

Where Is Joe Merchant? Short Guide

Where Is Joe Merchant? by Jimmy Buffett

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Characters

The main characters, Frank and Trevor, are both ordinary and predictable. It is the supporting characters, such as Desdemona, her friend Fernando, Joe Merchant, and even Rudy Breno who stand out as memorable in this novel.

Joe Merchant is a dark soul who goes over the edge to join the world of hired killers. Joe Merchant's character borrows heavily from real dead rock legends such as Jim Morrison, who curiously share the same initials, though the name selection may have actually been a tribute to a living musician, Jimmy Merchant. Both Desdemona's and Trevor's composite view of Joe point out further similarities.

Desdemona describes him as one of the most gifted and demented people she had ever met, a man ruled by the reptilian side of his brain. One minute he was the life of the party, and the next he would be trying to rip somebody's head off. He was dark haired, good looking, wild and crazy. Trevor's recollections of her brother's self-destruction dominated by his licentious appetite for drugs and sex and his violent outbursts, cast in him very much in the Morrison mold. As the novel moves toward conclusion Trevor and Frank stand outside a nightclub and hear what is unmistakably the guitar licks of her lost brother, "playing an electrifying rendition of the classical instrumental break of his signature song," which begs comparison to the innovative instrumental break of the "long version" of The Door's "Light My Fire," a rock music classic.

The continually shifting setting allows for a large ensemble of secondary characters whose fantastic quirks personify the curious fixations and passions of larger society. Such a character is Fernando, an island entertainer who believes he is the reincarnation of Ricky Ricardo and is aggravated by his friend Desdemona's insistence that a person cannot channel a television character. In this playful exchange the Buffett "fruitcake" lady displays the limits of her own tolerance as she pronounces judgment on Fernando's grasp of reality.

Social Concerns

Where Is Joe Merchant? is the first novel by folk pop artist Jimmy Buffett following his best-selling collection of short fiction, *Tales from Margaritaville* (1989). Buffett proves himself a capable novelist, easily filling the full canvas of longer fiction with an engaging lyrical adventure set in the Caribbean islands near Hispaniola. As is true with the music of Jimmy Buffett, it reflects the captivating grace and rhythm of island life. Buffett's passion for the islands, the sea, and navigation (both air and sea), brings authenticity to the exotic setting of this adventure novel.

The novel's hero, Frank Bama, served in Vietnam as a seaplane pilot.

After the service he obtains the Goose Gruman seaplane of his dreams which he christens the *Hemisphere Dancer* and uses for his business as a sport fishing guide and a spotter for commercial fishermen.

Bama radiates confidence, affability, and wit as he faces a steady stream of difficulties and danger. When he makes an account of his varied skills, he reckons himself deficient in only two categories: managing his emotions and his *Where Is Joe Merchant?*

business. His fishing guide business has fallen on hard times and the repo man is after Bama's seaplane. The only viable option for keeping the *Hemisphere Dancer* is to head for the remote region of Kodiak Island, Alaska.

Initially, the unexpected visit of his old girlfriend, Trevor Kane, seeking his assistance on the eve of his departure to Alaska, is an unwelcomed complication. However, he senses that a last chance for happiness is being presented to him, and embarks on a course which will provide new opportunities to prove his love and commitment to Trevor.

Trevor had left Frank six years earlier when her rock star brother, Joe Merchant, took a suicidal leap from a yacht. Frank and Trevor's relationship had deteriorated into a series of fights and flights; then in her grief over her brother's death she broke off with Frank and moved to New Orleans.

After six years Trevor receives a bizarre letter from someone who had known Joe years ago and believes that he is still alive. Trevor asks Frank to assist her in reaching Boomstown, a remote Caribbean community, so that she may locate the mysterious letter writer. While their early relationship was troubled by Bama's escapism and poor communication, the mature Frank Bama faces his trials with courage — even his most difficult trial, being emotionally responsive to Trevor.

Frank enjoins the quest to help Trevor as well as his buddy Blanton Meyercord, who is running from the authorities after making an "environmental statement" with some explosives at the filming site of a jet ski commercial. The adventure gets into full swing



when a mad killer named Charlie Fabian hijacks Frank's plane, and a sinister Colonel Cairo, who once mentored Joe Merchant as a would-be mercenary, plots to kill Trevor in his pursuit of the Kane family fortune. As an action adventure novel there is no shortage of violence and the pace is quick. To its credit, farcical characters and storylines are interwoven, giving the story a lighter, humorous tone.

One of the highlights of the novel is Frank Bama's narrative of the region from a sea pilot's point of view, detailing the physical Caribbean environment, waterways, reefs, fishing, and weather patterns. The knowledge of local lore and history which Bama has amassed during his career as a charter pilot provides a framework for understanding island culture. Both the social and geographical settings depict many of the transitions and influences which have shaped the modern Caribbean.

