

*Me Three* by Susan Juby. Penguin Random House Canada, 2022.

*Mindful of Murder* by Susan Juby. Harper Collins, 2022.

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“If you follow your dharma, you will bring good into the world.”

- *Mindful of Murder* by Susan Juby

In recent times I've been rereading selectively, also reading from my backlog of borrowed books, and from my pile of purchases from small and independent publishers, and trying to avoid new purchases from large [publishing houses that pursue actions that undermine both the rights of readers and the capacity of libraries](#) to do their work. This minor consumer activism has simplified my reading life in a complicated time, but it is a little deprivation too, so it was a guilty pleasure for me to receive review copies of two new novels by Susan Juby when they arrived.

I was asked to provide one review for the two new books, [Me Three](#) and [Mindful of Murder](#). This is a straightforward task in that they share an author, less so in that one novel is ostensibly meant for a young readership, whereas the other is for a more general adult readership. Readers familiar with Susan Juby's writing know of its appeal for diverse audiences and are acquainted with her good work in various genres; they will not need the encouragement of this review to take up these new books and will not be surprised to find various throughlines between these books and in relation to her other works. For those new to Susan Juby's books, I'm happy to introduce both of these novels, together with a few thoughts that connect them.

*We Three* differs from previous novels for young readers by Susan Juby in a number of ways. The novel takes place in the United States, and familiar West Coast settings are far offstage. Written in epistolary form, one-sided though it is, the story is carried by an eleven year old boy named Rodney. He is writing to his friend Larry, but Larry is not writing back for reasons that become clear as Rodney learns more about and works through the consequences of recent events that have changed his life. In other of Juby's books for young readers the main character has often been older, in fact more like Rodney's prickly older sister Kate. But as with young Sara in the popular [Woefield Poultry Collective](#) and [Republic of Dirt](#), the author's characterization of the young narrator is convincing, and shows a respectful and appreciative regard that takes in the particular considerations and complexities of a young life. The book might be seen as belonging to the category of what used to be called young adult “problem novels” although like the best of that category it is much more; it is very funny, in fact, and protects and celebrates space to experience and anticipate joy. But even so, Rodney's family is in terrible trouble.

Faced with accusations about his actions, Rodney's celebrity father has taken refuge in a treatment centre while Rodney, his mother, and sister try to make sense of their losses and changed circumstances. Rodney is negotiating external pressures together with his own capacity to deal with family issues of addiction, broken and new relationships, and the human fallibility of adults around him. All of this is complicated by the intrusive realities of social media. The subject matter is difficult, and the author presents it without judgment, and with warmth and

sensitivity appropriate for younger readers, as the narrator constructs his own understanding of events. Still, while this is not [Fight Night](#) or [Lullabies for Little Criminals](#), some young readers may find even such a gentle treatment of difficult topics hard to read. I once asked a teenager how they were doing with a copy of Juby's [Getting the Girl](#), to be told that they couldn't read it right then because they were living it. If the right books sometimes find us at the right times, perhaps what might be taken from my anecdote is that the right time is highly subjective, doesn't happen on a schedule, and that these works for young readers should also find a readership among caring adults.

With *Mindful of Murder*, Juby returns to a familiar format in a new genre. Helen Thorpe is a former Buddhist nun who is entrusted to carry out the final wishes of a former employer and friend. The story unfolds from the perspective of alternating narrators, parties to the action, and occurs through the medium of a murder mystery. As in Juby's very popular *Woefield* novels, this narrative strategy is an effective and enjoyable means to have the reader learn about the characters and events through varied and vividly drawn perspectives. The novel also returns to familiar territory, set at a retreat centre on a Gulf Island in the Salish Sea. As with *Woefield*, the [Truth Commission](#), the [Alice](#) novels and others, local readers may appreciate the verisimilitude and the gentle irony with which this is done. Readers from away may find reflected in Sutil Island and the Yatra Institute the exceptionalities, eccentricities, and idealisms that can be features of remote, self-selected, and alternative communities.

The setup recalls other fictional works that rely on West Coast settings, such as Bill Richardson's [Bachelor Brothers](#) series, and also [L.R. Wright's](#) murder mysteries set on the Sunshine Coast. This particular triangulation appeals to me because *Mindful of Murder* is quite possibly the most humane and compassionate murder mystery that a reader is likely to encounter. Through the construct of the alternating narrators we are offered insights into the back stories of main and also minor characters, and empathy builds along with the action. As in *We Three*, the author treats the characters with thoughtfulness and care, so that we understand something about their failings, strengths, and choices, even when we may not like them very much.

New in *Mindful of Murder*, for me at least, is the extent to which I am led by the author's wide-ranging creativity and curiosity to follow delightful threads beyond the pages, to learn more about diverse details that enrich the novel: Is there really such a thing as butler academy? What does the marvelous crockery from Faïencerie de Gien look like? These sideroads arise in addition to weightier thematic matters that the reader might consider, but that are introduced with a rare lightness, for example in relation to Buddhist practice, green burial arrangements, or right to die movements. The closing provides the satisfactory resolution that one expects in a murder mystery, and yet the complexity and potential of the characters and their situations suggests that Helen and her friends could make a welcome return in future works.

Between *We Three* and *Mindful of Murder*, two dots in the growing constellation of Susan Juby's works, a connection might be drawn that passes through her 2010 memoir, [Nice Recovery](#). Living in recovery for many years from addiction that began in her early teen years, the author

describes middle school experiences that brought her to a determination to “change everything,” and that among other things in her young life led her to become a keen observer. Those early experiences and consequent skills of perception, and the humility, empathy, and humour that derive from them, inform these two novels as they do her prior works. These most recent novels continue a body of work that demonstrates a generous and humane creativity, and the result brings good to our reading world. I highly recommend both new novels, along with others in Susan Juby’s back list as mentioned above.