

Writing Fire Island

Fire Island is a gripping historical novel by John J. Stevens. It tells the story of William Trask, a captain of the vessel *Young America*, which wrecked off the coast of Fire Island in the 1850s. In the wreck, Trask "lost his son, his crew, and one of his legs," but found "a strange new course in his life that he could never have guessed." Stevens spoke with the *Fire Island Tide Newspaper* about his novel and the island that inspired it.

Fire Island Tide: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

John J. Stevens: [I'm a] lifelong Long Islander, [and I] now live in Riverhead. [I] started my career as a writer for *The Long Islander* weekly newspaper. Currently, I own Bullfrog Communications, a digital design and communications company, creating websites and other digital applications for our clients. I have written, directed, and produced several PBS documentaries, including "Freedom's Glory: The Restoration of the Little Jennie" (see it at LittleJennie.com). My company created "Murder at Old Fields: An Online Forensic Science Lab Activity" based on the notorious double murder that occurred in 1842 in Old Fields, Long Island (see it at MurderAtOldFields.com).

FIT: What is your connection to Fire Island?

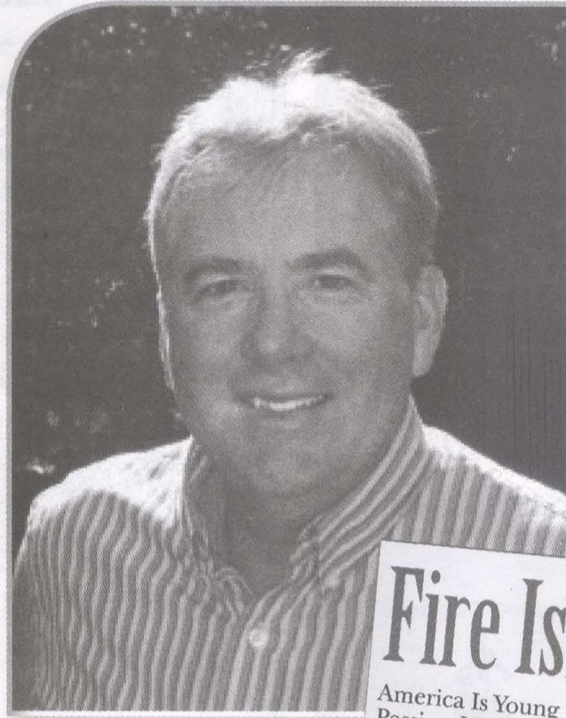
Stevens: As a child, my mother would bring me and my siblings to Robert Moses every nice summer day she could. It was an affordable "daycation" for a family of five. As a teenager, my buddies and I would hitchhike down to Field 2 and bodysurf all day.

It's still one of my favorite places in the world, and I love its remote beauty.

I also love the name: Fire Island. Not only does it have nice musical alliterative quality to it - Fire Island - but it reflects one of the themes of the story. We are all, as it were, Fire Islands. Inside each of us there burns the fire of life - the passion, the energy, the drive to live, to prosper, to procreate - yet, each of us is alone, an island unto ourselves. Despite what John Donne says in his famous poem that "no man is an island", we are. Despite our best efforts to connect with the people around us, that connection is never fully realized. At best, we're islands connected to the mainland by a bridge - (*the Robert Moses bridge!* to stay with the analogy) but we're still an island, a Fire Island.

FIT: What was the inspiration for your novel *Fire Island*?

Stevens: One night many years ago, I took the sunset walk with a tour group from Field 5 down to the Fire Island Lighthouse. The Park Service Ranger who led the tour sat us around a bonfire on the beach and told us stories about the heroic surfmen of the U.S. Lifesaving Service who risked their lives saving shipwreck survivors from that very beach. I sat mesmerized listening to her, and watching the little sparks rising up from the flames up into the night sky where the cool air eventually extinguished them. My book *Fire Island* was born of that pro-



found connection: between the night, the surfmen, the beach, the ocean, and those little sparks dying out in the night sky.

Fire Island the novel is a meditation, really, on what makes humans undertake the greatest sacrifice of all - that of risking their lives to save someone who basically is a complete stranger to them. That is the story of the surfmen, and of other first responders like them.

FIT: You say that the book is "faction." Can you explain what that means?

Stevens: *Faction* is what I've dubbed a mixture of both fiction and non-fiction. It's fictionalized history that has a mix of real characters and events and fictionalized characters and events that are drawn from fact.

FIT: *Fire Island* features a mixture of both real historical figures and fictional characters. How did this choice help you better tell your story?

Stevens: I love the format because it gives me the freedom to construct a story without being wholly constrained by historical precision.

FIT: Sailing and maritime culture play a huge role in your novel. Were you well-versed in maritime history before you wrote *Fire Island*?

Stevens: I caught the maritime history bug while producing my first documentary for public television: "Freedom's Glory: The Restoration of the Little Jennie." This was the story of my friend Bill

Perks, who lead the effort to restore a 100-year-old Chesapeake Bay oyster dredger - the Little Jennie.

FIT: How much research went into writing your novel?

Stevens: The research effort for the book was titanic. When I first started researching the story, it was basically pre-internet, so it had to be done the old-fashioned way: through libraries, Coast Guard archives, and the like. Plus, I was raising my kids and trying to grow my business. Looking back at it, I just shake my head in wonder and disbelief. Today, the historical archive of what's freely available on the Internet has grown exponentially, so that this type of research is so much easier - so, so, so, so much easier.

FIT: Is there any character, in particular, you found most fun to write?

Stevens: I guess I had the most fun writing the bad guy in the story - Frank Eck. As a young man, I actually knew someone named Frank Eck, and modeled the character after him. The real Frank Eck was a "dark mentor" of mine, if you will, when I started my career as a writer for the Long Island newspaper. He was this ink-stained, crotchety, freelance, local sports writer, who was always running some sort of con. He was a smaller-than-life chiseler, scratching out a living anyway he knew how - right out of central casting!

FIT: Are you working

on anything else?

Stevens: Currently I'm finishing up the first draft of my next book. It's called *Lacrosse*, another epic tale of historical "faction". This one takes place in the 1630s in what we know of as upstate New York, but was at the time the territory of the five nations of the Iroquois confederacy. (They called themselves the Haudenosaunee.) It covers the origins of the game I very much love, and a game that is very important to Long Island: Lacrosse.

FIT: Is there anything else you'd like us to know?

Stevens: Fire Island is a beautiful and fun vacation destination now, but not that long ago, it was a very different kind of place. My book *Fire Island* reaches back to that time and recreates it with drama and flair.

Fire Island by John J. Stevens is available from Amazon in both print and ebook formats. ■

