

## *Amber Flashing*

### *A Literary Mystery*

DARLENE BARRY QUAIFFE

*WAS IT THE RHYTHM OF THE OVERHEAD FAN, THE HOT RAIN, his blood that beat up from between her legs? She couldn't be sure. It all mixed together in her veins and scalded her heart. She never could have imagined it, not this way, despite the hours she had spent dreaming, crying out in the deepest, most secret part of her woman self for this moment. Sure, she had had to follow him to New Orleans to make it come true, but her pride would survive. She would survive. In a matter of hours, Stephanie had not only found and seduced the only man who could make her heart beat like a tropical rain on a New Orleans lace balcony, she had discovered her true home. New Orleans was her place.*

Ah, yes, New Orleans. Pauline could see why *Amber Flashing* would set a steamy novel among cast iron lace and *beignets*. Pauline had been there only once, for a Modern Language Association conference, but she hoped to return and to that end networked with other university scholars at Loyola and Tulane. Pauline placed the book back on her night table, making sure it was underneath current copies of *Queen's Quarterly*, *Canadian Women Studies*, *Prairie Fire*.

She always did this and always wondered who she thought was going to see the trash novels she read. Certainly not her colleagues. For years, there hadn't been anyone in her department eligible for her bed. Still, better safe than sorry. After all, there was the Jane Austen conference this week and there were a few guest speakers whom she had never met. One with a name that eclipsed the title of his paper, "Jane Austen and Repudiation of the Canon" by Dirk Glynworth.

Dirk, indeed. Could he live up to a name like that? And what did "Dirk" mean? There was always a clue to the person in his name.

Now she'd done it, got the gears going, when in fact *Amber Flashing* and her New Orleans rain were supposed to be the equivalent of hot milk at midnight. Damn. It was Dirk the Jerk who got in the way of her journey to absolution.

Disgusted with herself, she reached for the copy of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* propped open on her other bedside table. She only had a few pages left in a novel excerpt called "Memory in the Blood."

*Naming a newborn is the one time that humans use vision. The one time they get to take the future in their arms and bury their faces in the*

*smell of resurrection. It's heady stuff and when they lift their faces from the skin of their babies, they speak in tongues predicting the future in the names of their offspring.*

Wasn't that odd. Here she had just been thinking about names. Was this an omen? Perhaps she should get up and check on the meaning of "Dirk" in her *Dictionary of Proper Names*. Why not, sleep was out of the question.

So, Dirk the Turk was short for Derrick. How dull. But Derrick was Old German for "Ruler of the People." Not bad. Or Teutonic for "dagger." That had promise.

What to read now? She'd blown the night. Pauline pulled *Descant* out from under the *Canadian Fiction Magazine* and flipped to a short story.

*There are women dancing together in the dark. It's easy to pick them out in the ballroom on the roof of Xanadu. Not so much because the walls are open to the beach and the Bay of Cárdenas, but because the women glow in the dark. During the day they appear normal. Although a few are sick, especially the ones whose mouths won't close.*

Pauline finished "Pleasure Dome" with the oddest feeling. On examination it had nothing to do with the characters of this story—19th century American factory workers, poor, sick women who had swallowed loads of radium while painting luminous dials on watches and who were then secreted in Cuba during a public health investigation. There was nothing in the setting. In fact, Pauline had been to Cuba and to the DuPont mansion at Xanadu. Owned by the state, it was now a restaurant. No, there was something in the style of the story that felt familiar, but W.E. Campbell, the author of this piece, was no one she knew.

Yet "Pleasure Dome" reminded her of a story she had started to read in *Border Crossings*. She'd been interrupted by a student knocking on her office door, so Pauline had stuffed the arts mag in her briefcase to finish at home. Well, she was at home. But did she really want to get out of her warm bed and track down her briefcase? Could both stories have been written by W.E. Campbell? And then the strange coincidence presented itself: the student who had come to her office today was one Wendy Campbell, a serious young woman in a yellow sweater studying political science.

Pauline's feet touched the floor reluctantly, but curiosity had always been her elephant hook—pulling and prodding at her better judgement. She stumbled over her briefcase at the bottom of the stairs. Flipping through the magazine, she found the story was written by Berna Daughters, not the Campbell person.

