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KILLING MISTER WATSON

By Peter Matthiessen

Random House. 346 pp.

Bill House may have been the first to pull his trigger that October night in 1910 outside Ted Smallwood's store in Chokoloskee, at the western edge of the Everglades. It was hard to tell, even for House. It was twilight. And all around House 20 other settlers, washed into Chokoloskee days earlier by a hurricane, were pumping bullets into Edgar Watson too. Watson was their neighbor, but he might have just murdered three people at his Chatham Bend plantation. Or maybe he'd just shot the man who murdered them. No one but Watson himself knew for sure. By October 1910, Watson's reputation for killing had so spooked his neighbors that, says House, "It wasn't justice they was after, but a good night's sleep."

Drive near the southwestern swampland of Florida and they'll tell you about "Bloody" Ed Watson. They still speak of him. Before and after his death mothers could scare children into compliance by threatening, "You don't jump in that bed quick, Mister Watson'll gitcha!"

Suspected of dozens of murders, many committed while he was known to be elsewhere, Watson remains a mystery. In this brilliantly structured novel, Peter Matthiessen, as he did in *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, explores a murder he spent years researching. He "makes no claim to historical accuracy, since almost nothing here is indisputable. On the other hand, there is little or nothing that could *not* have happened—nothing inconsistent, that is, with the very little that is actually known."

This weighty novel moves with courtroom deliberateness as Matthiessen relates the story through a variety of witnesses. Eight are Watson's neighbors, a ninth Lee County Sheriff Frank B. Tippins, a tenth Watson's daughter Carrie whose diary we glimpse. Interspersed with these reports are the more "scholarly" accounts of a correspondent circa 1960. Bit by bit they furnish the jigsaw pieces, yet when the picture is complete many parts remain murky.

Born on Nov.11, 1855 in South Carolina to a brutal father, Watson came to northern Florida as a boy. He grew up there, married, had a son, and married again to a woman who bore Carrie and two sons. Reportedly having killed his brother-in-law, Watson left by 1888 for the Oklahoma Indian Territory where he was charged with shooting outlaw moll Belle Star. He fled to Arkansas and was imprisoned as a horse thief, then escaped to central Florida. There, in the cattle town of Arcadia, he shot down a knife-wielding "bad actor" named Quinn Bass. He moved to southwestern Florida, the setting of this novel, by 1892.

Henry Thompson, who piloted Watson's boats, says the sparse Everglades population contained a few "thin piney-woods crackers with them knife-mouthed women,

hollow-eyed under bent hats, lank black hair like horses, touchy, on the run." One, Will Raymond, got killed by a Key West posse, and Watson bought his 40 acres on Chatham Bend from Raymond's widow. Soon, Watson cut the throat of Adolphus Santini, "our leading citizen" according to House, just short of fatally in a Key West brawl. He may have killed Jean Chevelier too, a French early settler who hunted bird plumes for women's hats. His most heinous murder was certainly the young Tucker couple in 1901, she with child at the time, who refused to sell Watson a patch of land on nearby Lost Man's Key. That so enraged his neighbors that Watson fled to northern Florida for five years.

Matthiessen deftly fills in Watson's nefarious outline with rich romantic hues. So much so, in fact, that one neighbor claims Watson "looked and acted like our idea of a hero." Always raising Cain, Watson also raised sugar cane, becoming a leading supplier of cane syrup along Florida's gulf coast. While Ted Smallwood's other customers were in debt, Watson was \$200 ahead in his account. He married Carrie into the powerful cattle baron Langford family of Ft. Myers, where the sheriff's office was, earning Watson a large measure of immunity. He behaved himself in Ft. Myers, and in Chokoloskee where he brought his third wife in 1906, confining his brawls mostly to Key West and Tampa.

A prosperous planter rumored to have killed some dangerous villains, Watson became legendary, even glamorous. However much they scare us, we lionize our fearless desperados who brazenly snicker at the rules confining our lives of quieter desperation. We especially like them when they pay their bills and attend church with their families and dress and speak with refinement. With a new family and much of coastal Florida in awe, Watson appeared headed for wealth and prominence.

Then more rumors buzzed. Watson, they said, was hiring help no one would miss, then killing them on pay day. In 1910, after Halley's Comet made its ominous appearance, with the worst hurricane in memory bearing down on Florida, a triple murder occurred at Watson's place. Wanting a good night's sleep even more than justice, his neighbors gunned him down.

Like the people whose eyes we see him through, we find ourselves beguiled by Watson. Matthiessen, as he did expertly in *Men's Lives* and *Far Tortuga*, uses his characters' voices both to suggest candid reportage and to capture the Southern frontier setting. Their voices range from backwoods-poetic to droll. Leon Hamilton describes his love for Sarah Johnson: "I loved her for the joy in her, and that sparkly laughter, but I was drawn hard to her, too. It wasn't only wanting her, it was like she was a lost side of my own nature that I had to have back or I'd never get my breath." Sarah, in turn, eyed Watson's son Lucius: "Me'n Lucius was always just a little bit in love, but not so's anyone would notice, even him."

Matthiessen, with his gift for revealing life with intensity and clarity, stays surefooted on the wavy line between fiction and chronicle, as always making the strange familiar and the mundane significant. Forged from extensive research, a naturalist's

understanding of the land and an artist's sense of form, *Killing Mister Watson* is spellbinding to read, even moreso to reread.

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