

## Novel Focuses on Outer Banks Characters

### By Ruth Moose: Special to The Pilot

Saltwater Cowboys

By Bill Morris

Coastal Carolina Press, 2004, \$13

I am not a beach person. (Is that heresy?) Being Piedmont born and bred, I prefer rocks to sand. Rocks are much more interesting and don't stick to the soles of your feet or your sheets. I like land that undulates in various shades of red clay and green trees. Land that has verve and energy.

All this is to say that Bill Morris' "Saltwater Cowboys" was a delightful dip into the waters of another world. If you don't know the Outer Banks of North Carolina, this book will be a wonderful introduction. Or if you visited once, enjoyed the wild ponies, lighthouses and ferry ride, here's your chance to get to know the area a little deeper, learn the language, really see the landscape.

Cowboys is not only a rollicking tale of "us versus them," it's lessons in North Carolina geography and vocabulary. Morris does an excellent job of letting the reader in on local lore as he spins a story of people who love the sea and will wage wars to protect it; wars in the legal ways (testifying before the Legislature) and illegal ways (pasting bumper stickers that read "Jesus was a fisherman" and netting cars in a country club parking lot.)

You'll learn what a real dingbat is, a pocosin, what the locals call blue crabs (jimmies), thunderclouds (gillyard heads) and other things. You'll also read behind the folklore I've heard all my life about German U-boats off the North Carolina coast during World War II. ( I always thought my daddy was making up the whole tale.) And a new theory about the Lost Colony. Maybe even discover what really happened to Virginia Dare. (DNA forensics can tell us a lot today.)

All this along with rescuing sea turtles who manage to turn up in places no self-respecting sea turtle would ever dip a toe into. Plus a wonderful sermon/eulogy, two love stories and one of the most tasteful sex scenes I've ever read in literature. (One of the marks of a really good writer is saying less but meaning more. Hemingway taught us that a thousand times over.)

Morris is intimately acquainted with the right metaphor in the right place. Some make you laugh, such as referring to a hot tub as a "human crock pot" or describing the boys at a king mackerel tournament as "frat boys thirty years older, sixty pounds heavier and with way more money for beer and other goodies."

He's pure poetry at times, describing sea vessels and surroundings.

"The boat whipped around in the harbor and out into Ballast Creek. A blue heron flushed at the noise and I saw the great bird suspended above us silhouetted against the marsh as it held the soft morning light like milk in a saucer."

And Morris can preach in a way that wins you with heartfelt facts and warnings when one of the fisherman says, "There's a war going on, against the way we live and how we make our living. Maybe it started back in the sixties, when the state of North Carolina began buying up the private land on the Banks. Folks who had deeds to the prettiest beachfront property in the world got paid a dollar an acre! Then, in the seventies, Cape Lookout National Seashore gobbled up the Core Banks and Shackleford, those sand islands where my ancestors were born and buried. And they got all these rules about where and how a man can fish."

"In the end," Johnny went on in his bluesy, gentle voice like he was telling an exotic story from some far-off land, "the National Seashore has been a good thing because it saved us from being turned into Myrtle Beach, but Downeasters were asked to sacrifice for the good of everybody. We didn't have a say in the matter. We do plan to have a say in what happens next, though. In my short lifetime I've seen the end of tobacco farming and textile making in this state, and I'm determined not to see the end of the seafood industry. Not while I'm still alive. But many people seem intent on making it so a man can't make a decent living catching fish or shrimp. And they're doing it by using the sea turtles and the Endangered Species Act."

Wow! If you want to read about another world that's right in our neighborhood told by a master storyteller who knows the lay and lore of the land, reach for "Saltwater Cowboys." Morris is a keeper!

Ruth Moose, a longtime reviewer for The Pilot, teaches creative writing at UNC-Chapel Hill.