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Clarion Review ★★★★☆ MYSTERY

The Marsh: A Folly Beach Mystery

Bill Noel
iUniverse
978-1-936236-87-9

The Marsh: A Folly Beach Mystery opens with a whisper and continues in muted tones for nearly three hundred pages. Author Bill Noel has written a pleasant murder mystery, if there is such a thing, and a placid guide to life on Folly Beach, a barrier island off of the South Carolina coast near Charleston.

Noel's protagonist, Chris Landrum, is a recent retiree who moved to Folly Beach from Kentucky. In South Carolina, he finds an abundance of friends and, strange for such a bucolic area, a succession of murder mysteries. His friends are eclectic: there is Charles, a cane-wielding, apparently good-hearted ne'er-do-well with no visible means of income; the group also includes Harley, a sometime plumber with a curious past, who rides a Harley. By far the oddest of Chris' friends is Dude, an aging hippie and surf-shop owner who speaks in his own language. At one point, Dude observes that, "Beauty be in retina of beviewer." In addition, the story is filled with the types of characters that populate nearly every small town: shop owners, waitresses, cops, and attorneys (some shady, some not).

After a body is found in a marsh in the first chapter, the story develops slowly as Chris and Charles investigate the crime in order to defend a friend, while strolling through their relaxed lives on Folly Beach. Noel is short with his descriptions of the scenery and long on his depiction of characters. Chris and Harley are opposites. Chris is retired from a well paying job. Charles gave up work long ago. Chris is quiet and avoids people. Charles is outgoing and speaks to everyone. Chris rarely reads a book. Charles is a voracious reader.

The action of the story builds imperceptibly. The final chapters move at a much quicker pace, as the mystery is unraveled. Along the way, though, Noel captures the ambiance of life on a barrier island: "Conversation the next morning at the Dog was equally divided between the locals, who hashed, and rehashed, the fire and Colleen's death, and the vacationers, who, from their perspective, debated an equally serious topic: what time to go to the beach."

The author writes fluently and with a well-developed ability to paint word pictures. In describing a character's large home, he writes that, "Elder's humble abode stood out like a porcupine at a nudist's colony."

The Marsh is the fifth mystery novel in Noel's Folly Beach Mystery Series. The book makes for a relaxing and entertaining beach read.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (February 17, 2012)

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