



Robert W. Mack

Murder ON THE CAPE

Maria Flook
finds the
dark corners of
an idyllic setting

By Sarah Anne Johnson

MARIA FLOOK HAS become known for mining the dark corners of murder, love and loss on the outer coast of Cape Cod, where she lives in Truro, Mass. Through prose based in both fiction and nonfiction, Flook explores the lives of her ramshackle characters and charts their tempestuous journeys through scenes and inner conflagrations that would push even the strongest among us to extremes.

Flook is the author of the novels *Lux*, *Open Water* and *Family Night*; a collection of stories, *You Have the Wrong Man*; and two nonfiction works, *Invisible Eden: A Story of Love and Murder on Cape Cod* and *My Sister Life: The Story*

of My Sister's Disappearance.

In the latter, her first nonfiction book, Flook brought to life her sister Karen, who ran away as a teenager and lived as a prostitute. Through conversations with her sister and extensive research into the details of her life, Flook created chapters from her sister's point of view. She counterpointed these with chapters from her own point of view, creating a portrait of two sisters.

Critics debated if this was, in fact, a memoir. Or was it fiction, since the chapters from Karen's point of view were essentially creations in which the author imagined herself into her sister's skin? Flook uses Frederick Exley's phrase "fictionalized memoir" to

A scene from Cape Cod, Mass., where Maria Flook finds the edgy terrain for much of her fiction and nonfiction in the shadows and undercurrents.

describe her approach—a topic she expanded on in our interview.

While Flook's talent for fiction-alized memoir served her well in *My Sister Life*, it stirred substantial controversy in *Invisible Eden*. Christa Worthington, a former fashion writer who was brutally murdered in her Truro home in 2002, is at the center of this story. While Flook had never known Christa, she had to imagine her way into her life in order to invent scenes in which Christa was the main character.

Writing the scenes in *My Sister Life*, Flook had the benefit of her sister's consent as well as an intimate relationship with her subject. In *Invisible Eden*, she had to rely on research, and while Flook is a meticulous and thorough researcher, it's not the same as knowing the actual person. Without that intimate knowledge, some critics and readers felt that Flook's technique was unreliable in a non-fiction account.

Still, the book was a bestseller and received a starred review from *Booklist*, which said, "Flook offers a searing look at the seaside town peopled with the rich, famous, and quirky, as well as the blue-collar, obscure, and edgy, in this intimate look at the allure of secrets, sex, and murder."

Interestingly enough, Flook's most recent book, the novel *Lux*, takes a look at love and a murder on the outer Cape, but where *Invisible Eden* is about an actual event, *Lux* is pure noir invention. Alden and Lux are as wild and unruly as the landscape along the Cape Cod National Seashore where Alden works for the National Park Service. Alden's husband has disappeared, and with little hope of his return, she struggles to fill the emptiness in her life with stormy love affairs, her attempt to adopt a

baby and work. Lux is trying to stay sober and live with a terrible secret in his past that gives him anxiety attacks. Both are haunted and fierce, and together they strike a tender connection that neither can resist. *Lux* brings together what is best about Flook's writing: a fierce eye for the telling detail, a lyric sensibility and irresistibly flawed but sympathetic characters set in an edgy, irresistible plot.

You've written poetry, nonfiction and fiction. How does your work in one genre inform your work in the other?

I'm AWOL from poetry. I don't write poems very often, but of course the lyric voice and a constant dependence on "poetic figure" is a given in literary fiction. I have a deep dependence on image as the shortest route to a wallop of perception. As a novelist, I mine the distinct strata of diction and emotive language that comes from that background in poetry. Poetry is not merely a vein of ore. It's bedrock. For me, the lyric voice is never absent, not even in bleak instances nor in black comedy.

Where do your story ideas come from, and what is your process like for developing them?

My stories usually come from a connection or a gut attraction to a character. So you might say my work begins with "connection." It's not mere fascination but an *obsessive* preoccupation with a character, usually someone who faces a problem I recognize to be an important strain in current life. These characters might emerge from my own intimates or could be amalgams of personal connections, but my story starts to materialize from my accrued experiences and involvement with people, often fringe characters, and from my interest in exploring our troubles as men and women.

Your two books prior to *Lux*, *My Sister Life* and *Invisible Eden*, were nonfiction books that wove real fact and event with invention. Can you talk about this approach to nonfiction?

