Flavia Sabina de Luce is mad about chemistry, loves poisons, and is not above dissolving her older sister's pearls in acid as an act of revenge. Aged 11, she lives with two sisters, her distant and eccentric father, and a couple of retainers in an old manor house in post-Second World War England. She is also the narrator of the first in a planned series of detective novels by Alan Bradley. Flavia tells a pretty good tale. Late one night, she overhears her beloved father arguing with a red-haired man, and before morning she finds the stranger dying in the garden. Whipping around the countryside on her trusty bike, Gladys, she unravels this mystery, as well as others that the local police find puzzling. Is she Harriet the Spy morphed into a detective, or a plucky refugee from any number of British children's books? Neither, it seems. Although the plot outline sounds like it would appeal to readers in the nine-to-12 age range, Flavia and the series are intended primarily for the adult market. Evidently, the hope is that Flavia will enchant readers the way another unlikely heroine, Alexander McCall Smith’s Precious Ramotswe of The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency, has. Bradley succeeds in making Flavia’s passion for chemistry believable, but the first part of the book creaks a bit, and the cliff-hangers at the end of each chapter are overdone. An early chapter closes: “Father bent down for a closer look, then gave a little gasp. And suddenly he was clutching at his throat, his hands shaking like aspen leaves in autumn, his face the colour of sodden ashes.” A few pages later, the police inspector says ominously, “Flavia … I’d like a word with you. Inside.” This heavy-handedness may make some readers cross, but those who enjoy a nice puzzle mystery are advised to keep reading. Flavia is a smart girl who figures things out impressively. Whether she’ll also charm a world of adult readers remains to be seen.
About the Author

Winner of the CWA Debut Dagger Award, 2007

Alan Bradley was born in Toronto and grew up in Cobourg, Ontario. With an education in electronic engineering, Alan worked at numerous radio and television stations in Ontario, and at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (now Ryerson University) in Toronto, before becoming Director of Television Engineering in the media centre at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, SK, where he remained for 25 years before taking early retirement to write in 1994.

He became the first President of the Saskatoon Writers, and a founding member of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild. His children’s stories were published in The Canadian Children’s Annual, and his short story, Meet Miss Mullen, was the first recipient of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild Award for Children’s Literature.

For a number of years, he regularly taught Script Writing and Television Production courses at the University of Saskatchewan (Extension Division) at both beginner and advanced levels.

His fiction has been published in literary journals and he has given many public readings in schools and galleries. His short stories have been broadcast by CBC Radio.

He was a founding member of The Casebook of Saskatoon, a society devoted to the study of Sherlock Holmes and Sherlockian writings. Here, he met the late Dr. William A.S. Sarjeant, with whom he collaborated on their classic book, Ms Holmes of Baker Street. This work put forth the startling theory that the Great
Detective was a woman, and was greeted upon publication with what has been described as “a firestorm of controversy”.

The release of *Ms. Holmes* resulted in national media coverage, with the authors embarking upon an extensive series of interviews, radio and television appearances, and a public debate at Toronto’s Harbourfront. His lifestyle and humorous pieces have appeared in *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*.

His book *The Shoebox Bible* (McClelland and Stewart, 2006) has been compared with *Tuesdays With Morrie* and *Mr. God, This is Anna*. In July of 2007 he won the Debut Dagger Award of the (British) Crimewriter’s Association for his novel *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, the first of a series featuring eleven year old Flavia de Luce.

Alan Bradley lives in Malta, with his wife Shirley and two calculating cats.
Discussion Questions

1. With her high level of knowledge, her erudition and her self-reliance, Flavia hardly seems your typical eleven-year-old girl. Or does she? Discuss Flavia and her personality, and how her character drives this novel. Can you think of other books that have used a similar protagonist?

2. *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* falls within the tradition of English country house mysteries, but with the devilishly intelligent Flavia racing around Bishop's Lacey on her bike instead of the expected older woman ferreting out the truth by chatting with her fellow villagers. Discuss how Bradley uses the traditions of the genre, and how he plays with them too.

3. What is your favorite scene from *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*?

4. With her excessive interest in poisons and revenge, it's no surprise that Flavia is fascinated, not scared, as she watches the stranger die in her garden. In your view, is her dark matter-of-factness more refreshing or disturbing?

5. Flavia reminds us often about Harriet, the mother she never knew, and has many keepsakes that help her imagine what she was like. Do you think the real Harriet would have fit into Flavia’s mold?

6. Flavia's distance from her father, the Colonel, is obvious, yet she loves him all the same. Does their relationship change over the course of the novel in a lasting way? Would Flavia want it to?

7. Through Flavia's eyes what sort of a picture does Alan Bradley paint of the British aristocracy? Think as well about how appearances aren't always reality, as with the borderline bankruptcy of Flavia's father and Dr. Kissing.

8. Discuss the meaning (or meanings) of the title *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.

9. What twists in the plot surprised you the most?

10. Buckshaw, the estate, is almost a character in its own right here, with its overlarge wings, hidden laboratory, and pinched front gates. Talk about how Bradley brings the setting to life in this novel – not only Buckshaw itself, but Bishop's Lacey and the surrounding area.

11. What does Flavia care about most in life? How do the people around her compare to her chemistry lab and books?

12. Like any scientist, Flavia expects her world to obey certain rules, and seems to be thrown off kilter when surprises occur. How much does she rely on the predictability of those around her, like her father and her sisters, in order to pursue her own interests (like solving the murder)?