

Living in the Book

By Nancy Pate

Dusk was descending on a late-December afternoon as I drove the heavily wooded back road on Edisto Island, S.C., heading toward the beach several miles away. My cousins Gail Greer and Meg Herndon and I had been working together on our new Caroline Cousins mystery, *Way Down Dead in Dixie*. We were finishing the last chapters, and I was conducting imaginary conversations with the main characters. Then I rounded a curve and slammed on the brakes. A large deer stared at me from the middle of the road. Yes, they really do freeze in the headlights. While I waited for this one to move and my heartbeat to return to normal, I realized an almost identical scene occurs in our first mystery, *Fiddle Dee Death*. At least I hadn't driven the car off the blacktop. Still, it was another reminder that we were now "living in the book."

Meg coined the phrase when we first started writing together eight years ago, and we chose a barrier island south of Charleston as the setting for our cozy mystery about discovering a body in an old plantation house turned tourist attraction. We called the island Indigo, but we modeled it after Edisto, where we spent summer vacations growing up and where our parents – two sisters married to two men who are first cousins – retired down the street from one another. At the time, I lived in Florida, Meg was in Mount Pleasant, just north of Charleston across the Ashley and Cooper rivers, and Gail was half a world away in Japan with her navy husband. Still, Edisto was "home," where we gathered for holidays and holed up in my mother's guest room, writing "the book." It took us about three years. Thank goodness for e-mail and Gail moving back to Mount Pleasant so we could be in the same time zone.

People are always curious about how three people write a book together, and our standard response is "Divide and conquer." We come up with a detailed outline together before splitting

up research and chapters, writing separately for the most part. But after three books, I know now that it wouldn't be possible without our shared experiences of Edisto and life in the Low Country. ("Why does our publisher spell it like that?" Gail grouses. "Everyone here knows 'lowcountry' is one word. They'll think we don't know what we're talking about.")

Of course, when it comes to murder, mayhem, and methlabs, as in our second book, *Marsh Madness*, we have to rely on research. But when it comes to atmosphere and place, we borrow from Edisto's history and our own, although we take generous liberties with geography and details as our plots demand. After all, we are writing fiction, and Indigo Island, Pinckney Plantation, and the characters are products of our imagination. Over time, they have attained a reality of their own for us, hence the first meaning of "living in the book" — when we carry the stories around in our head and picture scenes involving the discovery of old bones or our heroines' derring-do in the face of danger.

The second meaning is more literal. Meg and her family moved into their new house on the north side of the island in the fall of 2005. The kitchen counters weren't in yet, but 18 of us gathered for Thanksgiving dinner. Gail looked enviously at the adjoining cleared lot and declared she'd soon be "living in the book," too. Her family moved into an island rental this past fall while their house was being built. Meanwhile, since health issues forced me to stop working several years ago, my visits to Edisto are more frequent and last longer, weeks spilling into months at a house on the beach. Like our mamas, we check in with each other early in the morning. One day, I caught Meg in tears after she encountered a coiled and hissing snake under her house and had to kill it. She'd just finished a call to Gail, who told her to tell me and we'd put it in the new book. We did, and "Too much nature" became another of our favorite sayings.

Still, Indigo is by no means a photocopy of Edisto. It's too mixed up with our memories of the island when we were kids, when a drawbridge

still connected us to the mainland and aptly named Jungle Road didn't lead to a golf course. The giant, moss-draped live oaks still arch over the highway that twists like a black snake 20 miles from beach to bridge, and dolphins play in St. Helena Sound. Churches and graveyards still outnumber shops and restaurants, but now there's sushi on the menu. We always called it "bait."

One Saturday last fall, Gail and I went on a homes tour sponsored by the Edisto Island Open Land Trust. Unlike the annual plantation tour sponsored by the historical society, this event featured contemporary dream homes. Meg was doing flowers for a wedding and couldn't go. "I really wanted to see that house," she said. We knew the one she meant – a beach mansion with a turquoise roof that stands on the site of the old green beach cottage where we holidayed as children.

When the cottage was sold, the new owners relocated it to a less desirable lot on a side street, where, even repainted and slightly enlarged, it still looks small and shabby. Their new house, four times the size, is a showcase of modern amenities and tropical décor.

Standing on the front porch, looking out at the blue-green ocean and blue-gray sky, Gail sighed. "Those are our oleanders and dunes. This is our view." We were caught up in a wave of nostalgia.

But it's not the same view we had as kids from our screened porch. Over the years, the sands have shifted with tides and storms. There's more beach here now, while farther up the road, there's much less, and waves sometimes come up under the houses during a full moon. It is a reminder that even as we are "living in the book," Edisto continues to write its own story.

Praise for *Fiddle Dee Death*

"*Fiddle Dee Death* is rich in Southern lore and language."

The State, Columbia, S.C.

"... a Southern-fried mystery ... that's nearly as good as Chocolate Turtles for beach-season brain candy."

Wilmington Star-News

"A sprightly saga of skullduggery and Southern manners ..."

Post and Courier, Charleston, S.C.

"This is a hilarious tale full of Lowcountry ghosts, wonderful characters and a surprise ending, featuring three Southern Nancy Drew types we hope to see again."

Charlotte Observer

"The crime-solving cousins ... are as inviting as a pair of well-worn jeans."

Seattle Times

"The humorous banter among the three cousins, the quaint island locale and a surprise ending lift this light-hearted romp."

Publishers Weekly

"... the kind of light, upbeat story that keeps mystery lovers reading."

Boston Globe

"Scarlett meets Marple."

News & Observer, Raleigh, N.C.



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Gail Greer, Nancy Pate, and Meg Herndon

About Caroline Cousins

Caroline Cousins is a pseudonym for Nancy Pate and her "one-and-a-half-times" first cousins, sisters Meg Herndon and Gail Greer. (Their mothers are sisters, and their fathers are first cousins.) Meg who owns a specialty floral business, lives on Edisto Island, South Carolina, as does Gail, a former plantation tour guide. Nancy, former longtime book critic for the *Orlando Sentinel*, divides her time between Edisto and Orlando, Florida. They are also the authors of *Fiddle Dee Death* and *Marsh Madness*.



Nancy, Meg, and Gail as children.



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