

On the Coast of California

The Morgan Bay Mysteries

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In the autumn of 2013 I was driving up the coast of California on my way back home to Oregon, where I was then living after my retirement. I stopped for the night in Eureka, a town founded in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Eureka has many Victorian houses, with towers, widow's walks, and gingerbread decorations on overhanging front porches. As evening fell on my first night, fog rolled in. Entranced, I went out for a walk.

Suddenly, as I was enwrapped by the thick mist, I was put in mind of the Morgan Bay series, which was set on the coast of northern California. It struck me that the books could well have been set in Eureka.

The Morgan Bay Mysteries were written by John & Nancy Rambeau. Curiously, while there is much anecdotal evidence of schools officially and unofficially disapproving of the classic series books of half a century ago and more, the Morgan Bay series was almost certainly commissioned by a school district to encourage children to read. The inside cover of several of the volumes I own features a notice that "This is a California State Textbook". On the title page, one of my volumes is described further as part of the "California State Series, published by the California State Department of Education". Maybe the books became more popular, for the rest of the books are listed as published by "Field Educational Publications, Incorporated", and were found all over the country.

In the research I've done, I can find no information about the books or the authors other than the book titles, unless you want to count the information that the authors also wrote the Jim Forest series. This series appears to consist of nine titles published between 1959 and 1967. Although I have not read or even found any of these books, I was able to assemble a list of the titles:

- Jim Forest and the Bandits
- Jim Forest and the Mystery Hunter
- Jim Forest and Dead Man's Peak
- Jim Forest and the Flood
- Jim Forest and Lone Wolf Gulch
- Jim Forest and the Plane Crash
- Jim Forest and Ranger Don
- Jim Forest and Lightning

Jim Forest and the Trapper

There are eight books in the Morgan Bay mysteries; four were published in 1962, and four in 1965, so they came out right in the middle years of the Jim Forest books. The Jim Forests were also published by the Field Educational Publications.

From this scanty information, my guess is that John and Nancy Rambeau were established but not major authors of children's books, and were commissioned to write both series by the California Department of Education.

All the Morgan Bay books were very inexpensive. They were referred to me back in 2008 by Mark Gibbons of Vermont, to whom I am indebted for several excellent series I would most likely never had heard of otherwise.

The illustrations were done by Joseph Maniscalco, and are a pleasing sepia. The books feature a lot of illustrations, both small line drawings within the text and full page or even two-page illustrations of much greater detail. I couldn't find out much about Joseph Maniscalco any more than I could about the authors, other than that he was both an author and illustrator of many children's books in the same genre as the Morgan Bay mysteries.

Admittedly, these books are aimed at a younger audience than the classic books that are more popular among the readers of the *Review*. Late elementary school, is my guess. The stories are only 70 to 90 pages long. Nonetheless, they were good; had I been a preteen at the time these books came out, I'd have enjoyed them. The plots are pretty original and engaging even if they were not too complex.

Unlike any other series I've ever collected or read about, at the back of each of the Morgan Bay books is a study guide, with questions about details of the story on a chapter by chapter basis. There is also a word list for building vocabulary.

These are the titles of the eight books:

- The Mystery of Morgan Castle (1962)
- The Mystery of the Marble Angel (1962)
- The Mystery of the Midnight Visitor (1962)
- The Mystery of the Missing Marlin (1962)
- The Mystery of the Musical Ghost (1965)
- The Mystery of Monk's Island (1965)
- The Mystery of the Marauder's Gold (1965)
- The Mystery of the Myrmidon's Journey (1965)

The protagonist in the mysteries is Gabby Summers. He has an older sister Vinny and an older brother Bill. Bill is the protagonist in a few of the volumes. As a pointer that Morgan Bay is based on real life Eureka, in the first chapter of the first book, *The Mystery of Morgan Castle* (1962), we read that Gabby goes out to apply for a job as a dog sitter, as he walks the story reports, "All along the beach were big, old houses. They had been there for years and years." Then he sees Morgan Castle with "dark empty windows and high, pointed roof."

Could this mansion be based on the Carson Mansion, build in 1866? Compare the photograph with Maniscalco's drawing. I think I can rest my case. Not only is Morgan Bay based on Eureka, California, but Morgan Castle is based on the Carson Mansion.



In the initial story, Morgan Castle has long been abandoned, but we find that it had been left to an elderly spinster, Miss Lucy Wellington, who was going to marry Ross Morgan, the last of the family. He had died in a car accident and had left the mansion to Miss Wellington. She never took possession of the mansion, however, and lives in the house next door. Gabby is intrigued when he finds out that someone is living in the mansion. When Gabby finds two twenty dollar bills in a paper bag on the grounds of the mansion, he becomes curious enough to investigate.

