

Key West Phantasmagoria

‘Chasin’ the Wind” by Michael Haskins is a very different kettle of very different fish. Despite his wildest dreams, there is nothing of Haskins, erstwhile public information for the City of Key West and business editor/writer for *The Citizen*, in his hero, a journalist named Liam Michael “Mad Mick” Murphy.

Except, perhaps, for a shared feeling for integrity. Integrity in the sense of seeking to get things right.

Also literary, in the sense that “Chasin’ the Wind,” with its Schooner Wharf kind of title, is true mystery writing, which has its own codes of purpose and excellence. This particular work comes with advance praise from the likes of Jeremiah Healey and Tom Corcoran.

I first coozied up to Haskin’s story-telling on the couch one Sunday last April, when Mad Mick made his first appearance in a story called “Murder in Key West” in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. The descriptions of the waterfront neighborhoods, the language of the real relationships conducted (and tested) there, resounded with what poet Wallace Stevens called, in a different context, the shock of recognition. The afternoon passed as in a dream, a dream within the dream of a real Key West on any Sunday.

Inevitably, the Cuba question is in the middle of this new Mad Mick mystery from Haskins. But not as a side-show, not out of nostalgia and not as entertainment. In the opening scene, Mick discovers the brutally beaten body of his buddy Tom, pulverized meat in a moaning bag. One word escapes Tom’s swollen lips: “Gusanos” — Havana slang for militant Cuban exiles in Miami.

The Key West chief of police this time around is Richard Dowlry, who blames Mick for bringing hoodlums from Miami to the Keys for a boat race to Havana being organized by him and his friends. Then Mick gets leaned on by a federal heavyweight and he decides to look into things on his own.

Not easy on an island. It isn’t long before a bunch of local pals are swarm-

Two new novels put the spotlight on Key West

by Mark Howell

‘Cayo Hueso/Cuba Libre” is a political thriller by former Key West reporter and associate editor Michael Ritchie.

“Chasin’ the Wind” is a mystery novel by former Key West business editor and publicist Michael Haskins.

Both books are now on sale. Both books, one way or another, are bound to cause a stir.

ing among the alleyways and bars of downtown in search of clues and blood. What they discover is that the Feds are protecting the perpetrators (for the record, Jose, Carlos and Pepe). With the American government turning its back on the law, the independent Conch Republic — with the help of Cuban police officials, also of an ex-priest who talks with the angels and is amazingly accurate about the future — can settle the score itself.

“Chasin’ the Wind” has received all sorts of blog attention due to Haskins’ instinctual skills at self-promotion. At a site called “Genre Go-Round reviews,” Harriet Klausner writes with insight: “The storyline is fast-paced as the Feds protect the killing *gusanos* while the locals demand justice from their government but turn elsewhere to achieve it. Fans will ponder, did Mick and crew commit treason by going to Cuba and did the *gusanos* commit murder since the U.S. government ‘sanctioned’ them and the government makes the law?” Calling it an “offbeat thriller,” Klausner adds that it will “remind ancient boomers of Phil Ochs’ ‘Ballad of William Worth’ whose refrain is ‘You are living in the free world, in the free world you must stay.’”

Committing treason by

going to Cuba ... the U.S. government sanctioning murder ... the words “ancient boomers” ... these are very big deals indeed and it is fun to have them wrapped up in an easy-to-read, tautly written adventure that has a looming background we might recognize. In the words of one of Haskins’ fans, the Edgar nominee Megan Abbot: “A dark menace rippling beneath the placid city of shaggy bars, flowing rum and the sound of rain on tin roofs.”

On one Web site, “Crime Always Pays” (an ingenious reference to the persistence of mystery writers), there is a page called the Rubber Hose Interview — subtitled “Ya Wanna Do It Here Or Down the Station, Punk?” — in which Declan Burke posts a question to Haskins:

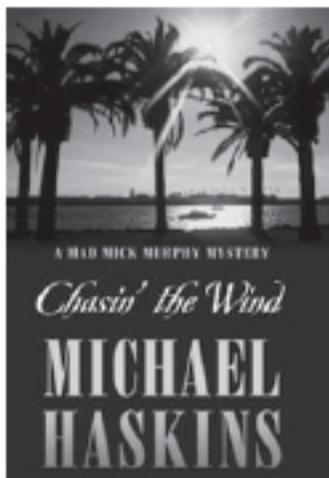
“If God appears and says you can only write or read, which would it be?”

Responds Haskins: “I’d be at the gates of Hell — which would mean I’d lived a life of sin but maybe one worth reading about.”

A remark, actually, of integrity. □

“Chasin’ the Wind” by Michael Haskins, published by Five Star at \$25.95 in hardcover, is to be featured at book signings with the author at two locations where it will presently be available: From 5 to 7 p.m. on Saturday, April 5, at Key West Island Bookstore, 513 Fleming St., and from 4 to 7 p.m. on Friday, April 25, at the Hog’s Breath Saloon, 400 Front St.

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“Yuppies and wannabe reggae kings and queens spilled out of Jimmy Buffett’s Magaritaville club. They were trying to exist in the nirvana that Buffett had created in his music, including Jimmy. Boisterous laughter wafted from the ground floor of the Bull, a bar with large, gaping windows that opened toward Duval; the second-floor porch of the Whistle bar, upstairs from the Bull, was full of partyers yelling and whistling at the small packs of girls walking by. A light dusting of sweet marijuana smoke skipped by on the breeze as I made my way along the busy street.”

— from “Chasin’ the Wind” by Michael Haskins