In my nonfiction, nothing is "invented" or created from thin air. The story map was in place. Events are real. The facts and details are not merely collected, mined and stockpiled, but are crystallized by insight and empathetic perception. It's the writer's task to assemble both fact and insight about the facts in a narrative that is charged, sympathetic and transforming.

How do you accomplish that?

In both these nonfiction books, I used traditional narrative devices to help create a "felt life" that can be attained only through development of character. The characters in these books are evoked through *scene*—a scene, of course, has action, dialogue and interior perceptions.

My responsibility in my non-fiction, just as in fiction, is to write scenes that dramatize the harrowing situations and struggles that these subjects faced and to follow their journeys with acuity and lucidity, and even with the lyricism that at times is necessary to truly mirror their secret worlds.

Amy Bloom once said about fiction, "The truth is almost never what happened, not to mention that it doesn't really matter." Do you agree, and do you think this applies to nonfiction at times?

"Truth" is a trick word.

"Fact," too. Facts are subversive because they can be subjective. Depending on who is presorting, sanitizing or handling them, facts can mean different things. Just ask the foreman of a jury. Facts are like mosaic tiles or Scrabble pieces. Facts require that *someone* places them in whatever order—perhaps leav-

ing some out—to make a word or a picture or a patio table.

Matisse would tell students in his painting classes, “Exaggerate in the direction of truth.” One might ask, isn’t it false to exaggerate the truth? I think what Matisse is saying is that one cannot reveal or portray the truth without manipulating your medium. The truth in art is not made up of exact reportage, or of concrete and representational elements alone, but it comes from the artist’s own mastery of technique in order to deliver the complexity of his impulse.

How do you decide what must remain fact and where you can take fictive license?

Fiction should have realistic information about setting. Let’s say you want New York City to “look” like it’s supposed to look. New York isn’t supposed to have palm trees. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t invent street names or restaurants, or little quirks in both the landscape and in the local culture that will feed and underscore the particular

tensions in your story. A palm tree might have some realistic spotlight in New York, but the writer must explain how it got there, why it is there and how it matters or doesn’t. The wilder the invention, the stronger the corresponding realism must be so that inventions don’t distract but enrich the text.

Lux offers vivid details about Cape Cod nature and wildlife as well as descriptions of the jobs characters hold—everything from how Lux repairs the broken 7 on a clock to how doctors reattach amputated fingers. What do you want this level of detail to add to the narrative?

Realistic detail is the infrastructure of fiction. It’s used to support the load that carries the dream forward. Details shouldn’t interrupt the dreamer with questions of clarity or implausibility, so research is important, but these researched areas must be completely integrated into the narrative fabric. Researched details should go *into the author* before going onto the page.

How do you do your research?

I use books, newspapers, Google, but I have also interviewed many live subjects, traveled to locations, everywhere from The Arrow Shirt Co. corporate offices in Manhattan for my first novel, [*Family Night*], to Castle Hill Coast Guard Station in Newport [R.I.] for *Open Water*, to the Massachusetts state police barracks in Yarmouth for *Invisible Eden*. The nonfiction books are a bit different from research done for fiction, but I do research for both.

For *Lux*, I didn’t need to do much local research, having absorbed so much from daily life. Living on a tiny spit of land, it doesn’t take long before you know it backwards and forwards. I have been following

the lower Cape communities for many years and their struggles and transformations. I did do some additional research about the National Seashore Park System and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

How do you decide what research to use?

I think the first thing to understand about research is that research cannot create story, but it builds into your story, it invigorates or strengthens like those steel rods inside concrete. In fiction especially, you shouldn’t see the research superimposed on the pages; it should be wholly seamless. When I look further and dig up materials to find information, exactness, correct nomenclature, to learn more about the subject, I am coming to it with an art hunger and not just as a reporter or scholar. I hope to transform the information I gather into a “literary” explanation—deepening character and enforcing my narrative stance.

What are your most unusual sources of information?

I have a broad spectrum of weird sources, everything from live interviews with murder “suspects” to books like *A Fly for the Prosecution*, about forensic entomology. The story dictates what I need to get my hands on—as in my first novel I had to find the legit specs for an automobile, a 1969 Plymouth Duster, and I contacted the Chrysler Historical Society. For that book, I also had to find the history of illustrator J.C. Leyendecker, who drew the virile Arrow Collar ads in the early 20th century.