*Burned a black-patent spike-heel today, just the one, by accident, got mixed in with some old newspapers under my bed, threw them all in the burning barrel, saw the shoe glisten, flames reflected for a minute in the patina before the plastic began to melt, obviously not real leather, a man-made skin. Could plant flowers in its surviving mate, ladyslippers maybe. Didn't feel much like a lady when I wore those shoes with sheer black nylons, black garters. What's the phrase: "a woman's leg like a trumpet, caressed that trumpet like it was a woman's leg?" Trumpet: a glistening brass musical instrument of the wind variety, commonly a curved tube with*

*a flaring bell. Woman's leg: glistening skin instrument of the sexual variety, commonly denoted by pitch of heel on shoe. Both performance instruments.*

She could hear it. The rhythm of the sentences, word choice and placement—these two writers could be Siamese twins joined at the head. They're speaking with the same tongue. Pauline turned to the contributors' notes. Nothing she could use. No references to where they lived. Perhaps they've shared a creative writing class, come under the same influence. Creative writing courses had a way of homogenizing writers. That being said, the stories were both fairly good.

It was 3 a.m. The hour that signalled the end of Pauline's patience with her runaway mind. Back to New Orleans and Stephanie's quest. Consider it a night cap.

*He was still asleep, posed like a Greek god on the sheets. Stephanie sat on the balcony as shiny and new from the rain as her New Orleans love. She was wearing his shirt and drank in his scent which mingled in her nostrils with the steamy smells of the street below. It was tantalizing to think that here she sat naked but for a white silk shirt, her lover breathing the rhythm of satisfied sleep and the people of the French Quarter passing underneath her. Soon the two of them would dress, cross the street to the Croissant d'Or, where they would sip bowls of café au lait, eat pâtisserie and plan their life together. Stephanie's journal lay open in her lap. She had been writing as he slept. Now she examined the various forms her name could take: Mrs. David Barr, Mrs. Stephanie Barr, Stephanie Smith-Barr.*

The following evening, Pauline climbed into bed with a stack of journals from her office and some information on the Jane Austen conference. First, she'd find out about Quirky Dirk, then she'd start on some detective work into what she had come to call "The Case of the Ventriloquous Author."

Pauline scanned the conference bios. Well, well, Mr. Dirk Glynworth was from Loyola University. He must be new. She hadn't heard of him from her contacts. Besides Austen, his interests ran to Milton, Sterne and Renaissance pornography. She wondered if he was as old as his taste in literature? Her conclusion: see what a Dirk looks like, then decide whether to add one to her southern collection.

Now onto the stack of journals. The more she had thought about the similarities in the stories she had read the night before, the more she was convinced that she was reading the same author and had encountered her before. This idea had held her in its grip all day, until late in the afternoon when she started reviewing the periodicals on her shelves and pulling out any that had short stories she remembered as being like those of W.E. Campbell and Berna Daughters. Pauline started with *Room of One's Own*.

*I say, "She lies naked in the creek, the water running the length of her body and spreading the blood from between her legs like an alluvial fan into the ocean." His dark eyes draw a line up my arm, over the rise of my shoulder to the slope of my neck up past my jaw and cheek, the line of sight stopping short of my eyes. He says, "I am the thirsty rocks on the shore." The train shudders and we are thrown together. I smell the seaweed in his hair.*

There it was again, that voice with its provocative timbre, a kind of worldly-wise quality with a hint of gravel. But this story, "Word Made Flesh," belonged to Barry Cove. Impossible. There was no way this erotic story had been written by a man. It was too female. And too much like the others now under scrutiny. Pauline was sure she was onto something.

After flinging eight more magazines to the floor, the trail was cold. Out of frustration she took up Amber Flashing in search of a little mindless solace. The title of the novel said it all, she thought: *You Got Me Voodoo'D*. And the photograph on the back cover gave nothing away about the woman behind Amber Flashing. What did this woman with the outrageous pseudonym, this writer of popular fiction, know about real life, let alone New Orleans and the Blues? Had she done the mileage? At least she acknowledged the title's source: Louis Armstrong, Luis Russell, Neil Lawrence and Decca. Certainly, Ms. Amber Flashing was no contemporary of Satchmo; judging by the photo she wasn't more than forty. But here she was writing out of the City of Sin.

