

CÉLINE KEATING

MY SEARCH FOR THREE PINES

Most literary pilgrimages are to where an author has lived or worked; mine involved an imaginary place.

Canada's Eastern Townships, L'Estrie, the region of Québec less than two hours south of Montreal and just over the border from Vermont, is an area rich in beauty, culture, and history. After the American Revolution, some who were loyal to the crown fled north and settled among the Québécois and the English, Scottish, and Irish settlers. From this mix come lovely juxtapositions: Both French and English are spoken here, and the towns display the sloping metal roofs of the Québécois as well as the pale rose brick homes of the Loyalists. In this rolling countryside of apple orchards, lakes, and forests, you're never far from a crisp baguette, farmhouse cheese, excellent wine, or specialty chocolate.

There is much to attract the visitor, but that's not why I talked my husband into traveling to the Townships. I was drawn by the novels of award-winning best-selling author Louise Penny, whose work is a paean to the area, and to the alluring hamlet in which she sets her mysteries. In *Three Pines*, homes face each other around a green jewel of a town square, the pond ices over for winter frolicking, and mysterious forests envelop all in a protective embrace. Evil comes to this world—these are murder mysteries after all—but there's always time to gather in the bistro for warm croissants and camaraderie.

I went in search of Three Pines.

Penny writes that Three Pines can only be found by those who are lost, that it does not appear on any map, but I was undaunted. Like her main character, Chief Inspector Gamache, I sniffed for clues. In *A Fatal Grace*, Penny writes of an old stone mill and an abandoned railroad station; in *The Brutal Telling*, the Rivière Bella Bella flows. An old stagecoach road, a lake, and other features are variously mentioned. But the constants were these: The village, hidden among hills and forests, occurs where four roads come together "like the spokes of a wheel" [*Still Life*]. And at one end of the commons stand