



“Kin”-dred Spirits
by Nancy Pate

We all know the saying, “You can choose your friends but not your family,” which may be why when I tell people I wrote a mystery with my two cousins, they look at me as if I’m crazy. Some of them actually come out and say so. Mostly, though, they want to know how we wrote *Fiddle Dee Death*. How did Nancy Pate, Meg Herndon, and Gail Greer become “Caroline Cousins?”

The pen name was the easy part. “Caroline” was an old family name, plus we were from the Carolinas and our book was set in Low Country South Carolina. “Cousins” described not only our relationship but also that of our three amateur sleuths. Sort of. Meg and Gail, who are sisters, are the daughters of my mother’s sister, who is married to my father’s first cousin. As a character notes in *Fiddle Dee Death*: “That means we have the same grandparents on one side and the same great-grandparents on the other. We’re not double first cousins, though, more like one-and-half.”

And did I mention that I’m just two days older than Meg, and that our parents now live down the street from each other on Edisto Island, South Carolina?

A fictionalized Edisto, known as Indigo Island, provides the setting for our story, which begins at an old plantation house on a rainy afternoon two days after Christmas.

Several years ago, on a rainy afternoon two days after Christmas, Meg and I drove over to Boone Hall Plantation in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, where her teenage daughter Erin was working as a tour guide. After we returned to Meg’s house, the two of us wrote the first chapter of “the book,” creating our fictional counterparts in cousins Lindsey and Margaret Ann.

It was just a fun way to pass some time, or so we thought. We played around with it a little more when I came to Edisto at Easter. But by this time, Gail, whose husband was a commander in the navy, had e-mailed from their posting in Japan that she wanted to write too, and that she wanted her character’s name to be Bonnie Lynn Tyler, so her initials could be BLT.

We came up with an outline that summer when Gail returned home, and then we worked on “the book” on holidays for several years. I was at Edisto for the Fourth of July two years; they came to Orlando one Labor Day weekend; I went home Christmas and Easter; they drove down for a Martin Luther King Day weekend.

It was obvious from the beginning that we were writing the kind of book we like to read – a Southern cozy mystery / comedy of manners. Our family has great talkers and storytellers, and we wanted to capture the vernacular they use. How could we resist lines like, “She looks pretty good for someone who looks terrible”? We also wanted to write about Edisto because it was so much a part of our growing up. We borrowed from its history and our own.

The outline was our most essential tool, although it went through several revisions.

The first came early on when Meg and Gail e-mailed me that they knew who the killer was. Well, of course, they did – we’d figured that out day one. No, no, they said, we mean it’s too easy for other people to figure it out. So we rearranged the plot.

The second revision came February a year ago when I read with disbelief a new novel by a well-known mystery writer. There was our plot! Before I broke the news to the cousins, I stayed up half the night figuring out how we could salvage what we had with a new story line. Actually, it’s a good thing, I told them. In going over what we’d written, I had discovered a hole in the original plot large enough for a truck to drive through. “Does this mean we have to write Chapter One again?” Meg sighed.

When we were together at Edisto, we brainstormed in my mother’s guest room, where she keeps her computer.

Then we’d assign scenes and write them, and I’d put them together. We also acted out scenes. In one chapter, Lindsey and Margaret Ann are locked in the attic of the plantation house. I’ll never forget Gail jumping up from the bed and running to the door. “You’d be pounding on the door and twisting the lock,” she said, demonstrating. “Then you’d be eyeing those windows, looking for a chair.”

Pronouns tended to get mixed up when we were talking: you, me, us, we, she. “I’d never say that,” Meg said one day. “You’re not saying it,” I retorted. “I am.” Gail interrupted with a reality check. “Neither one of YOU is saying it. The character is.” Nevertheless, she signed her e-mails “BLT.”

As part of my day job as book editor for the *Orlando Sentinel*, I interviewed Frances Mayes last fall about her first novel, *Swan*, and she said that many writers will tell you that their characters lead them. “Mine didn’t,” she said. “They were rocking on the front porch, waiting for me.” The characters in *Fiddle Dee Death* didn’t wait on anybody; they were too busy calling each other on the phone or e-mailing, “Where is Chapter Fourteen?” “Where are we going to put the part about the dog coffins?” “I think Chapter Nine is boring and we need to redo it. I like it better when we get shot at.”

Sure, we had some “artistic differences” – okay, arguments. But the outline kept us on track, as did the guiding hand of Steve Kirk, our editor at John F. Blair. “Steve says we need to lose the dog coffins,” I reported to the cousins as we got down to the final revisions. “But it’s funny,” Meg wailed. “We’ll put it in the next book,” Gail said.

Yes, we have started on a second book, or at least the outline, even as our website (carolinecousins.net) goes operational and we prepare for a two-week road trip through the South to promote *Fiddle Dee Death*. The family is shaking its collective head. My mother wants to know if she can get rid of the six different versions of Chapter One on her computer. Meg’s daughter Erin is calling her friends to tell them she was on the scene when we started “the book.” And Gail’s husband, Jeff, looks at the three of us and at the planned “if it’s Tuesday, this must be Raleigh” schedule and says what everyone is thinking:

“There may not be a sequel, but there could be another murder.”



About Caroline Cousins

Caroline Cousins is a pseudonym for Nancy Pate and her “one-and-a-half-times” first cousins, Meg Herndon and Gail Greer. (Their mothers are sisters, and their fathers are first cousins.) Nancy, book critic for the *Orlando Sentinel*, lives in Orlando, Florida. Meg, a former elementary-school teacher, and Gail, a floral designer and former plantation tour guide, live in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. This is their first book.



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Tart as buttermilk, sweet as pecan pie, *Fiddle Dee Death* manages to make murder in the Low Country good old-fashioned fun. The terrific triumvirate who call themselves Caroline Cousins are the literary equivalent to the Dixie Chicks.

—**Mary Kay Andrews**, author of *Savannah Blues* and *Little Bitty Lies*

Fiddle Dee Death is a hilarious and entertaining murder mystery as Southern as honeysuckle and black-eyed peas.

—**Fannie Flagg**, author of *Standing in the Rainbow*

In a wonderfully original mystery, three Low Country cousins confront ghosts, old bones, and modern chicanery. *Fiddle Dee Death* sparkles with Southern charm and wit. Sheer delight!

—**Carolyn Hart**, author of the *Death on Demand* and *Henrie O* mysteries

Fiddle Dee Death is chock-full of engaging characters, sprightly writing, delightful humor, and a passel of ripping-good mysteries to keep the folks of Indigo Island hopping. What’s spooking Aunt Cora? Is that a human bone Jimmy and Cissy found in the woods? Who’s that dead guy at the bottom of the stairs? And will Lindsey and Will get back together after all these years? I’m already itching to read the next one from Caroline Cousins.

—**Robert Inman**, author of *Captain Saturday*

Fiddle Dee Death is a fast, funny roller-coaster ride of a book—full of twists, turns, and surprises. From dialogue and menus to Civil War history and predatory developers, Caroline Cousins gets it all right. And her Dixie Chicks cousins are the most entertaining sleuths to come along in years.

—**Lee Smith**, author of *The Last Girls*



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Introducing...

Caroline Cousins



Author of
Fiddle Dee Death