

Murder, We Wrote

By Nancy Pate

No blood was spilled in the writing of *Marsh Madness*. This fact causes some amazement among the friends and family of Caroline Cousins, a pseudonym for the writing team of myself and my cousins, Meg Herndon and Gail Greer. When our first novel, *Fiddle Dee Death*, was published in June 2003 and we embarked on a two-week promotional tour of the South with plans to outline a second mystery, those who knew us well just shook their heads. Gail's husband, Jeff, went so far as to predict, "There may not be a sequel, but there could be another murder."

Ha! Caroline Cousins returns in June 2005 with *Marsh Madness*, proof not only that three women can travel for two weeks in a van and still be speaking at trip's end, but that they also can write another book together without violence.

But not without incident. Otherwise, where would we get our material? We hadn't been on the road long in the silver Turn-Around Van (as in, "Turn around, we should have gone left back there") before we turned our attention to the next book. "So," said Meg as she polished off the last of our initial supply of Cheetohs, "who are we killing off this time?"

We already had decided that the book would be a sequel to *Fiddle Dee Death*, featuring our alteregos, the crime-solving cousins Lindsey, Margaret Ann, and Bonnie. The setting would again be Indigo Island, a fictionalized version of Edisto Island, South Carolina, where we spent summers as children and where our parents now live on the same street. *Fiddle Dee Death* takes place right before and after New Year's Day. Because we tend to write together on holidays, we picked the end of March and Easter as the

time frame for the new book. Meg, who is an independent florist, wanted there to be a wedding at Pinckney Plantation. Gail, who was an extra for the movie *Cold Mountain*, suggested Indigo as the set for a feature film. And as a history lover, I wanted to dig up more of the island's unique past. Add in our mutual obsession with food and family and we had everything and more for a new book—except a plot.

We worked on that as we traveled from Wilmington to Raleigh and on to Charlotte and Columbia, signing books and greeting kinfolk. Our favorite conversation starter in the van—other than "Where's the chocolate?"—was "What if?" Although the book was a sequel, we wanted it to stand on its own, separate from *Fiddle Dee Death*. We didn't want to repeat ourselves.

At some point, maybe between Atlanta and Birmingham, we decided we wanted our characters to discover a body in a public bathroom. From then on, we conducted research. "How many stalls?" "I like that tile." "Pass me the hand sanitizer." "There's no hook for my purse." "Hang it around your neck."

We also realized we couldn't possibly include all the elements and characters we wanted in what we had taken to calling "Marsh Madness." Compromise was in order. The wedding stayed as the main backdrop. The film set evolved into one wannabe actress who would try to steal the show as a bridesmaid. Bits of the island's history would be mixed in with modern-day crime. We settled on a victim and a killer. Later, we added another victim and switched killers.

Driving through the Tennessee mountains during a nighttime downpour, we proposed adding a storm into the mix. "A hurricane?" "Not in March." "A tornado?" "Possibly." Little did we know then that Hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne, as well as Tropical Storm Gustav, would add to our memories of Hurricane Hugo when writing the spring storm scenes in *Marsh Madness*. Those chapters were a mutual enterprise.

Which brings me to the most often-asked ques-

tion about Caroline Cousins. How do three people write a book together, especially when one of them lives in Florida? The short answer: an outline, e-mail, and unlimited minutes on nights and weekends. Our main strategy, though, is divide and conquer. We brainstorm ideas and write the outline when we're together. Then we assign research and scenes. This time, Gail worked on snakes, boats, and identity theft. Meg provided expertise on flowers and fish. I ended up with gators, poison, and illegal drugs. They e-mailed me what they wrote, and I put chapters together and e-mailed them back. We all experimented with duct tape.

Let me repeat, no blood was spilled. But there was some sweat and tears. After all, Southern summers are known for their heat and humidity. As for tears, people often cry at weddings. When Meg's daughter Erin was married at Magnolia Plantation on Easter weekend a year ago, we all passed the Kleenex—and the bug spray. "Gnats! We need to remember the gnats!"

Our family, our friends and Edisto continue to provide us with material. I called the cousins from the island Christmas weekend to make plans for proofing the manuscript. "Jellyfish on the beach," I reported. Yes, they replied, that scene is in the book, after the storm and before the gnats. "I know," I said. "But this is real." I had just walked on the beach, where hundreds of jellyfish had washed up on the sand, perhaps victims of a sudden cold snap. "Life imitates art," Meg said. "I don't know about art," Gail commented, "but at least we don't have to go pick them up before a wedding."

Thank heavens. **We're not good with dead bodies. Or blood. Except in books.**

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 ..."

The 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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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.) Nancy, former longtime book critic for the *Orlando Sentinel*, lives in Orlando, Florida. Meg, an independent wedding florist, and Gail, a designer for a floral preservation business and former plantation tour guide, live in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. The trio's first book was *Fiddle Dee Death*.



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Caroline Cousins



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Marsh Madness