

First Light: A Folly Beach Mystery

Bill Noel

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Themes of friendship and faith thread through Bill Noel's ninth Folly Beach mystery, *First Light*, a lively novel set on a South Carolina island.

Amateur detective, photographer, and gallery owner Chris Landrum finds himself involved in more murky goings-on in Folly Beach, South Carolina, in this mystery series' ninth installment. He almost gets run over twice; witnesses a hit-and-run which he insists is intentional; and spends some anxious days worried about Charleston County Sheriff's Department Detective Karen Lawson, his girlfriend, who has been shot in a robbery attempt. On top of all that, he's finally decided to tell his best friend and gallery assistant Charles that their gallery is a money pit and needs to close for good.

Noel's characters are lively, likable (even when they're ornery), and real. Surf-shop owner Dude Sloan seems to have indoctrinated several townsfolk into his unique way of speaking, and gets into more amateur detecting in this novel. Charles is in a stew over whether he should really marry his fiancée. Realtor Bob Howard pulls no punches in his opinions of itinerant preachers. Chris attends First Light preacher Burl Ives Costello's beach services once out of curiosity. He pays repeat visits for other (detective) reasons. Emotions are plainly shown without being overbearing, making the characters fully fleshed out in all senses. There's not a stilted character here anywhere.

Particularly well imparted is the humanity of the police officers, especially when it comes to their reactions to injuries among their own. The Folly Beach officers and county sheriff's deputies are competent and caring, do their jobs attentively and enthusiastically, and are very seldom seen with donuts. The notable exception is Folly Beach PD Detective Brad Burton, a stellar example of a man so close to retirement that he can smell it, who does the minimum to keep his job and stay alive.

The mental ruminations of Chris's internal dialogues provide illuminating moments in the text, while crisp external dialogues enlighten when it comes to characters' personalities and helpfully deliver information about the crimes being investigated.

The events in this novel are perfectly paced, a gentle roller coaster with enough highs and lows to maintain forward movement without causing confusion. There is a lot going on in *First Light*—death, near-death, major life decisions, schemes, and secrets—but the narrative balances these elements masterfully. There are some spelling and punctuation errors present, but they have little effect on the overall reading experience.

First Light is a great read. Mystery lovers who enjoy interesting settings and offbeat characters should cotton to this series. Landrum and his friends are a welcome distraction from everyday life, and Bill Noel ably generates interest for his continuing series.

J. G. STINSON (February 22, 2016)

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