*Stephanie stood with her back to the balcony doors, the light from the street sign enveloped her in passionate radiance. The sheer, floor-length negligée that flowed from her shoulders had been the purest white when she had stood in front of the bathroom mirror and slipped it on. Now she shimmered as red as the naked neon sign, redder still with the light from David's eyes.*

It wasn't enough, not even David with lust in his eyes could keep Pauline's mind off the mystery of those short stories. She decided to write the editors of the magazines. The letter would suggest that she is considering writing a critical paper to include these works; that access to the addresses and phone numbers of the authors under consideration would greatly facilitate her research. Yes, then she'd know from whence cometh these stories—from a singular source sprung as she suspected.

Pauline reconsidered: why wait for letters? Editors were notoriously slow to answer their mail. She'd just phone. From the office, of course. Yes, all the better, there would be no letter on file, no substantial record. Now, why did that matter? She wasn't doing anything illicit. But somehow her quest didn't seem academic, it seemed nosy, it had the smell of a tabloid—cheap newsprint.

None of her concerns mattered the next day as she finished speaking to the last editor on her list, Meeka Walsh at *Border Crossings*. As she hung up the phone, Pauline stared at the three names on the writing pad in front of her: W.E. Campbell, Berna Daughters, Barry Cove. These authors shared the same postal box, in the same post office, in the same city, her city. She was right! But why? Why publish under different names? A single pseudonym would have made sense, certainly less sense in this day and age, but still the odd person did take a pen name. Fiction writing was no longer considered one step up from Prostitution; it was at least two or three steps. If they didn't think of themselves as artists, many fiction writers were well-respected, solid citizens. Pauline counted a number of such people among her colleagues at the university.

And the spoiler in her little mystery was that the *nom de plumes* were not of a gender. So, was the author female or male? What would the

advantage be? Was the author a man, perhaps he really was this Barry Cove, who felt he'd have a better chance of being published if he masqueraded as a woman writer? Did this mean that women writers were coming into print more frequently than men? Might there be some sort of unconscious reparation among editors for the hundreds of years that women had been denied a paper voice? There could be an article in this for her after all. But she must contact the real author of these short stories and answer some of these questions. At the top of the notepad she printed, *GEORGE SAND USURPED*, as if it were a title.

The problem was that none of the editors she contacted had phone numbers for the authors, or rather the author. Karen Mulhallen, editor of *Descant*, who had to hand the original cover letter and manuscript of W.E. Campbell assured Pauline there was no phone number provided. It wasn't as if she could knock on the door of a postal box. What to do?

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Pauline hadn't expected to spend more than a few minutes in what turned out not to be a post office, but a postal station. There was no one to chat up, no one who might have seen the occupant of box 202. She found herself leaning against the wall waiting. For what? For number 202? Absurd!

When she heard someone open the first set of double doors and step into the foyer, she quickly retrieved a flyer from the trash, giving it critical attention. An old man entered, nodded, went for a box in the single digits. Pauline had discounted him immediately—even if her author was male, he certainly wouldn't be a senior. The short stories were too earthy, too erotic.

Despite feeling like a fool, Pauline stayed on another fifteen minutes. As she was leaving, a well-dressed woman in her seventies stepped up to the door. Pauline held it open, preoccupied with her thoughts until the woman's perfume aroused her curiosity. Pauline recognized it immediately as *Passion*; she used the scent strips out of magazines as book marks and *Passion* was her favourite. By this time the old woman had stepped through the door and Pauline missed getting a good look at her face.

No matter, she was far too old to be writing anything that smelled of sex, despite her choice in perfume. It occurred to Pauline that perhaps the woman was also a collector of magazine scent samples. The Scratch 'n' Sniff Lady! Pauline giggled like a naughty school girl. She didn't bother to wait and see what box the woman opened.

After her last class the following day, Pauline gathered up a few of the new journals that had arrived with her office mail, and posted a notice on her door indicating she would not be available for the rest of the day. She threw on her raincoat and drew the belt tight. She was on her way to the postal station.

