



A Bucket of Ashes

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“The resolution of the central mystery is almost secondary to the revelations about Nell’s past and the way the author ties up all the loose ends of her present situation. Longtime readers will enjoy this aspect immensely; I know I did. This has been a gorgeously written series, populated with unique and unforgettable characters.”

—CA Reviews

Summers at the Hewitts family’s palatial Cape Cod “cottage” are always bittersweet for governess Nell Sweeney, for it was on the Cape that she lost all but one of her siblings to disease. Then she married Duncan, a ne’er-do-well charmer who abused her and coaxed her into petty crime before being condemned to spend the rest of his life in prison. Her dark past has been a deeply buried secret for years—but soon she’ll learn that it wasn’t buried quite deeply enough.

Nell has proven herself an exemplary governess, and she is deeply devoted to little Gracie. But now the possibility that she might be carrying Will Hewitt’s child threatens to destroy everything she’s worked so hard for. Even if she were free to marry, she doubts that Will, a rootless cardsharp and recovering addict, could ever truly settle down. Not that marriage is even an option, since Duncan adamantly refuses to grant her a divorce. When the pregnancy is discovered, she’ll be ruined.

Nell is dealt another blow when she finds out that her beloved brother Jamie has been discovered dead in a burned-out farm shed—and that he was wanted for murder. With help from an injured Will and her former mentor, Dr. Greaves, Nell attempts to clear Jamie’s name, a mission that takes her from the criminal underworld to the top ranks of Cape Cod society.

Originally published by Berkley Prime Crime

A Bucket of Ashes Details

Date : Published July 7th 2010 by Hawkley Books (first published December 4th 2007)

ISBN :

Author : P.B. Ryan , Patricia Ryan

Format : Kindle Edition 192 pages

Genre : Mystery, Historical, Historical Fiction, Historical Mystery, Fiction, Romance

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Allison says

It was ok... but not quite what I was hoping for in the finale of this series. The mystery was lackluster, with more focus on Nell than the mystery for much of it. Then Nell and Will's relationship took the contrived sort of turns that I dislike in a romance and didn't have as many of the more subtle interactions that I enjoyed in previous books. Until now, their relationship didn't have that 'romance' quality. So unfortunately I find myself disappointed in the resolution of 5 books of build-up. I really wish it wasn't true, but I feel let down.

Just another note of caution - as another reviewer noted, there are about 50 pages at the end of the ebook edition that are an excerpt from the first book in the series, just in case you hadn't read it I suppose. Luckily I was aware of this and didn't get the cheated feeling of reaching the end 50 pages too early.

Li says

This felt like a shorter book to me compared to the others in the series, but possibly only because of the amount of DRAMA packed into it. Which I loved, obviously. Unlike the previous five books, the romance took a front seat in this one, while the mystery was almost treated a subplot to tie up loose ends. Possibly a bit too perfect of a HEA, but it left me smiling - and this was really a most satisfying series.

Jennie says

I really did enjoy this series overall, but the final two books, and this one in particular, felt more like novellas. Somehow all the loose ends were tied up too quickly, and while I *liked* the ending, it wasn't *satisfying*. The mystery in this installment feels like an afterthought, as others have mentioned, but for some reason the chemistry that had been so apparent between Will and Nell in the previous books came off a bit flat, too.

I wish the series would have continued, so that we could see the continuing development of their relationship. Alas.

Stacie Haden says

All you want in a historical mystery series. I'm sad to be done.

OLT says

This is not an especially timely review. It's for a book which was released in 2007. In addition, this is not really a review for just this book. It's a review of the whole Nell Sweeney historical mystery series. There are

six books altogether. The first, **STILL LIFE WITH MURDER**, came out in 2004, takes place in 1868 in post Civil War Boston and introduced readers to heroine Nell Sweeney, Irish immigrant from a very poor background who, with the help of a kind doctor, gets herself out of the gutter and educated and becomes the doctor's medical assistant.

In the first book, Nell assists at the Caesarean birth of the baby of a maid in the household of the rich and influential Hewitt family. The matriarch of the family is so impressed by Nell that she hires her to live with them and raise the child. (Why should Viola Hewitt want to raise the child as part of her family? I'm not saying. Just read the books.)

So the complete 6-book series has Nell living in the Hewitt household in Boston, taking care of baby Gracie and solving a mystery in each book. Nell also becomes involved with the whole family, some family members loving her, some not, and there's a special relationship between Nell and oldest son and black sheep of the family Will, who's messed up emotionally and injured physically through events during the Civil War and is now addicted to opium.

As the series progresses, we see their relationship become closer and Will slowly wean himself off drugs, with some minor set-backs. There are some complications to Nell and Will having an HEA which I will not mention because you need to read it all and be surprised by everything in Nell's background. However, all will be resolved in this last book.

