

## A Note From the Author

*Sea-born Women* is my second attempt at a mystery novel. Like so many would-be-writers, I had a computer full of unsold books, some good and some not so good. Then at a writer's conference, an agent remarked his dream was to discover another Mary Higgins Clark. "I can do that," I thought. "All I need is a good plot." It was not so easy, I soon discovered.

Inspiration came with a January phone call informing me that I'd been chosen--by default, no one else applied--as summer caretaker at Portsmouth Village for Cape Lookout National Seashore on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

There was my setting and plot. I'd only been to Portsmouth once, and I was so excited at the idea of being alone on a deserted island that I began writing *Sea-born Women* that day. The first draft was finished before I arrived in the village--which was just as well. Not only was there no time to write on the island, it would have been a very different book if I'd waited.

As it was, I took Roberta "Bert" Lenehan to the village on paper, sat back and let my imagination take over. Of course, since it was a "ghost town," scary things began to happen and there were all sorts of weird people running around. By the time I got to chapter three, I knew the reader had to see the island as it was in the colonial days. To do this, I needed another character, preferably a ghost, but who? Although steeped in history, there's a mystic, timeless quality about Portsmouth that precludes the underworld. Then I remembered the tale that first piqued my interest in the village--Charles Whedbee's *Sea-born Woman*, from his collection, *The Flaming Ship of Ocracoke & Other Tales of the Outer Banks*. Not sure of the laws governing plagiarism, I hesitated to borrow Whedbee's charac-

ters, but the longer I searched for a suitable spirit, the more Jerushia Spriggs O'Hagan and Captain Francis Carrington Spriggs came to mind. Finally, I gave up and wrote them into the story.

The legendary ghosts soon took on a life of their own. They solved Sprigg's murder and told me why Jerushia had been haunting the island. Then they surprised me by intermingling with Bert and Hunter O'Hagan, the park supervisor, and becoming far more involved with the present than I'd expected. Don't get me wrong; I don't really believe in ghosts--not most of the time that is. To quote Hunter, "man attributes that which he can't explain to the supernatural."

I have to confess that I did not know whodunit until well into the book. The mysteries that keep me in suspense the longest are the ones with many suspects rather than none, so I tried to do the same. I made sure that everyone had both motive and opportunity and went on from there, developing characters until the decision was made for me.

My characters usually begin as a medley of people I know or sometimes, like Hunter, my ideal of the perfect ranger. That's how they start out. The good ones soon take on a personality of their own, as was the case with Donny, Luna Mae, and even Hunter. The hardest part of this book was the ending--explaining the action in terms of both logic and the supernatural. There, I am indebted to some superb editing by the staff of John F. Blair, Publisher.

## About this Book

There's an Outer Banks legend about a woman whose birth at sea saved her ship from a pirate captain. To this day, her spirit is said to give aid to incoming boats.

When Bert Lenehan, also born at sea, volunteered to act as caretaker on Portsmouth Island, she's just looking for a peaceful summer. The deserted island proves to be anything but peaceful, with over-solicitous fishermen, watchful park rangers, maintenance workers, and bereaved husbands all showing up at the strangest times. The previous caretaker accidentally burnt herself to death. When Bert finds another woman dead in the marsh, she begins to question these "accidents."

Ranger Hunter O'Hagan distracts and beguiles her with tales of his long-dead ancestor, Jerushia Spriggs O'Hagan. What has a two-hundred-year-old murder to do with the more recent deaths and the strange behavior of the island's sentient life? Bert searches for answers as even the weather conspires to keep her isolated on the island with a killer.

## Reviews

"Mountford's descriptions of Cape Lookout National Seashore may have readers longing to pack their bags...for the Outer Banks" - Kathy Roe, *Orlando Sentinel*

"The book is a beautiful blend of romance, mystery, and legend." Michelle Cater, *Greensboro News & Record*

"With its setting on Portsmouth Island, just south of Ocracoke in North Carolina's Outer Banks, this may be the summer's best all-around beach book for Tarheel readers." - Linda Brinson, *Winston-Salem Journal*

"This book is a stay-up-late page turner." - Deirdre Parker Smith, *Salisbury Post*

## Questions to Consider

Have you read Whedbee's *Sea-born Woman* or Helmer's *Sea-born Mary*? Do you approve of the author taking from this coastal legend?

Was Anne's death an accident or murder?

Where did the "Infusion of Bayberries" come from, and why? What caused the plague of jellyfish?

Could you see and feel the Carolina coast? Did reading this book make you want to visit Cape Lookout and Portsmouth Village?

Do you think the park service should preserve the land? What is the solution?

Was Jimmy justified in what he did? What would have happened if he'd acted differently?

Who or what caused the "fog"?

Is there any parallel between Bert's hesitation to become involved with Hunter and Jerushia's refusal to leave with Goree? If so, what do you think it is?

Did Bert learn anything while on the island?

What happened whenever Bert wished out loud? Was there any relationship to the weather? Did Bert become aware of this? Did you?

Was there a ghost on the roof of the life-saving station? If so, whose ghost was it?

Who was the O'Hagan's "guardian angel" and why was it protecting Hunter?

Was the ending satisfactory? Was it logical? Was the identity of the killer important to the story?

Was Bert a satisfactory protagonist? Did she act reasonably? What would you have done in similar situations?



## About the Author

BJ (Betty Jo) Mountford was born in San Francisco. Her mother was of French/Danish extraction; her father came from an old New England family and worked for the merchant marine. BJ went to school in Chile, Venezuela, and Barbados, finally attending college in Pennsylvania, where she met her husband, who was attending a nearby law school. After a twenty-five year career in real estate, BJ sold her office and tried her hand at writing. Taking early retirement to the North Carolina coast, BJ began a third career as a volunteer with the National Park Service. She's spent four summers on Portsmouth Village and two terms at Hawaii Volcano. She's also worked at Cape Lookout Lighthouse, North Carolina, Hagerman, Idaho, and Cumberland Island, Georgia. To learn more about BJ, contact [www.bjmountford.com](http://www.bjmountford.com).

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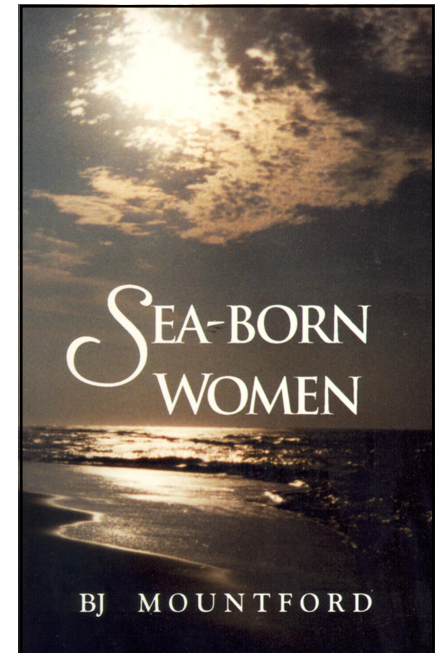


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## Reading Group Guide



## Sea-born Women

by BJ Mountford