Being there was a little less difficult than the day before. At least she had something real to read. It had been hard feigning interest in *Home Hardware*. What she hadn't counted on was the cement floor. Her thin-soled dress shoes were a handicap that gave new meaning to the term "gumshoe." Pauline lasted at her post long enough to observe six obviously

unsuitable candidates for position of mystery author, never mind that they didn't have the right box number; to chide herself about the paper she should be working on right now in her office; and to read snatches of a story called "Rest Easy."

*Max and Maggie had spent a lifetime together, but no more. He was getting good professional care now, there was no doubt about it. But there was one thing that she, Maggie, could give that those white starched nurses couldn't. She was still Max's wife and she had arranged with the administrator for private, uninterrupted time with her husband. Maggie had done more than arrange, she had been a rock on the subject, as undeniable as her years.*

*On these private days, Maggie came dressed in a pink sweat suit, no buttons to fumble, zippers to catch as her stiff fingers stripped away her clothes in this unfamiliar room. She knew herself by the perfume that rose from between her breasts. In bed she was reassured by his warmth, his familiar scent. There was nothing that could replace the feeling of his skin against hers. It aroused her as much as her skin, her hand aroused him.*

Pauline couldn't finish the story. Her feet hurt too much. Bending down, she tucked her copy of *The Quarterly* into her briefcase. As she did so the outside doors opened into the foyer. By the time she straightened up, tugged at the belt on her raincoat and headed briefcase in hand for the doors, there was no one there. The foyer smelled vaguely of *Passion*.

That night as Pauline finished the story of Max and Maggie, she knew she had another, another story by her mysterious ventriloquist author. This time the voice was coming from some mouthpiece called Anbara Ambergris. Not a name she knew, but she'd be on the phone to Gordon Lish at *The Quarterly* first thing in the morning. That was all well and fine, but if she got the same postal box in the same postal station from Lish, what was she going to do, really do?

Of course, how obtuse of her to overlook the obvious—she'd write Box 202. Ask one of the authors that resided in that morgue-like slot to meet her, at a restaurant perhaps. Pauline would write nothing of her suspicions in this letter, just that she had an academic interest in the author's work. Yes, quite civilized. These gumshoe antics had really been beneath her. She turned to her night table and Amber Flashing for some contented pleasure. She opened *You Got Me Voodoo'D*.

*David was late. Stephanie sat in the Croissant d'Or alone. A copy of the Times Picayune open in front of her. She hadn't turned a page in an hour. Her cappuccino was cold, her face hot. Sitting, she simply stared at the plate glass window imagining one scene of betrayal after another as if the window was a television screen. Stephanie watched as he undid the buttons on the red blouse of the woman who stood before him head back, eyes closed. There was no silk or lace between him and skin the colour of rich dark coffee. He put his mouth, his lips unnaturally pink, against first one then the other dark nipple.*

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While in the main office of the English Department depositing her letter to Ms Anbara Ambergris in the mail basket, Pauline popped in on the Chairman. Before she realized what she was doing, she had informed him she wouldn't be attending the morning session of the Jane Austen Conference. As it happened, there were pictures of all the guest lecturers in the brochure, including Dirk Glynworth. She offered her regrets, but she had some urgent and timely research that required her attention. Pauline offered nothing more to the Chairman, certainly no real details about her research project. She thought to ask him if he owned a shooting stick, then thought better of it.

The next morning Pauline arrived at the postal station prepared to stay a few hours. Dutifully she had brought the paper she was writing on "The Emergence of Négritude and the Subsequent Influence on Post-Colonial Fiction," a clipboard, a bag of books and journals, and something called an Executive Sport Seat. She cherished the idea of a shooting stick, the phrase fit the circumstances, but realized the practicality of a cane that folded out into a three-legged chair. A cement floor was less than ideal for the deployment of a shooting stick with its single leg, even though a thick rubber mat ran the length of the postal station down the middle of the floor. So, there Pauline sat on her newly acquired Executive Sport Seat at the far end of the cement block tomb. When questioned about her presence, she simply answered that she was doing a survey. The clipboard held to her chest was her badge.

