

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Several years ago, I did a volunteer stint for Cape Lookout National Seashore on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Shackleford Island, home of the wild mustangs, lies across a narrow stretch of water from the cape's lighthouse. Visitors being ferried to the park arrive all pumped up because on their way over, they've been able to photograph a stallion posed on a spit of sand, or a band feeding in the marsh. After work, I'd often take my small boat to Shackleford to search the beach for shells and the dunes for horses.

Then, in 2000, I volunteered to help with the roundup and stay overnight with the horses. When I returned home—later than scheduled, as we were marooned by heavy seas—I wrote up an account of the week. Even though I was still working on my first book, *Sea-born Women*, I felt the roundup would make a great background for another mystery.

One cannot be near the Shackleford herd without hearing that the ponies are descendants of horses that escaped from sinking Spanish galleons, or that, in order to lighten a ship, sailors would often push horses overboard.

Neither explanation sat well. I couldn't imagine sailors, fighting for their lives, cutting horses loose on a storm-tossed ship. Considering the value of the horses and the cost of transportation, it seemed to me they would be one of the last things to be thrown into the water to lighten a grounded caravel—after ballast, food, water, and even seamen.

Then park ranger Karen Duggan intrigued me with a tale about an Irish chieftain who traded 700 head of cattle for a Spanish horse. I looked into the history of the Shackleford mustangs. The first thing I found was the beautifully written "Time

Line of Shackleford Horses" by Carolyn Mason. It became the outline for my background chapters. Thus, ***Bloodlines of Shackleford Banks*** came into being.

I began with a roundup of the ponies, but I needed a subplot. Besides horses, Shackleford Banks is a nesting site for loggerhead sea turtles. At the time, Bogue Banks was in the middle of brouhaha between beach nourishment supporters and concerns protecting the giant turtles. I mentioned this to my daughter—my listener, reader, and idea person. She immediately came back with, "An environmental crime. That's original." And so the sub-plot was developed.

In writing, I'm pretty much a disciple of Stephen King's method: Develop a setting and situation, then dump your characters in the middle and see what they do. The problem with this method is that sometimes you write yourself into a corner. That happened to me with *Bloodlines*. All of a sudden, I reached the moment for my big finale, but I was stuck. There was no way to get from here to there.

I tried several ways out. One was just to write. Free writing triggers ideas if continued long enough. Then I called my daughter and pumped her for a solution. At the same time, a friend recommended Donald Maas's book about plots. Maas advised that when it seems as if nothing else can go wrong, the protagonist should lose the one thing he or she has been counting on.

The problem is that I hate to see my protagonists suffer. I also hate depressing books in which the nice guy is beaten down time after time. I had to grit my teeth and make Bert lose that which she loved best. Actually, I couldn't be as mean as I originally planned. But I did give Bert a logical reason to go to Shackleford alone in the teeth of a storm.

Although I had to rewrite the ending of *Sea-born Women* several times before my editor was satisfied, I had the ending of *Bloodlines* planned from the beginning. As I wrote, things changed, and the grand finale became even more fun than I'd expected.

Frankly, the parts I enjoyed the most were the horse stories. The more I researched, the more these chapters just fell into place. Although I began as a skeptic of the horses' Spanish ancestry, I soon became a believer. I wanted to embellish these background chapters with some historical tidbits I'd heard while working for Cape Lookout. One concerned a female Southern spy who helped blow up the lighthouse. Research on minor historical characters can be frustrating, but Katherine Muller of the Carteret County Public Library gave me one precious piece of advice. She suggested I contact Paul Branch, a North Carolina park ranger at Fort Macon and expert on the "War of Northern Aggression." Gathering my courage, I phoned. To my amazement, off the top of his head, he gave me the name, volume, and page of the book containing this historical account.

Another local story that fascinated me was the destruction of Diamond City by a hurricane known as the San Ciriaco. I was helped out here by Jay Barnes's great book on North Carolina hurricanes, by a separate account from the Mormons who settled on Shackleford, by David Stick, and by little snippets here and there unearthed by Onslow librarian Margaret West. This remains my favorite of all the back stories.

I'd be curious to know which is your favorite. You can contact me at bj@bjmountford.com or visit my web site, www.bjmountford.com. (Don't forget the u in Mountford.)

1. When De Ayllon's wife begs the colonists not to abandon Medeu, she refers to a stable in Hispaniola. Besides identifying the stallion's lineage, what does this tell you about the stable boy on Columbus's second voyage?
2. How do you feel about what DeWitt does to the foal? Is he justified?
3. Which would you prefer: a mate who's a widow or widower or a mate with an ex? Why?
4. Is society going overboard preserving endangered species?
5. How do the differing traits of Triton, Finn-gall, and Diablo contribute to the survival of the current generation of ponies?
6. In chapter 31, if the stallion described is not Triton, then who is it? What clues does the author provide?
7. What's your theory as to the origin of the wild horses of the Outer Banks?
8. Although the size of the Shackleford herd is controlled by culling and birth control, and though they are checked for disease, they receive no supplementary feed, even in times of drought or devastation. How do you feel about this policy?
9. How do you feel about the interspersed horse chapters? Do they detract from or heighten the suspense?
10. Which incidents in this story let you know Bert a little better, and what weakness does she overcome at the end?

About BJ Mountford

BJ Mountford comes from a merchant-marine family. She was born in San Francisco but was brought up on the coast of Chile, Venezuela, and Barbados. She attended college in Pennsylvania, where she met her husband at a nearby law school. After a 25-year career in real estate, BJ sold her office and tried her hand at writing. When she retired to Emerald Isle, North Carolina, she began volunteering with the National Park Service. She's worked at Portsmouth Island and Cape Lookout Keepers' Quarters on the Outer Banks. She's also volunteered at parks in Hawaii, Idaho, and Georgia.



BJ Mountford on the Outer Banks of North Carolina

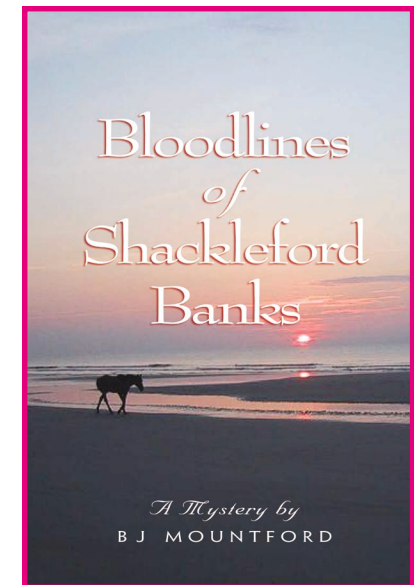


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Bloodlines of Shackleford Banks

Reading Group Guide



by BJ Mountford