

# Historical Mysteries from The South—An Interview with Susan Diamond Riley

By Dina Schiff Massachi

Susan Diamond Riley writes middle-grade historical fiction mysteries set primarily in the Carolina Lowcountry. Her novels, *The Sea Island's Secret* (University of South Carolina Press, 2019) and *The Sea Turtle's Curse* (Koehler Books, 2020) are the first two books in the Delta & Jax Mystery series, with a third book currently in the works. Mrs. Riley was kind enough to share her time with *RISE* in order to help us learn a little more about writing historical mysteries, her southern inspirations, and where—or perhaps a better word is when—Delta and Jax are going next.

**I'm very excited about your newest Delta and Jax book, *The Sea Turtle's Curse*. Can you tell us a little about it?**

*The Sea Turtle's Curse* follows the continuing adventures of tween siblings Delta and Jax Wells. In this book, the duo become disaster-magnets after they discover an ancient carving of a sea turtle on the beach of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Now they must uncover forgotten American history and learn the importance of passing on stories as they travel throughout the Carolina Lowcountry—and through time itself—in a race to break the turtle's curse before a hurricane destroys their island home!

**This isn't your first Delta and Jax book. *The Sea Island's Secret* came first. Do they need to be read in order?**

In the first Delta & Jax Mystery, *The Sea Island's Secret*, the kids find a human skeleton and a mysterious message-in-a-bottle in the salt marsh, sending them on a hunt for a long-forgotten treasure from the time of the American Civil War. Each book involves a stand-alone mystery that is resolved by the end of the final chapter. Even so, though, the books are written chronologically and the overarching story of the siblings' lives will make better sense to readers who read them in order. For example, Delta and Jax deal more with their sibling relationship in the first book. By book two, *The Sea Turtle's Curse*, they are each coming to understand themselves and their own place in our world. Plus, they've made a new friend—Darius—in this new book. Darius's family will continue to play a substantial role in upcoming adventures as readers learn more about the Gullah culture that still plays such a vital role in Lowcountry society. The Gullah people, by the way, are descendants of the freed slaves who once worked on plantations in the Lowcountry.

**Darius sounds fascinating! I imagine that some people have never heard about Gullah culture. How do you decide what historical elements to include? How do you decide what parts to fictionalize, and how do you make that fictionalization clear to your readers?**

I am continuously amazed by the significant role that the Carolina Lowcountry played in our country's history, and by how much of that history has been forgotten. For example, did you know that, for more than twenty years, the Spanish capitol of our entire continent stood on the grounds of what is now Parris Island Marine Recruiting Station, just across Port Royal Sound from Hilton Head Island? *The Sea Turtle's*

Curse sees Delta and Jax actually “visiting” the Spanish Santa Elena Colony in the late 1500’s, as well as witnessing some of the Native Americans that lived in the region during that time.

My goal is to highlight some of these forgotten moments in history, found through my own research and exploration of the American South, and present them in a way that readers young and old will find entertaining and relevant to our world today. Of course, I sometimes need to embellish or fictionalize some of the historical facts and events in my books. For clarification, though, each Delta & Jax Mystery includes a “Fact or Fiction?” section at the end that distinguishes the real history from my own storytelling.

*The Sea Island’s Secret* explores another one of these forgotten moments in our country’s past, the Battle of Port Royal, which happened on the now-calm waters right off the coast of modern-day Hilton Head Island during the Civil War. This battle changed the course of the war for the North but, more importantly, allowed the island to be one of the first places in the South where slaves were freed. These freed people even began their own self-governed town, Mitchelville, becoming the first freed slaves to do so. But that’s a story for another book!

**You currently live on Hilton Head, as do Delta’s and Jax’s grandparents. What about the island inspires you?**

I actually lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, when I wrote my first Delta & Jax Mystery set on Hilton Head Island. The research that I did writing that book convinced my husband and me that we wanted to make the island our full-time home. This part of the country is filled with hidden and forgotten history that, as a storyteller and history-lover, I feel is begging to be told! Besides the fascinating history, though, there is a distinct culture to the area in terms of setting (ocean waves crashing on the shore and live oaks dripping with wisps of Spanish moss), inhabitants (Gullah families who have called this island home for more than a century, new Northern transplants anxious for milder temperatures, and birds and sea life everywhere you look), and the food (fresh oyster roasts on the beach and buttery grits). The meandering path of creeks through the salt marsh is a perfect analogy for life in the Lowcountry—we’re not in such a hurry to get where we’re going, because we realize there is so much to see and appreciate along the way.

**There is a third book in the works. Can you tell us anything about it?**

Yes, I’m currently working on the third Delta & Jax book. This one will involve the Revolutionary War—a time when Hilton Head Island was fighting for American independence, yet its neighbor Daufuskie Island was loyal to the British crown. In a sense, that war was a civil war in our country, as well, pitting family members and friends against one another. I’m sure that Delta and Jax will learn a lot that relates to their modern world, and I hope that readers will take away a message of history-based hope for the future.

**Dina Massachi** teaches at UNC Charlotte’s English and American Studies departments and has a deep love for children’s literature.