My sources are sometimes as simple as local newspapers and periodicals, delightfully weird books like the classic *The Bach Flower Remedies* or pragmatic like *The Dilemma of the Alcoholic Marriage*, an Al-Anon title.



Nancy Crampton

“In fiction especially, you shouldn’t see the research superimposed on the pages; it should be wholly seamless.”

Your characters have interesting jobs that seem inextricably linked to who they are. Alden works at the National Seashore and Lux is a landscape designer and laborer. How do you arrive at the jobs for your characters?

Work is a common denominator, and readers identify with characters in their work troubles. Placing a character in work settings helps to explain his position or station in the world and can evoke his nature by showing his performance in the external arena—a boss who needles him, rifts with co-workers, his pride in his expertise and other details will seed transformations in his personal story.

How do you use work to deepen the character?

I've written about characters in office settings, fishing boats, about contractors, motel and cemetery clerks, prison guards and college professors. This is such rich terrain, and just the right details from blue-collar jobs can be as fascinating as the more exotic occupations. I tell my students never to forget to give their characters jobs! Identity at a workplace gives your characters essential footing, a perch in the real world from which they might tumble or climb out of trouble.

You've referred to *Lux* as a comedic, gothic love story. What draws you to this duplicitous terrain?

The characters in *Lux* have some unusual troubles. I think that the unorthodox (sometimes criminal), big-hearted, risky ways my characters address their problems are often plainly comic, other times very poignant and sometimes disturbing. The main characters meet over a dead body. One reviewer said my characters were sometimes so unnerving she'd want to walk to the other side of the street if she saw them walking

toward her. She'd say this about a Coen Brothers movie, too, I guess.

My characters are disenfranchised, at least temporarily, as they work their way into the mainstream. People trying to jump up rungs of the ladder often have pratfalls and sometimes serious injury. I guess the dark vein comes from their edgy circumstances; they are forced to lie, use one another, trample social mores as they try to better themselves and survive united.

***Lux* is filled with snowballing action that begins with Alden's causing a car wreck when she jaywalks and Lux's need to move a corpse. How do you develop a narrative that's character-driven, yet full of action, without letting the plot take over?**

Flannery O'Connor says in her great essay "Writing Short Stories" that a "story is an action." Action is different from that dirty word "plot." I think that character is evoked not only from descriptive detail, introspection and dialogue but by the events that these characters are immersed in and their accelerating *actions* within the boundaries of their scene-by-scene reactions to one another. We see characters making decisions and acting upon them, and this, of course, does develop character further.

There's a lot of physical movement in this story compared to a drawing-room novel. People do some unorthodox things. Lux has his work cut out—he has to stumble into murder, transport a body and also fight with its ghost—and Alden, too, is guilty of vandalism, kidnapping and comic assault as she tries to seek revenge on her ex-lovers, rivals and DSS [Department of Social Services] pencil pushers.

The Maria Flook file

FLOOK'S FIRST novel, *Family Night*, received a PEN American/Ernest Hemingway Foundation Special Citation.

MARRIED TO POET John Skoyles, the author of numerous books of poetry.

TEACHES AT Emerson College in Boston and spends as much time as she can in her rambling seaside garden in Truro, Mass.

FLOOK AND HER SISTER Karen had tickets for the ill-fated Atlantic crossing of the *Andrea Doria* in 1956 but instead took an earlier ship. The Italian ocean liner sank after colliding with another ship, killing a total of 51 people on the two vessels. One of the two girls who were moved into the Flooks' cabin was killed.

Do you have a sense of mystery and suspense in mind when you sit down to write, or does it come up in the invention?

The "suspense" in this story is twofold, at least. There is a core mystery at the center of the story—but not in the typical formulaic manner of mystery fiction. Of course, we are instantly worried about the characters being overtaken by the authorities who are monitoring their distinctly separate wrongdoings. Upon the instant Lux and Alden team up, they double their troubles. But more importantly, the suspense seems to be, will these characters be able to connect and survive after they have overcome their immediate, desperate straits, their bad unions with others, their haunted pasts? It's a love story unfolding within a mystery, within a social satire. #

Sarah Anne Johnson

A contributing editor to *The Writer*, Sarah Anne Johnson is author of *Conversations with American Women Writers* and *The Art of the Author Interview*. Her next book, *More Conversations with American Writers*, is due out in 2007. Web: www.sarahanjohnson.com.