

Book Review



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Key West's Mad Mick Murphy Returns in 'Free Range Institution'

By Reviewed by Shirrel Rhoades

"Free Range Institution"

By Michael Haskins

Five Star Publishing \$25.95

I always love a good mystery adventure and I love travel stories. Michael Haskins' new Mad Mick Murphy novel offers both.

You will remember Haskins' first Mick Murphy novel, "Chasin' the Wind," a wild ride with a crime-solving Key West freelance journalist. Well, Mick's back in a second book in the ongoing series, this one called "Free Range Institution."

Haskins takes the title from a song by Key West entertainer Scott Kirby, which has a chorus that goes: "I'm living in a free range institution/ It's a three-ring circus/ with 12-step programs to choose from/An open air asylum at its best."

When I say a good adventure, I'm referring to this tale of Colombian drug smugglers and corrupt city commissioners and government SWAT teams. When I say travel story, I mean an insider's tour of our fun-in-the-sun island of Key West.

You can read Haskins' book on two levels. Simply as a good mystery yarn in an exotic location, which is how the rest of America will approach it. And sure, it's that. The other level is with a local's delight in recognizing familiar people and places. Both those named and those whose names have been disguised.

Real people and locations (such as Ron Leonard and his Harpoon Harry's café) are intermingled with fictional ones (the publisher of a yellow newspaper who's nicknamed Snooper Scooper or a local watering hole tagged Nashville Saloon). And you'll likely recognize the tallest hotel on Duval Street, a conch-shell-pink six-story edifice that's dubbed here as Hotel Key West.

That's where the story starts, when Liam "Mick" Murphy and his Puerto Rican girlfriend Tita witness a jumper plummeting off the upper floor of the hotel to land practically at their feet. Being a curious journalist, Mick lies his way into the police and sheriff departments' joint investigation and quickly finds himself in a situation over his head. Next thing you know, Colombian gunsels want to kill him for what they think he might know.

Caught between the police chief, who is his friend, and the sheriff, who is his nemesis, with DEA agents and members of a Colombian drug cartel swarming about like angry wasps, our guy Mick turns to his ol' pal Norm for help. Norm is a shadowy character who might just belong to a government agency but will never admit it.

Before you're a third of the way through "Free Range Institution," the bodies start piling up. And the adrenaline is pumping through your veins.

Haskins is a gifted storyteller. And he knows his subject, having worked as a reporter for The Key West Citizen and as press liaison for the city.

Born in North Quincy, Massachusetts, he enjoyed a career as a journalist with Boston newspapers before trekking to California where he spent 28 years with ABC-TV's production department.

As he tells it, "I was fortunate to enter the world of journalism in its gritty days, when reporters came up the ranks from office boy to cub to reporter. My early years were like a black-and-white noir movie, no kidding."

During Haskins' California sojourn he also freelanced as a photojournalist for such publications as the Valley Green Sheet and for a rodeo company. "I shot a lot of pictures of cowboys getting thrown off horses," he says with a wry smile.

When Disney bought ABC, he packed it in and aimed for new horizons. "I was heading to La Paz, Mexico, but friends warned me that gringos might not be welcome after the upcoming election. I'm a devout coward so I headed for Key West instead."

Michael Haskins has been a fixture on the island since 1996. These days he does PR work and he's active in the Florida chapter of the Mystery Writers of America, serving on its board. Also he's a member of the International Thriller Writers.

With his Irish roots and leprechaun-like smile, it's sometimes hard to tell Michael Haskins from his character Mad Mick Murphy. He admits there are similarities. "I don't have red hair but I do have a beard. And I like cigars and Jameson whisky just like Mick. But I've given Mick a lot more courage than I have."

When did his alter ego first appear? "I started writing about Mick Murphy while going through a divorce in California," he told me over a con leche. "When I moved to Key West, he came with me -- him romantically on a boat, me driving here in a car with my dog."

Key West Citizen's publisher Paul Clarin gets an acknowledgement for advising Haskins on "handguns and many other things, like pizza, photography, blue money and auto repair." And Solares Hill's editor pops up in the story as an energetic British journalist known as Kram Rocket (hint, spell "Kram" backwards).

You'll also enjoy the return of fascinating characters from "Chasin' the Wind." For example, Padre Thomas, a wayward chain-smoking priest, who talks to angels and seems to have second sight. And Mick's sometimes girlfriend Tita, a curvy lawyer who is the kid sister of his college roommate.

"Free Range Institution," like its predecessor, is a good ride. If you want to share more Mad Mick Murphy adventures, a third book in the series ("Car Wash Blues") is waiting to be published. And a fourth ("Stairway to the Bottom") is currently in Michael Haskins' typewriter ... uh, computer.

You can pick up an autographed copy of "Free Range Institution" at local bookstores and other outlets. Or you can buy it at Amazon. Or go to www.gale.cengage.com/fivestar.

Key West Island Books at 523 Fleming St. has slated a book signing for Saturday, March 12 at 5 p.m.