

SECRET OF THE PAINTED ROCK

John Calu and Dave Hart

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ENLIGHTEN ME: Old Barney plays a key part in the Painted Rock's mysterious past.

Rocky Riddle Concludes Teen Trilogy

The colorful and mysterious monolith of Route 539 – locally and colloquially known as the Painted Rock – is uncovered and explored in the latest young adult novel from creative writing team John Calu and Dave Hart.

The Secret of the Painted Rock is, in every sense of the phrase and then some, a beach read: light, briskly paced and set right here at the shore.

It's not intended to be heavy, noted Hart, and the targeted audience is the 10- to 20-year-old, who might pick it up as a respite from more serious summer reading.

Of course, that's not to say the novel – which is more of a novella, really, wrapping up in just under 90 pages – is devoid of educational value. Even longtime locals might learn something from Calu and Hart's meticulous research, some of it culled from The SandPaper's own archives.

The third and final installment of the authors' locally focused mystery trilogy finds the young protagonists – Kelly Martin and her brother Geoffrey, along with Kelly's erstwhile beau, Danny Windsor – facing new challenges and confronting new issues. Windsor's paternity is even called into question near the end of the book.

It's only natural the characters are grappling with more-mature issues. They have, after all, aged two years since the first work in the trilogy, *The Treasure of Tucker's Island*, was written in 2000. The then-16-year-old Kelly is now an 18-year-old college student, while Geoffrey is now 17.

The transition from high school to higher education is likely something the authors will explore in future books. And it's in a "Princeton University kind of setting" that the kids, as Calu and Hart affectionately call their creations, might just encounter new and bigger mysteries.

"They are exploring what we're interested in," Hart explained. And the list of what the two authors are interested in is nearly boundless: the Sphinx, the Pyramids, Einstein's theory of relativity and its relation to the works of Salvador Dali and so on.

For upcoming books, they'll be looking to Dan Brown of *The DaVinci Code* fame for cues and inspiration, impressed as they are with the best-selling writer's ability to "provoke interest in myths and legends and mysteries."

"We just love a good mystery," Hart remarked. "And we're just confronted with so many mysteries in life."

The real-life mystery of the Painted Rock proved irresistible for Hart, who hails from Ewing, and had spotted the big stone on many occasions motoring down Route 539 toward Long Beach Island.

Calu and Hart took an important, and rather unusual, first step in preparing to write their latest work: They asked their friend and American Indian shaman, Grey Eagle, to perform a water ritual at the Painted Rock.

"The rock spoke – we listened," Hart recalled. As he ran his hands over the boulder, sensations ran over him: energy and a tremendous heat. Calu, on the other hand, felt stark coldness, the absence of life, as though the rock was stifled under the many layers of paint coating its surface.

"Grey Eagle, of course, was the one to spot the travesty around the rock," the litter and debris left behind by unenlightened humans.

It's a scene that's replicated in the book, as Geoffrey attempts to look to nature – with the help of a Tom Brown Jr.-esque wilderness expert – in an effort to resolve the controversy and contention surrounding the rock.

Over the course of the book's chapters, the landmark becomes a source of tension in the community, and the kids must not only piece together what happened at the site decades ago

Continued on Page 42, Sec. 2

Painted Rock

Continued from Page 40, Sec. 2

(hint: it involves a car accident), but also attempt to reconcile the groups of veterans and free-speech activists who clash when the American flag-bedecked rock is painted over with anti-war imagery.

In the tradition of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, the protagonists approach each situation with good, old-fashioned ingenuity and intuition.

Interestingly, the authors don't put too much of themselves into their creations, choosing instead to create composite personalities.

If anything, said Hart, he and Calu identify most with young Kelly Martin. "I have a 17-year-old daughter and John has a 12-year-old daughter."

The colorful, quirky secondary characters who fill the ranks of *The Secret of the Painted Rock* have their roots in caricatures of just some of the idiosyncratic folks that Calu and Hart have encountered on the Island and the mainland.

"Moss Greenberg, you can find him at the 18th Street beach in Ship Bottom every day," noted Hart. "He's not Australian, but he is the self-proclaimed oldest lifeguard."

Long Beach Island is "such a fascinating place," he continued. Having first visited the Island as a child, Hart said his earliest memories "were not necessarily about the sand and the surf and the sun, but about the stories of the Jersey Devil."

Those compelling tales are a part of the collective consciousness, at least in this part of the state. "Everyone has a Jersey Devil story or knows someone who does," Hart noted.

By exploring, tweaking, adding to or subtracting from conventional wisdom regarding local legends and lore, Hart and Calu are making their own myths, proving that long-held beliefs aren't set in stone, pardon the pun.

The book's titular secret draws upon the many Painted Rock theories the two men have heard over the years, uniting the most common themes into a cohesive explanation.

"Everyone thinks that somewhere along the line this rock fell off a truck destined for a jetty; everyone knows that somewhere around there, there had to be an accident," Hart explained.

Of course, the book doesn't purport to solve the real-life mystery, but it arrives at a conclusion that might not be too far from the truth. The authors seem keen on blurring the line between fact and fiction.

In the trilogy's second book, *The Mystery of the Jersey Devil*, for instance, "we throw out every single possible explanation, conception, belief that people have in the Jersey Devil and created a few new ones, too – that was the fun."

Indeed, fun's the word for Hart and Calu, who over the course of a 20-year friendship and partnership as a "creative writing team" have amassed a great number of ideas. They've banged out screenplays, sitcom scripts, humorous essays and even an award-winning song or two.

It's a body of work that has flowed directly from a rich source: a collaborative process that pits Hart's research skills against Calu's eye for detail to astounding effect. They liken the entire thing to the partnership of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, who together created works that outshone their individual contributions and abilities.

In the midst of writing, the duo puts in 18 to 20 hours a day, though they work relatively quickly, finishing up the *The Secret of the Painted Rock* in about two months.

Now, the pair is working diligently at promoting their latest novel, having gotten their works into a brick-and-mortar bookstore for the very first time: The Bookworm, in Surf City.

Additionally, they are selling via the Pinelands Preservation Alliance's web site and at the organization's new visitors center in Southampton.

Most of their books have been moved online, via Amazon.com and iUniverse, the print-on-demand service that has allowed Calu and Hart to become self-published writers.

The duo is working on scheduling book signings at the Tuckerton Seaport – a place Hart is particularly fascinated by – and How You Brewin' in Ship Bottom.

Calu and Hart believe their books, as rife as they are with regional color, can appeal to folks who've never even set foot on the Island. Hart points to the existence of other Jersey Devil-esque legends – including the fearsome Chupacabra of the southern United States, Mexico and Puerto Rico – as proof of the universal appeal of a good monster mystery.

So it's with that spirit in mind that Calu, who is currently winding his way through a whirlwind tour of Spain and other European nations, has hit upon a plan to bring *The Secret of the Painted Rock* to a global audience: According to Hart, he took 300 bookmarks to place "in all the fancy lobbies of all the hotels he's going to."

— Heather Pharo

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