All in all, this is a very complete series with interesting history, good mysteries and an overarching romance. The books take place over a 2-year period, from 1868 to 1870. The six titles are **STILL LIFE WITH MURDER**, **MURDER IN A MILL TOWN**, **DEATH ON BEACON HILL**, **MURDER ON BLACK FRIDAY**, **MURDER IN THE NORTH END**, and this last one, **A BUCKET OF ASHES**. I have enjoyed them all, perhaps the first one impressing me the most for its depiction of the grip opium has on Will. My only criticism of the books is that the Kindle versions have typos and are not edited as well as they should be. In addition, the stories are all short, most under 200 pages, and as such they could be priced more economically, especially considering the at-times shoddy editing.

Edward Beavers says

The end of a series

The Nell Sweeney series comes to a conclusion with an endearing finish for romance. Although the conclusion of the tale is sweet it is also sad that Ms. Ryan has not continued Nell's sleuthing. maybe someday Nell will return, we can only hope.

V.r. Christensen says

I finish on a sigh. This relationship between the hero and heroine is fraught with emotional and situational complexity. The mystery this time was a personal one, dealing with the last of Nell's demons. My only complaint is that it was rather short. I could have read on for quite a lot longer. But then I like long books. The mystery was secondary, but that was perfectly fine by me. The characters were so richly drawn, it seemed natural that their story would take the spotlight. I'm rather sad to say goodbye to this series. The

characters, Will, in particular, will stay with me for some time.

Tina says

Final book in the Gilded Age mystery series and it reads exactly like that -- a series wrap up. The mystery element was almost an after thought. This book was dedicated wholly to wrapping up loose ends on the personal and character front.

Throughout the series, Nell, the main character has been guarding some pretty heavy secrets for very good reason. Only Will, her best friend and the man she's quietly (and sufferingly) in love with knows them all. Well all is revealed in this installment, for the most part.

While the family is enjoying their annual summer sojourn on the Cape, Nell's past comes crashing into her present. Her last living sibling, her younger brother Jamie has been killed and under a cloud of suspicion. Also, her personal situation with Will, who is away in France working at a war-time field surgeon during one of the Napoleonic wars at the behest of President Grant, has reached a critical turning point. She has some hard decisions to make especially with Dr. Greaves, the man who helped her out when she needed it most, returns to her life.

I think I enjoyed this book largely on the merits of it being the terminal book in what is one of the more enjoyable series I've read of late. It reads more like a romance with mystery elements than a mystery with some romantic elements the way the earlier books are. I really have no complaints there as I like romance novels and have been suffering right along with Nell and Will in their tortured romance. So I am glad everything gets resolved so nicely. And I do admit that the 'punishment' meted out to the awful Harry is quite poetic. He'll be miserable for the rest of his life. LOL.

OTOH, everything does get resolved *too* nicely. Everything is wrapped up in a very neat, convenient and wonderful bow. If I had harsher feelings for the series I probably would have given this book a 3-star rating. But I am sentimental, I am glad things worked out the way they did and I did get a lot of enjoyment from this series.

Marla says

Clearly my reluctance to read the final book didn't last very long. But I feel robbed! The book actually ended at 75%, with the final 25% being an extra long excerpt from the first book. Really, we need an excerpt from the first book after reading the last one? This was also the most poorly edited book. The previous books might have had one or two errors, per book. This one had many errors, 'Nell' appeared as 'No', 'one' as 'on', and in one sentence he and his were both used instead of she and her. Also, a flimsy love triangle was thrown in after blissfully being free from that contrivance in all the previous books. I know why it was done, some obstacle was needed to keep Nell and Will from their ultimate reunion until the end of the book, but I found it vaguely annoying at first. Thankfully, it disappeared almost as soon as they introduced it once it had served its purpose.

But then I finished the book and all of the above, plus some awfully convenient and timely tiding up of loose ends, was completely forgiven with the happy feeling I got with the completely agreeable ending, which

wasn't dimmed any by the knowledge that Will and Nell would, of course, end up together. And I loved the unexpected, but perfect way the end of the book was written.

I can't wait to re-read these last two books and then the whole series.

Kaitlyn Dunnett says

A short book, but satisfying.

Jane Makley says

Very engaging

Loved the characters, especially Will and Nell, with their very human strengths and weaknesses. Minor grammatical errors occurred throughout the series, like "she took her head in his hands", but a good copy editor should have corrected such things. Although most of the series seemed very well researched with Will's addiction to drugs and Nell's adherence to religion believably portrayed, Aspects of the various plot lines seemed to drag in this book. The solving of the mystery of her brother's death seemed to take forever involving so many visits to the Gilmartins and police station. I have to admit that I did enjoy the tidy way the whole series was wrapped up at the end of this book

Bridgett says

Wow.. So this is how it ends.

