? How did their actions demonstrate this change?

A couple other general questions regarding characters...

Were the characters well described? Were their actions consistent with how they were depicted?

If you were one of the characters, what might you have done differently in a scene from the books?

Subtheme of the human response to threats—

In each book, an extraordinary crisis challenges normal life in the valley. This provided a central theme throughout the trilogy, and the reason I chose to create fiction rather than a memoir—beyond the events themselves, how did the community respond to each crisis? In *Casting Demons Into Swine*, an infectious agent threatens livestock and humans alike, in *Prometheus Scorned* and *Ghosts of Lost Dreams*, human mendacity, and even cruelty, cause unexpected duress. This opened creative windows for me to explore the role of individual players within the community. *Who leads the efforts to mitigate the impact? Who are the ‘followers’, or in some cases the bystanders, who endure passive suffering? And cynically, who for either personal gain, spite, or entrenched dogma, spreads mayhem?*

Underneath this overarching study of character roles in a crisis, the antagonists in each book exhibit a central flaw, often with tragic consequences to others in the community. Thus, bigotry, greed, and envy are the primary traits that bring about the downfall of the antagonists in *Casting Demons Into Swine*, *Prometheus Scorned*, and *Ghosts of Lost Dreams*, respectively.

Author maturation—

Writing fiction is a malleable process, and relies on patience, practice, and creative insight. For me, novels were a radical shift from a career based on scientific methods and technical writing. Dialogue, plots, themes, character development, subjective observations, and descriptive impressions were new frontiers that took me far beyond basic writing skills of complete sentences, spelling, and grammar. It has been a labor of love, but an evolutionary process as well. It took me ten years to write the first novel, as compared to two years for the third. Realizing personal bias, I believe my writing has progressed, and the flow of my stories has improved—although typographical errors still plague me and my reviewers.

As a reader, what was your impression of the direction of the three books in terms of style and maturity?

These novels were written as adult suspense fiction. With respect to building a plot to provide mystery and uncertainty—

Where in each book did you suspect the direction of the plot’s mystery? What were the key points that helped solve the puzzle?

Did the books build tension and suspense? What scenes in particular encouraged you to keep reading?

Did the end of the story (and epilogue) solve the puzzle completely? Were more details needed? Were the explanations convincing or too farfetched?

Fact vs fiction—

A bit of a treasure hunt...the trilogy is based on my experiences as a veterinary practitioner during a consistent time and place, central Pennsylvania throughout the 1980s. Although I stretched the facts regarding the rabies surge, barn arsons, and road project, each of these events took place in the community during this time period. Many of the scenes describing the “veterinary farm calls” were from notes taken by me as they happened, a bit of ‘on-farm journalism’. There were a few fictional amendments to enhance the plot and provide a richer mix of characters and their behaviors.

Can you guess which farm calls were written essentially as they happened and which ones were expanded (or in a couple cases, a figment of the author’s imagination)?

Supernatural events in the novels aside, you might also guess what other details were conjured up as “what ifs?” rather than reality. And finally, while most of the characters were based on people I knew in practice, there are a few ‘special fictional guests’ to the valley...can you guess who?

Addendum—

As stated above, the *Coigreach* trilogy is meant to provide entertainment, suspense, and insight into the day-to-day life of a young veterinarian in a predominately Amish and Mennonite community. I enjoy books that bring me into places and cultures that I know little about, and believe life is a journey of learning. I hope my stories provided these assets to you as well. You might ask, “*Why use a Scottish Gaelic term for ‘stranger’ when I could have just as easily called the series the ‘Outsider’ or ‘Stranger’ trilogy?*” The next book in the series, hopefully by mid-2025, may provide the answer.

Keep reading

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