

Sharks, Pirates, Mazelike Caves

Nautical Suspense

It happened about 25 years ago, on December 3, 1979. Three people went scuba diving and got lost in Seals Cove submerged cave on the northwest side of Santa Cruz Island. "They are the only people ever pulled out of there alive," said Margaret Hoffman of Raleigh, North Carolina, who used the incident as the basis of her latest suspense novel, *Dead in the Water*. "They have about a death a year

LOCAL EVENTS

go in looking for lobsters or abalone, and get killed."

The rescue involved the Ventura County Sheriff's Department and the Coast Guard stations in Marina del Rey, Oxnard, and Santa Barbara. Ventura County changed the name of its Search and Recovery dive team to Search and Rescue afterward, since a rescue attempt had finally been successful.

In the mid-1990s, Hoffman met one of the survivors, a Navy dentist named Bruce Smith, who lives in San Diego now. At the time of the accident he lived in Santa Barbara; when he and Hoffman met and became friends, they were both living in the Washington, D.C., area. One night Smith told Hoffman his story. "I had never been to California," said Hoffman by phone from her Raleigh home shortly before she left for her book tour here and elsewhere in Southern California. "It was snowing, it was winter, it was awful outside. Bruce had beautiful pictures of the Channel Islands all along his wall. Macro photography. Underwater scenes."

There was a picture of a pale white anemone with a Caribbean cleaner shrimp caught in its tendrils; another of an orange and purple Spanish shawl nudibranch; and a third of a purple gorgonian, its lacy arms bent back by the surge.



Macro photography had become his special interest, and his eye for meticulous detail had served him well.

Smith was diving with friends, a husband and wife, Tom and Cindy Campbell. When the three were unable to find their way out of the cave, a decision was made that Smith and Cindy would stay behind in an air pocket while Tom would make a try for the exit, using the extra air tanks. If he found the way out, he would lead rescuers back to the other two.

One of 120 known caves in an interconnected mazelike system, Seals Cove is considered by local divers to be the most dangerous cave out there. The cave is unmapped, its length unknown, although 400 feet of dive line have been laid without reaching the cave's end. "Every time there's an earthquake, faults are created," which in turn created the maze, said Hoffman, who spent time in California doing research.

Why did these three people make it out of the cave when so many others have not? Hoffman said she believes they all are "very optimistic people....They were also very experienced

divers, and so they didn't panic. They don't get upset about things." She added that it was, of course, their optimism that led them to their earlier, bad decision not to take a line into the cave in the first place.

Hoffman wove into her fictional story some domestic trouble. *She sighed. How could two people who were so in love drift so far apart? What had happened to them over the years?* Into the mix also went sharks. *Buck felt a flurry of water from above. He looked up to see the other blue now swimming over them. Abruptly, it circled and then moved in for attack. Before he could dart away, it was coming for him. Oh, Jesus! Finally, she interwove dental imagery, since the Smith character in the book is a dentist, like his real-life counterpart. Life was sort of like a root canal, he thought, with strange twists and passageways. When least expected, it could take a turn, lead you up a blind alley or down another.*

Hoffman, who does not scuba dive, did research to learn about how scuba diving is done. Divorced, she relied on her own experiences to write that part of the tale. And the attempted murder, which is yet another layer of the story? Imagination supplied that, she said.

Asked who set up her book tour, which includes a stop at Scuba Show 2004 in Long Beach on May 22-23,

Hoffman mentioned pirates. Pirates? "I have some pirate friends in California, and they have been very helpful. They're pirate re-enactors. I've become very friendly with all the pirate re-enactors; we do festivals together, because of *Blackbeard*."

She was referring to her previous book, *Blackbeard: A Tale of Villainy and Murder in Colonial America*, which is based on another true story with an underwater component. The pirate's sunken ship, *Queen Anne's Revenge*, was discovered off the coast of North Carolina by a dive team on November 21, 1996. "Sometimes I do lectures with the divers who discovered the ship," said Hoffman. "They've been bringing up artifacts ever since."

— Jeanne Schinto

Booksignings for Margaret Hoffman's *Dead in the Water* and *Blackbeard*
Thursday, May 20, 7:00 p.m.
Oceanside Barnes & Noble
2615 Vista Way
Oceanside
Free
Info: 760-529-0106
Friday, May 21, 5:00 p.m.
Bay Books
2019 Orange Avenue, Coronado
Free
Info: 619-435-0070

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