

Black Swan

Chris Knopf

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The setting is perfect for murder: a rickety old hotel—the Black Swan—on upscale Fishers Island, a tiny speck of land off the coast of Long Island; a dysfunctional family of high-tech refugees running the hotel; and an impending October storm of biblical fury. As the sea lurches and churns, Sam Acquillo seeks temporary shelter at Fishers Island to repair the *Carpe Manana*, the sleek new sailboat he and his girlfriend, Amanda, are delivering to a rich friend on the mainland.

By this time of the year all the summer people have departed and the permanent residents clearly want nothing to do with outsiders. But Acquillo, as readers of Chris Knopf's earlier Hampton mysteries will recall, is not easily discouraged. He soon finds an ally of sorts in the hotel owner's daughter, Anika, who seems sexually drawn to him, even though he's fifty-seven and she about half his age.

Anika's father, Christian Fey, has made his fortune by developing N-Spock, a computer program much in demand by big businesses. Just before the newest version of N-Spock is due to hit the market, Fey sells his company and retreats to Fishers Island with his crafty, love-starved daughter and his brilliant but psychologically flawed son, Axel. When the new owners of Fey's company discover defects in the latest N-Spock that render it inoperable, they arrive on the island to "consult" with Fey just as the storm sweeps in. Then the mayhem starts.

With communications disrupted, ferry service to the mainland cut off, and no significant police presence to rely on, it's up to Acquillo to find out what's going on while doing his best to safeguard himself and Amanda. By the time the storm is over this ex-boxer, ex-systems engineer, ex-corporate cog will have clashed with thugs, made common cause with the island's crustier types, and delved into minds on the verge of madness.

Acquillo has the same sense of irony, the same quick wit as fellow fictional sleuths such as Robert B. Parker's Spenser and Philip R. Craig's J. W. Jackson (of the Martha's Vineyard series), although he never seems to relax and enjoy life as much as they do. Perhaps his distance from emotions can be explained by the way he views himself while steering his boat through worsening weather: "As I put my strength and weight into the wheel one second, and then let it whirl between my gloved hands the next, it seemed impossible that any useful end was being served by human agency, that the boat was in some conspiracy with the sea and wanted to give me only the illusion of control."

EDWARD MORRIS (May / June 2011)

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