



The Edge: A Folly Beach Mystery

Bill Noel

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Author Bill Noel pops on the scene again with *The Edge: A Folly Beach Mystery*, his fourth whodunit set on the island of Folly Beach, South Carolina, starring the reluctant amateur sleuth, Chris Landrum, and his quirky posse of pals. Those new to the series quickly realize Chris has a knack for ending up in the middle of things. True to form, he successfully weathers a storm, only to stumble upon a crime scene. The victim, an inhabitant of a boardinghouse called *The Edge*, was done in by a crossbow. Against his better judgment, thanks in part to his nosy trivia buff pal Charles, Chris finds himself drawn in as more murders occur around him. Along the way, he makes the acquaintance of a nostalgic country crooner, a motorcyclist named Harley, a new-age starlet who sings off key, and a chain-smoking landlady who calls cigarettes a bad habit. As Chris pieces together the crime with clues from posse members old and new, he must also dodge pompous law enforcement, bad weather, and false leads to protect his compatriots from getting struck down.

Although this is the fourth installment in the Folly Beach series, new readers will slide comfortably into the pages because Noel does a stellar job of reintroducing his eminently likable characters. Chris' droll, understated humor and repeated insistence that he wants the police to handle things, provide a welcome change from the stereotype of "Everyman" who morphs into a citizen detective without compunction. Indeed, the befuddlement, brainstorming, and irritations experienced by these civilian sleuths is what makes readers care about them; readers are constantly reminded that these are normal people with eccentricities and frailties. Noel laudably resists the temptation to render his characters over-the-top in their quirks. Instead, he strikes the right note, making each character stand out enough so as to be recognizable.

The plot zips along, thanks to short chapters, near-constant action, and witty repartee. When things lag slightly, verbal zingers and vivid descriptions of locales make up for the lack of forward momentum. Just when readers think they have things figured out, the author serves up a new twist. He continually throws curveballs regarding the murderer, keeping readers guessing until the big reveal at the end. Noel does an excellent job of capturing the insular small-town aspects of the island while simultaneously depicting Folly Beach as connected to the outside world. Readers are invited to live on the edge and enjoy this mystery.

JILL ALLEN (March 17, 2011)

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