In *The Mystery of the Marble Angel* (1962), it is apparently summer vacation and very hot. The two brothers and sister are discussing a bank robbery that had taken place in a nearby town. Also, their friend Ham has just purchased a hearse from the local mortuary. Ham wants it because it is a Cadillac, hasn't been driven over 20 mph, and especially because it can be used to carry surfboards to the beach. Problem is, he only has enough money for the down payment and owes the balance, which he doesn't have, in a few days. When it is learned that another man wanted to buy the hearse, and that he was lodging in a rundown motel, Ham and his friends try to find him to negotiate over the hearse. The eponymous marble angel is a damaged grave marker in a local, nearly forgotten cemetery. Because of the angel all the threads of the story are brought together.

In *The Mystery of the Midnight Visitor* (1962), Gabby finds an empty silver box on the beach. Shortly after that, he notices a fire at Morgan Castle. The firemen are able to put it out with only minimal damage to the house, but when Gabby and his friends and Miss Wellington tour the house after the firemen leave, it is obvious that someone has ransacked the house, looking for something. After a search of their own, Miss Wellington assures them that although much has been disturbed, nothing has been taken. But when Gabby produces the silver box he found, Miss

Wellington identifies as the late Mrs. Morgan's jewel box. That being the case, who was the midnight visitor? What was he looking for? Did he find it? And just to add to the excitement, people who live near Morgan Castle are urging that it be torn down as an unmaintained firetrap that is bringing down the value of their homes.

The Mystery of the Missing Marlin (1962) begins with the words, "For four days and four nights a heavy fog had covered the town of Morgan Bay." The words reminded me of my late-night walk through Eureka. Anyway, the story begins when Gabby is confronted by a smartass named Captain Steele who is piloting a boat called the *Banshee*. He orders people around, and apparently keeps a tight rein on his crew, using threats and blows indiscriminately. Shortly after the *Banshee* ties up to the dock, another boat pulls in, looming out of the thick fog. Both boats had given up on doing any fishing in the fog. Gabby finds out that the man on the *Marlin* is a famous radio singer keeping a low profile, getting away from the crowds by going deep sea fishing. The mystery begins when the *Marlin* is stolen, the singer is left on shore, and Gabby's brother Bill and their friend Ham are missing.

The Mystery of the Musical Ghost (1965) begins with a bang. Bill and Ham are surfing, and see Miss Wellington faint on her front porch, just as a man in a dark coat is on hand. They run to help her, and see that she had been reading a letter. The man in the coat picks the letter up and gives it to Bill just as Bill and Ham take Miss Wellington inside. They call the doctor who comes and pronounces that Miss Wellington had merely fainted, and would be fine. After he leaves, Miss Wellington asks about the stranger, who has since left, and whether he had seen the letter. Bill says No. Then Miss Wellington informs Bill and Ham that he is a Nazi hunter, and that she may know where the man whom the Nazi hunter is seeking may be found.

In *The Mystery of Monk's Island* (1965), Gabby meets a boy named Lonnie Martin who lives in the city dump. He trades a broken switchblade for Gabby's slingshot and ball bearings. (You can tell this book was written nearly fifty years ago. As Hal Goodwin wrote about *Rick Brant's Science Projects*, which came out in 1960, a lot of stuff in children's books of that era would never see print today for fear of lawsuits.) Turns out Lonnie is on his own, afraid of the police, and is trying to find an island that had been owned by his father's family. Lonnie is an orphan whose father was shot down in the Korean War. He's run away from foster care to find the island to which he hopes he is the heir.

In *The Mystery of the Marauder's Gold* (1965), Bill and his adult friend Mr. Ballard set out to try to help a local man who's overfriendliness to strangers may have made him easy prey for some unprincipled visitor. The man had been withdrawn for a long time, but then tried to turn over a new leaf. The visitor shows up regularly at the ranch for free food, but disappears whenever there is work to be done. When some diving equipment is found sabotaged, Mr. Ballard becomes more than suspicious. Word of a lost treasure from the days of tall ships in the early years of California adds to the intrigue, and the excitement ratchets up quickly.

The final entry in the Morgan Bay mysteries is *The Mystery of the Myrmidon's Journey* (1965). For a second time, a book begins with fog: "An hour earlier the fog had been a dark wall against the distant sky. But now it had closed around the tiny boat. It rolled across the decks and left them damp and slippery." Bill and Ham are crew members on a boat under their friend Captain

Swift. In the fog, their craft is nearly slammed into by a cruiser called the *Myrmidon*. The *Myrmidon* looks abandoned and is floating freely on the sea. Bill and Ham board her to drop an anchor, but soon find that the boat is not as abandoned as it had appeared. A girl with a gun orders them to take charge of the ship. The crew has vanished, the radio has been sabotaged, and the girl is alone. She demands that Ham and Bill take her on a long journey south. It's hard to give a better description of the storyline without provided spoilers, so I'll just say that the story was written during the Viet Nam War and there is treasure involved. The Morgan Bay mysteries end on a high note.

All in all, I give these books a thumbs up. I suspect, and hope, that they would have served their purpose in encouraging young readers to continue to read, to build a better vocabulary, to learn a little bit of history, and to exercise their imaginations.