

**“A Red Herring Without Mustard” by Alan Bradley.
Delacorte Press, 2011. \$23.00, 391 pages.**

The village fete is such a staple in so many cozy British mysteries that one almost expects to find bodies in every tent and behind every table whenever the festivals occur in literature. Bishop’s Lacey, the quaint, quiet 1950’s era English village that has already seen more than its fair share of murder is hosting its own church fete when Flavia de Luce accidentally burns down the fortune teller’s tent. Although no corpses are discovered at the fete itself, it’s not long before death comes calling once again.

Feeling guilty for having destroyed the Gypsy’s tent, eleven year old Flavia invites Fenella Faa to park her caravan on the edge on the de Luce family estate for a few nights, despite knowing her father would disapprove most heartily. When she finds poor Fenella bludgeoned almost to death in her caravan later that night, Flavia knows that she will have to investigate the attempted murder. After all, she’s already solved two murders previously to this crime. Why shouldn’t the police be begging her for her help? Being a nosy, precocious and fiendishly clever eleven year old does have its benefits. Very few people expect an eleven year old girl to be investigating a crime or to be so fiendishly clever or so very tenacious in her inquiries.

Flavia immediately begins asking questions about why someone would want Fenella dead. Does it have something to do with a missing child from years ago? Perhaps someone was worried about the fortunes that Fenella was telling at the fete. Was there a secret she uncovered that was better kept buried? And what about the disappearing and reappearing antiques all across town?

Soon after, the appearance of a corpse, hoisted up high on the Poseidon fountain in Flavia’s yard and with a de Luce silver lobster pick shoved up its nose brings an urgency to Flavia’s investigations. Never one to let anything get in her way, Flavia eavesdrops, lies, breaks into houses, experiments with her extensive chemistry lab, and interrogates villagers and neighbors, all in the name of solving her mystery.

Like the two books featuring Flavia that came before it, “The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie” and “The Weed that Strings the Hangman’s Bag,” “A Red Herring Without Mustard” is a charming and compelling read. The mystery is sufficiently baffling without being confusing, and Flavia is one of the most unique characters in literature to come along in years. “A Red Herring Without Mustard” will keep you entertained from the first page to the last.

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