

Spring Festival
Saturday, March 30
 Periwinkle Place
 Shopping Center
 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
 Easter Egg Hunts,
 Games & Crafts,
 Food & Fun

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Book Review

The Manatee Murders

by Priscilla Friedersdorf

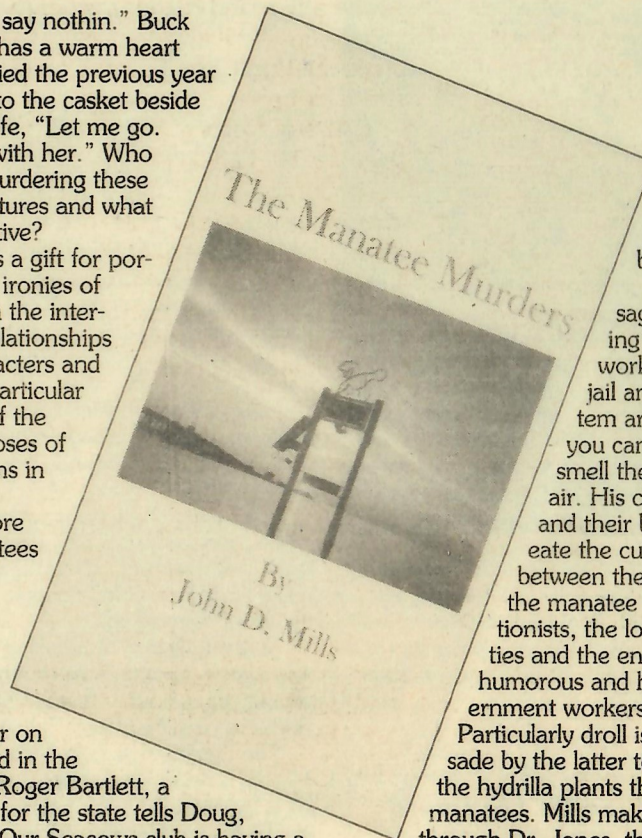
Aghast at the very title of this book, *The Manatee Murders*, I leafed through it quickly, and put it in the pile marked 'truly bizarre'. But the migration of these great ugly sea-cows, just now returning to swim in our warm waters, reminded me of the book by John D. Mills. In addition, Hollie Smith, owner of the Sanibel Island Book Shop, told me that the humorous mystery focuses on some important current issues.

Some of the pleasure in the book is in reading Mills' description of favorite local haunts in Southwest Florida.

Mills dedicates his book to "...the preservation of the manatee and Florida boaters." Doug Shearer, a detective with the Lee County Sheriff's Office, is awakened one morning with the news, "...three beheaded manatees are floating in Pine Island Sound." Buck Williams, a commercial fisherman from Matlacha, has already been apprehended but all the police have to go on is the grisly remains of a headless manatee, a bloody chain saw and "an old, crusty fisherman

who won't say nothin." Buck proved he has a warm heart when he tried the previous year to climb into the casket beside his dead wife, "Let me go. I'm going with her." Who could be murdering these gentle creatures and what is their motive?

Mills has a gift for portraying the ironies of life; both in the interpersonal relationships of his characters and the more particular instances of the cross purposes of local factions in Southwest Florida. More dead manatees are found; one in the water near "Ding" Darling Sanctuary and another on the dirt road in the sanctuary. Roger Bartlett, a prosecutor for the state tells Doug, "The Save Our Seacows club is having a press conference ... at the Punta Rassa boat ramp. I don't guess they'll miss a



chance to condemn the boaters ..."

Mills' passages describing the inner workings of the jail and court system are so good you can almost smell the stale, dank air. His characters and their biases delineate the current war between the boaters, the manatee preservationists, the local authorities and the endlessly humorous and hapless government workers.

Particularly droll is the crusade by the latter to destroy the hydrilla plants that feed the manatees. Mills makes his point through Dr. Jones, the vet, on the disagreement between boaters and preservationists and the hypocrisy

of the power companies as they pump warm water which attracts the big lazy creatures and also donate 'hundreds of thousands of dollars' to their preservation.

Some of the pleasure in the book is in reading Mills' description of favorite local haunts in Southwest Florida. The complications of Doug Shearer's love life give us a little look at the tension and quandary for him in choosing between Mary, a school teacher, and Amanda, a divorced hot number and his first love, who is living in the fast lane of Sarasota. Amanda, years before, had written him a 'dear Doug' letter in which she describes her goals in life, "...I want something more than being a cop's wife in little old Fort Myers."

Mills' serio-comic riff on the retribution of the attending nurse on a judge during Lazik surgery is another example of his wry humor. Mystery, romance, humor and the very real differences in viewpoints on saving the manatees make this book both highly entertaining and informative.

Mills is a native of Fort Myers, a fisherman, and a lawyer specializing in Criminal Defense and Personal Injury law. He began his career as a prosecuting attorney for the State of Florida. His first novel, *Reasonable and Necessary*, was published in 2000.

Author John Mills will sign copies of *The Manatee Murders* at the Sanibel Island Book Shop on Wednesday, April 3 from 6:30 to 8 p.m. For more information phone 472-5223.