I was so happy with this series all the way that I got absolutely blind-sided by this book!

I have to admit: I skipped a few pages in this one! I skipped a few a lot of pages in this one. I still got the gist of it.

I did not skip pages because I didn't like the book! I think the reason was that there were more words than were necessary on some of the pages. I do like descriptive writing, but sometimes you just have to get on with it!

I do understand the need to bring readers up to speed on things that happened earlier in the series, if they happen to have skipped those books. If it is too much "reminiscing" though then it gets boring and redundant for the faithful readers that read them all cover to cover. That is all.

Since really all of the books in this series were rather great, I am very willing to forgive this little bit of annoyance.

The Mystery part was really shallow! I get the whole "working through your feelings" bit with Nell's leftover family. I thought it was necessary to her character. Although I do think it was not necessary to kill her brother off to bring it about.

After finding out Nell's "situation" I wasn't really interested in the mystery at all any more. I just wanted to find out how she would handle it. Well, she refused to until the end and even then we got sort of cheated out of it.

I didn't like how neat the whole Duncan thing got resolved! It was just a bit too convenient!

The whole part with the "newspaper clipping" thing at the end was a bit trite.

The whole book felt like Mrs. Ryan just wanted to get it over with, have Nell taken care of in the end.

I didn't like that Will's excuse for being a cad was Nell being still married! It just did not fit in with his heroic character. His devil-may-care attitude, his possessiveness, his unconventional behaviour. Through out the series, he became more and more of a user. He used Nell for what he wanted. Then in the end, he makes it "all right" by.. gosh better not say anything about that or spoil it.

I am not opposed to happily ever after! Not in the least! I like it! I wish life was sometimes more like it! Bucket full of ashes had a cheap, rushed ending that left me feeling like I had a bucket full of too sweet candy!

Sorry, Mrs. Ryan. I know you put a lot of work into this one, just like your other books and I may be too harsh, or overly judgemental, but I just can't find much good about this one!

I am rather in a forgiving mood about it though and will certainly read more books by you! I just know that this was maybe just a fluke! Can't hit a home-run every time, right?

Katie Bee says

So after finishing this book - which feels like the natural end of the series, although I don't know if the author is planning to continue - I have come to understand the Nell Sweeney books more. If you approach them as primarily *romance* (the story of how governess Nell falls in love with, marries, and starts a family with her employer's son), they hold up much better than if you approach them as historical fiction (many anachronisms that only grow worse as the story progresses) or as mysteries (there is rarely deduction; it's mostly passive "listen to witnesses until they decide to tell you what happened").

As a romance series with historical bits thrown in as flavor, using mysteries to advance the romance, it actually ends up working quite well. Yes, it's total candyfloss wish-fulfillment that requires a lot of suspension of disbelief. But as a romance, in the long tradition of "governess marries rich fellow" books, it's fine. Nell and Will are both likeable characters and there are several interesting secondary characters as well.

There were a lot of hard-to-believe elements in the denouement of this particular installment. (view spoiler) But ultimately, again, if I remind myself that this is wish-fulfillment romantic fantasy, it works much better than if it's supposed to be realistic in the slightest.

Anne says

I was a little disappointed in this last installment. I knew it was short, but when I got to the end and I was only 74% into the book, I got little confused. Then when I realized the last 26% of the book was the first part of *Still Life With Murder*, I think you could say I was feeling put off. Why would you an excerpt from the first book in a series in the last book of the series? Common sense leads one to believe this is material one is already familiar with. I also thought the story could've went a bit further, as it seemed the characters I'd grown so attached to started acting out of character, simply to wrap things up neatly at the end. Perhaps P.B. Ryan was getting tired of Nell and Will, but I wasn't. She did her series a disservice with this phoned in, too neat ending.

Deborah Bowman says

Through all the pain and sacrifice, the impossible emerges triumphant

I have greatly enjoyed the Nell Sweeney Series by P.B. Ryan. A web of conflicting and seemingly insurmountable odds keep two star-crossed lovers apart as their lives are drawn into seeking justice in murder investigations that touch upon their lives, especially from the past. Nell Sweeney, Dr. Will Hewitt, even little innocent Gracie Hewitt, Will's 6-year-old daughter, are draped in secrets and inaccurate assumptions. Secrets many antagonists would love to expose...just as *Buckets of Ashes* starts out in this ending sequel. Good people like Mrs. Viola Hewitt, the matriarch of the family and Will's mother, Dr. Greaves, who helps Nell accept her troubled past and the loss of her only remaining sibling. The bittersweet ending that gives this family a new beginning for the chance at a happy future, no longer stymied by secrets and the forbidden rules of Brahmin Boston in the 1870's.
