

# BOOK CURRENTS

## SALTWATER COWBOYS

by Bill Morris

Coastal Carolina Press, \$13.00

2231 Wrightsville Avenue, Wilmington, NC 28403

1.877.817.9900 or [www.coastalcarolinapress.org](http://www.coastalcarolinapress.org)

Bill Morris knows a thing or two about Down East. He lives there for one thing. He also makes his living writing about it – whether it’s in the Raleigh *News & Observer* outdoors pages, short fiction compendiums like the *Boston Review*, *Real Fiction* and *The Dead Mule*, regional magazines or right here in the pages of *NCboatinglifestyle*. So when news spread of the publication of his first novel, a swell of pride surged from this editor (at least) that meant one of our boys had made it to “The Show.” But was our boy really ready for the big leagues?

The answer is an undeniable yes. Morris knocks it out of the park with *Saltwater Cowboys* – a quirky quagmire of environmental intrigue, “mommicked”\* love and cultural clash between the Down East way of life and the modern world. It’s something of a coming-of-middle-age tale, with outsider Dodge Lawson at the helm of a story heading for rough seas, indeed.

Set in the fictional fishing village of Croaker Neck, North Carolina, the novel begins with an eco-prank of epic proportions. A loggerhead turtle – a “threatened species” – turns up in the hotel Jacuzzi of a new development and cranks up the jets on the local independent fishermen who, invariably, take the heat for the

general demise of sea turtles. Caught in the deep between the nets of real estate developers, his saltwater cowboy friends and Ilse Brunner, his red-blooded, henna-haired love interest (and president of Tortugas Now!), Dodge has some serious thinking to do.

And that’s where Morris’s prose sings that salt-of-the-earth song so longed for in good fiction. On Ilse, Dodge muses, “Even in the yellow bug lights she looked good, the lines on her face inscribing a gently worn beauty that made women half her age look like first drafts.” On the subject of the Disneyfication of the Outer Banks, a filmmaker doing a documentary in Croaker Neck laments, “I started shooting in Manteo, but the place has been turned into a damned Elizabethan theme park overrun with morons in Beefeater costumes.”

Compulsively readable and complex in its comedy and dyspeptic wisdom, *Saltwater Cowboys* manages to reel in the turmoil, hibernating history, joy and fleeting freedom of a fasci-

nating slice of coastal North Carolina. But don’t trust this “dingbatter,”\*\* read it yourself.

Nicole Crews

\*“Mommicked” is Down East for something that’s just not right.

\*\*“Dingbatter” means outsider or someone who’s not from around Down East.

