



Bob Morris takes notes for his next mystery novel as he overlooks Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain.

From Deadlines to Death Lines and Copywriting to Corpses

Former Fort Myers journalist turns Caribbean mystery man

by Chelle Koster Walton

The secret room and recipe at Angostura Bitters distillery, a hidden monastery guest house atop a mountain, the legend of a soul-sucking she-devil, a certain yacht harbor where photography is forbidden (something about the sailboats being where they aren't supposed to be): Bob Morris' ears perked up with every mention of mystery and intrigue as we plied the sights of Port of Spain in Trinidad.

A long way from his ten-year stint as columnist and the original Jean Le Boeuf restaurant critic for the *Fort Myers News-Press*, Morris was hot on the trail of the next murder-mystery novel for his Caribbean Islands series.

Some thirty years ago, Morris moved up from his "low man on the totem pole" job at the *News-Press*—covering county commission and school board meetings—when a colleague left his columnist post to write a series of murder mysteries. That man was Randy White.

"We were a bunch of young journal-

ists right out of school, and we were ready to kick ass," says Morris of the "good old days" at the *News-Press*, then rattles off a list of colleagues who have gone on to make good and win prizes in the fields of journalism and, like White, fiction. The gang still gets together in Fort Myers on occasion to catch up at the home of Joe Workman, another former *News-Press* columnist.

Morris, a fourth-generation Floridian from Winter Haven, raised some hackles back then with his edgy columns, which covered everything from the folly of tourists to the perfect eggnog recipe. His love of food and cooking led to the invention of Jean Le Boeuf, who has endured long since Morris left the paper in 1985.

"I never meant to stay that long at the *News-Press*," he confesses today. "But I met my wife, Debbie, who was the wire room supervisor at the paper, got married, had kids."

Debbie, a Fort Myers native, graduated from Cypress Lake High School.

The Morrises saved their first son, Bo, from being "another Bob Morris" in the family line. His second son, Dashiell Hammett Morris, is living proof of the author's long love affair with mystery novels. "I wanted to write fiction from the minute I could read," he says. "But then I got into journalism and I loved the day-to-day part of it. It makes you sit down and write something every day."

Back then, you could get away with flights of fancy that would never be indulged in this day and age, Morris said. A turning point in his writing career came when he convinced his editor to allow a six-week cross-country, Charles Kuralt sort of travelogue from the road. He calls it "formative teaching" for what eventually led down the road to travel writing.

"It made me realize there's a story everywhere," he said.

But ahead of the road to fiction came a detour as columnist with the *Orlando Sentinel*, where one of his proudest



Novelist Bob Morris was the original *News-Press* Jean Le Boeuf, and he hasn't lost his love for food. Here he samples a Trinidadian snow cone while on location researching a new mystery novel.

achievements was the creation of a tongue-in-cheek parody parade known as the Queen Kumquat Sashay.

Later, as editor of two travel magazines—*Aqua* in Santa Barbara, California, and then *Caribbean Travel & Life* in Orlando—Morris found himself happily back in the Caribbean, which he had discovered as barely a teen on hiatus with a friend and his Episcopalian minister father. On one recent research trip to Harbour Island in the Bahamas, something went “boing!”

“As editor of travel magazines, I found I couldn’t use all the great information I was finding within the confines of magazine articles,” he said. “The idea of writing a mystery series came to me in Harbour Island.”

And so *Bahamarama* hit the stands in November 2004, finalist for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Mystery Novel and one of the year’s Top Five Mysteries according to *Library Journal*. Next came *Jamaica Me Dead* the following year. *Bermuda Schwartz* pub-

lished in February of this year.

Morris’s books star former pro footballer and Floridian Zack Chasteen and his comely magazine-editor girlfriend. Morris’s wife, Debbie, is his front-line editor, he says. That only becomes a problem when she murders some of the sex scenes, he adds.

His book titles prove Morris hasn’t lost the sense of humor that made him a local favorite—controversial, yes, but also downright funny. He misses Lee County, he says. “I could always keep a boat in the water there,” he laments. “That and hearing ‘Lila’ at the Veranda piano bar.”

In Trinidad, he cajoled Angostura staff into giving details of this secret that only five men, who aren’t allowed in the same room together, know. He surreptitiously photographed the forbidden yachts. He joked about house-sitting Porter Goss’s house in the old days and Caribbean adventures with rum in the new days. He jotted notes about the quirky, like the name of the Trinidadian

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Novelist Bob Morris reaches to shake hands with a market vendor in Trinidad, where he was researching his next murder-mystery.

town Tunapuna and a parking lot sign that read “Differently Able Persons.” And ever Jean Le Boeuf, he tasted with relish everything in his path—from slices of spiced green mango to saltfish and johnnycake sandwiches. (His book signings are famous for the conch fritters and rum punches he makes on the spot. On his trip to Trinidad he also purchased steel drums to help, uh,

drum up sales.)

At the time, he was renegotiating contracts. He had satisfied his three-book contract with St. Martin’s Press and *Trinidad-O* will be part of a new series he’s negotiating, expected out in 2008. Plus he has a new thriller series in the works.

Why Trinidad as the locale for the next book? “I’ve thought up a title!” he

quips with a sly nudge and an infectious guffaw. “Only about eighty-thousand words to go,” he writes on his fans blog (<http://surroundedonthreesides.blogspot.com/>).

“Titles are way important,” he continues. “They are the billboards for my books. And they need to serve two purposes: 1) Let prospective readers know where the story will take place, and 2) Let readers know from the outset that the book in their hands is not some deep, dark psychological drama. If they laugh at the title, then all the better. The hero of these books, Zack Chasteen, is nothing if not a smart ass. So, with luck, the titles let the readers know exactly what they’re in for.”

What exactly are they in for? You can bet on an offbeat, sleuthy rollick in the islands. 🌴

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