Often she found herself staring at the opposite wall forming on its government green surface the sentences of her post-colonial paper. While searching for the appropriate word to continue an unfinished sentence, Pauline noticed the poster above her visual tablet. The word EXPEDITED announced itself in a brisk, official manner. And she smiled at the word, at its unlikely serendipitous role as she added it to a sentence that now read, "Notwithstanding the period in which this Black movement was launched, one can extend the theory with its inexactitudes, its emotionalism, its utopian vision to much of the post-colonial fiction outside Africa as well as expedite. . . ."

In rapture over this word, she failed to notice that two more postal tenants had come and gone and a third was eyeing her with suspicion from the door. Pauline quickly finished the sentence and smiled sweetly at the hesitant child. This cut no ice, but then Pauline's stomach rumbled largely and the child was prompted to come in.

Pauline checked her watch, incredulous to find it read twenty past twelve. She had never intended to spend the whole morning and yet was not ready to be turned out by hunger, although a cup of coffee would be very welcome. She decided to take a coffeeless reading break and pulled the latest edition of *Dandelion* from her bag. Scanning the Table of Contents she received a caffeine-free jolt—Anbara Ambergris—another story. Pauline turned with dispatch to page 7.

*Nettie tried to ignore the saleswoman hovering off her right shoulder. She had already given the perfunctory, "I'm just browsing." But the young clerk had immediately replied, "Of course you're looking for a gift. Your*

daughter or granddaughter perhaps?" Indeed, Nettie thought, and moved toward a rack of red and black Merry Widows; has that bland young thing never thought about the name of these bits of satin and suspenders? Taking down a scarlet Merry Widow, Nettie shook out the garters and stepped before a full-length mirror. "What do you think?" she said to the girl, over her shoulder. In the mirror she saw the lingerie clerk pull a face. "I can see you approve," Nettie said. "I think I'll try it on."

Pauline was startled to find someone speaking to her. "You'll ruin your eyes reading in this light." This tidbit of advice from an old woman standing over Pauline's book bag. The woman reached in and extracted Amber Flashing's *You Got Me Voodoo'D*. "I have them all," she announced, "right from the very first in 1952. Oh my, yes, I'm a fan."

Pauline did not welcome a discussion of this kind of literature in a public place. And was about to say the book was a gift for a sick friend, when the import of what the woman had said registered with her. "Did you say 1952? The first novel was 1952? But how can that be, the author looks barely over forty?"

"Well," the old woman turned the novel over, "it's certainly a flattering photo and I can see why she would want to use it on all her books."

"The photograph is from 1952?" Pauline was recalling her doubts about Amber Flashing's bio printed on the inside cover. "I suppose all that business about her speaking seven languages and being born in the Far East of missionary parents is all bunk?"

"Why do you say so?" the woman asked, looking sharply at Pauline and then at the copy of *Dandelion* in her lap.

"Obviously," Pauline drew the word out, "if our Ms Flashing's biography were true, she would not be writing this type of thing."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" The woman seemed amused but her tone was icy. "In your opinion Mrs. Flashing is too well-educated to write pot-boilers?"

"Stands to reason, doesn't it?" Pauline regarded the old woman as a practitioner of logic.

"I happen to know Mrs. Flashing is paid very well." The woman offered this as a cold fact. The dingy postal station seemed to lend her statement weight. It was her closing. She handed the book back to Pauline.

Stiff-jointed, Pauline rose from her Executive Sport Seat and began to collect her things. She turned her back on the old woman while she returned her chair to cane status.

Pauline, on her way out, passed the woman who was sorting a great pile of mail in the recess of a window on the sill. The woman had already deposited several large padded envelopes from her New York publisher in a plain cotton shopping bag. The letters she had separated into neat bundles according to *nom de plume*. And now she was flipping through her magazines, although not *Saturday Night* or *The Atlantic Monthly*, and ripping out the perfume strips. Turning to Pauline, who had caught her cane in the double doors, the woman offered her the strips. "I thought you would like these. I noticed you used them to sweeten the pages of my favourite book."

With the scent of *Passion* between them, Pauline recognized the old woman. ☺