

Storms, Mayhem, and Mystery

by Ken Pelham

*I have seen tempests when the scolding winds
have rived the knotty oaks, and I have seen the
ambitious ocean swell and rage and foam, to be
exalted with the threat'ning clouds...*

—William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

Living in Florida skews your view of the world. The perspective is all wrong, beginning with geography. Look at a map: Florida dangles there off the Continental U.S., phallic and flaccid, causing far more trouble than it's worth (Exhibit 'A': the recent national election).

I love it. Every stupid, soggy square foot of it.

I grew up really skewed, not content to be merely Floridian. No, I had to grow up in a small farm town inland from both coasts. Some of my earliest memories are from 1960, when Hurricane Donna plowed through my little town and barreled its way up the state. I was three years old.

(I plug into my Sony Walkman as I write. Miraculously and by sheer coincidence—I swear—Neil Young's paint-peeler, "Like a Hurricane", blisters my ears and soul the minute I begin typing. Mind blown!)

Years later, as a pretend-adult in Orlando, and because my pretend-day-job revolves around design and construction, I began to notice that all the 100-year flood levels on lakes were set on one eventful day in 1960, the day Hurricane Donna slammed through. One storm, it turns out, still affected my life decades later and many miles farther north.

Years later still, I was listening to an audio book of John Steinbeck's, *Travels with Charley*, the memoir of his roundabout tour of America with only Charley the Dog for companionship. Steinbeck started his grand tour from his home near Boston, but the journey was almost still-born...Hurricane Donna had stormed in and delivered a sucker-punch, a thousand miles after it had hammered my little town of Immokalee.

So what's all this have to do with mystery fiction?

A hurricane is among the untamed, uncontrollable, unfathomable forces of nature. We fool ourselves into believing that we are masters of our world. So when the plot for my suspense novel, *Brigands Key* (2012, Five Star Mystery), began to reveal itself to me, I realized that the evil taking place caused by us would be as nothing in the teeth of a monster hurricane. The characters would become chaff before the wind. If anything, it forced my villain to become even more evil in order to compete.

The fictional Hurricane Celeste gave me the perfect backdrop, the perfect deadline—and the perfect trap. Because of fears of an unstoppable plague, no one is allowed off the island. Everyone is abandoned to fend for themselves, even though each passing hour brings the certainty of death from the howling sea ever closer. The spiraling storm becomes the metaphor for the spiraling series of events. Only this time, the metaphor kicks your ass. And then drowns you.

And the storm does one more thing; it provides perfect cover for a murderer.

All this is packed into the story for the sake of white-knuckle, kiss-your-hairy-ass-goodbye suspense. For entertainment. But entertainment can and should do more than entertain. It can move and inspire. Failing that, it can at least educate.

(Holy crap...my play list, set to "random", just launched into Jimmy Buffett's "Trying to Reason with Hurricane Season." I swear I'm not bullshitting you.)

While writing *Brigands Key*, I immersed myself in the history and lore of hurricanes. You learn to live with them in Florida and elsewhere along the Gulf Coast. They hit every year...but they don't hit *you* every year. The thing is, though, if you live here long enough, you *will* get hit. In 2004, three hurricanes walloped my home in Maitland, Hurricane Charley being the worst of the trio. We were without power for days each time, stewing in August like shrimps in a pot. I tried to weave memories and emotions from Donna and Charley into Celeste, describe them accurately, and take them up a few notches.

(Creedence just laid on "Who'll Stop the Rain?" Is this cosmic serendipity, or is it that my playlist is comprised only of gold dipped in awesome sauce? Or what?)

Watching safely from afar the misery wrought by Superstorm Sandy on the Northeast brought it all back to me. There is real terror and helplessness when one confronts nature in a bad mood. I wondered if the little bit of insight my book offers might have helped someone. Probably not. But maybe a few will read it, think about it, remember Sandy, Katrina, Charley, Andrew, and Camille, and prepare for the worst. If nothing else, like the citizens of Brigands Key, maybe they'll keep a lifejacket or two on hand, even if they never intend to set foot on a boat. Because, as Sandy tragically pointed out, the ocean doesn't always stay where it's supposed to.

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