

**The First Two Pages of “The Fur Coat Conundrum”
by Rosemary McCracken**

From the Mesdames of Mayhem’s *In The Spirit of 13*,
edited by Donna Carrick (Carrick Publishing)

An Essay by Rosemary McCracken

The annual feature telling readers what to expect in the year ahead was a pet project of the *Montreal Star*’s editor-in-chief. Now our weekend editor had given the old standby a new spin: he wanted predictions for 1978 from the Great Beyond.

It was just my luck to have drawn this flaky assignment.

That’s how I found myself drinking tea with a man who claimed he could communicate with the departed. Fortyish and fair-haired, Marco Rinaldi ran Montreal’s First Spiritualist Church and he had agreed to an interview. Sipping my tea, I looked around his living room with its crimson flocked wallpaper, crimson velvet drapes and gilt-framed mirrors. I wondered what rubbish he would come up with for the year ahead.

With a grand flourish, Rinaldi poured more tea into our china cups. “Everyone longs to know what lies ahead in these uncertain times,” he said in elegant, accented English.

The “forecast for the new year” article is an old standby in daily and weekly newspapers. The article that Ellie, the protagonist of “The Fur Coat Conundrum,” has been assigned to write would have appeared in her newspaper’s lifestyles or insight sections. Because I was writing a short story (4,780 words) and not a novel, I needed to get to the heart of the matter quickly. The story’s second and third sentences accomplish this: Ellie’s editor is asking for predictions for the coming year from the Great Beyond, and she is sent out on assignment.

I included almost nothing of Ellie’s backstory in the opening pages; this would have slowed the progression of the story. Ellie is a 26-year-old newspaper reporter, assigned to write an article that she considers “flaky.” That’s all I needed about Ellie to get rolling. I wove in a few backstory details later, letting them emerge organically as the story unfolded.

“The Fur Coat Conundrum” draws on some of my own experiences as a young newspaper reporter at the now-defunct *Montreal Star*. Like Ellie, I was assigned the “forecast for 1978” story, but it was my idea to give it a new twist with predictions from a psychic. And, like Ellie, I found myself drinking tea in the home of a man who bore a close resemblance to Marco Rinaldi.

But fiction can be much more fun to write than fact. Whereas Ellie meets her spirit guide as a result of her interview with Rinaldi, nothing even close to that happened to me. The story’s supernatural elements are all products of my imagination. (However, the fur coat theft ring, the “crime” in the story, is another real-life element I drew upon. One of the *Star*’s copy editors was selling “hot” fur coats to women staffers when I was at the newspaper. Unlike Ellie, I didn’t buy a coat.)

Writing fiction based on real-life experiences is a two-edged sword. It can be difficult for a writer to pull away from recollections of what really happened and shape a satisfying story arc. But time and distance can help loosen those ties. The

fact that my interview with the psychic took place four decades ago gave me the freedom to create a fictional storyline. I wouldn't have found that easy to do with something that happened last year. Added to that, I've lost track of most of my former colleagues at the *Star*, so I don't worry that someone may recognize himself or events he was part of. If a colleague should chance upon one of my stories, I hope he'll enjoy a good laugh.

On the other hand, real-life experiences provide shortcuts to creating setting, atmosphere, and character. I drew on my memories of the psychic's living room to build my opening scene: the flocked wallpaper, the velvet drapes, the gilt-framed mirrors. I remember thinking at the time that this must be what a bordello looked like. My memories of the psychic himself have likely morphed over the years, but they allowed me to create Rinaldi. He stepped, fully formed, into my mind: an elegant, slightly effeminate man who is given to grand gestures and who likes to drink his tea from dainty china cups.

Every writer, even those who've lived sheltered lives, has had dramatic and poignant life experiences on which they can draw. But it often takes time and distance to mine them as story material. As well as some writing experience to shape and polish this found material until it shines.

#

Rosemary McCracken hails from Montreal, and has worked as a reporter, editor, and reviewer at newspapers across Canada. Her first Pat Tierney mystery novel, *Safe Harbor*, was a finalist for Britain's Debut Dagger. It was published by Imajin

Books in 2012, and was followed by *Black Water* in 2013, *Raven Lake* in 2016, and *Uncharted Waters* in 2020. Jack Batten, the *Toronto Star*'s crime fiction reviewer, calls Pat "a hugely successful sleuth figure." Rosemary's short fiction has appeared in numerous Canadian and American anthologies and magazines. "The Sweetheart Scamster," published in the crime fiction collection *Thirteen*, was a Derringer Award finalist in 2014. Rosemary now lives in Toronto. Visit her website and blog at <https://www.rosemarymccracken.website/>