The impact of the tourist industry, business exploitation, and the arrival of satellite dish television have dramatically changed the face of paradise.

One island town featured in the novel is quickly transformed by the arrival of an American sponge company. However, when the company's president suddenly dies, the young corporation abruptly shuts down and the town soon reverts to its former character. A black Cadillac convertible, once owned by the sponge magnate and the only automobile on the island, becomes the property of an island preacher and then is passed on to his brother who paints it pink and hoists it up on stilts above his bar. What had been an emblem of industry and prosperity in a white man's possession quickly becomes an emblem of relaxation and whimsy in an islander's. The islanders maintain a "roll with the punches" attitude, not taking their economic swings too seriously.

In a similar vein, Buffett's asides reveal his grief over the unbridled development of Key West. He harkens back to simpler times, before the 1970s, when Key West was genuinely the bad boys' playground, home to all breeds of social expatriates and renegades.

Now he bemoans its transition from paradise to a tourist spot where visitors come to drink in the ambiance of a way of life that's no longer present.

The novel also makes plain his environmental concerns regarding the carnage of the coast and the habitats of wild life. In true Buffett style he employs the tale of the Jet Ski Killer, a.k.a. Blanton Meyercord to voice his anger at the reckless misuse of the environment. Blanton is an appropriate voice for protest; he is no Northern liberal newcomer looking for a cause, but an authentic Floridian, a local guy who makes his living as a fishing guide. He has spent his life in partnership with the marine life, and reacts with explosive rage when outsiders exploit and maim the environment that is a central part of his life.

Techniques

Buffett's storytelling style employs exaggeration, escapism, pathos, and humor to explore the stresses and complexities of modern life. His work in print expands the stories and spirit of his music. *Where Is Joe Merchant?* is peppered with characters and situations previously introduced in Buffett's music and stories. Desdemona has appeared in his short fiction, *Tales from Margaritaville*, and in his song, "Fruit cakes," while Blanton Meyercord resembles the environmental terrorist portrayed in a song from Barometer Soup called "The ballad of Skip Willey." Lines and titles frequently borrowed from Buffett songs appear throughout the novel.

Where Is Joe Merchant?



Themes

The novel makes a weak stab at portraying the relational dynamics of a couple who have separated but are still in love. Frank and Trevor had a passionate involvement that crumbled in the absence of good communication.

Frank possesses no insight on how to reach out emotionally to a woman in turmoil. He is a stereotypical male who has never learned to express his feelings or emotionally connect with the needs of his partner. Frank resolves to make an earnest effort with Trevor and reclaim the relationship he thought he had lost. At the story's close he manages to share his heart with her and their relationship holds the promise of permanence as they establish themselves in wilds of Alaska.

The female perspective is not well voiced. It is sketched out in Trevor's quick prejudgment of Frank, which belies her low expectations of his dependability. Once the couple has relocated Trevor writes to friends that Frank talks more and she is happy.

This happily-ever-after postscript salutes good communication as the key to relational happiness.

The tropical allure of paradise at a reasonable price and an easy commute from Miami has enabled Jimmy Buffet to become an icon of Gauguinesque escapism to a stress-ridden society. The central character of the story, Frank Bama, lives the male escapist fantasy.

By occupation he is a seaplane pilot, able to lift above the cares of the world at will. He leaves the earth "when things get too complicated. When I'm sitting at the controls of my flying boat over the ocean, there is no sense of urgency. The tempo allows me to do what needs to be done. When I am standing on the earth, I realize how fast things are really moving." But for Bama, paradise has become corrupted by exploitation and hard times. When Where Is Joe Merchant?

his seaplane, the Hemisphere Dancer, is being sought by the repo man Bama turns to a new paradise, one still possessing purity and possibility, Kodiak Island, Alaska as his next destination.

In the past escapism undermined his relationship with Trevor, taking flight when things got too complicated or uncomfortable. As the hour of Bama's Alaskan departure approaches, his plans become challenged by the needs of others — his old lover, Trevor, and his buddy, Blanton Meyercord. However reluctant at first, he does not desert Trevor when she arrives needing his help. He has reached a point where he no longer wants to escape the responsibilities of a relationship.



A destructive brand of escapism is depicted in the life Joe Merchant. As a youth drugs and rock and roll offered Joe an escape from the military world to which his father had conscripted him. As his music rocketed him to stardom he continued in his escapism through drug abuse, to no satisfaction.

In a perverse twist of character he escapes the persona of Joe Merchant to become Charlie Fabian, soldier in a murderous legion. This escape comes with an expensive price tag. As well as forfeiting his soul he unwittingly paves the way for his mother's death and endangers his sister as his new master, Colonel Adrian Cairo seeks control of the family's money. He comes to the realization that he and his family are doomed if he stays in league with the Colonel and his survival now depends on escaping the life that the Colonel created for him as Charlie Fabian. His old identity is awakened when he encounters his signature song on an airplane. The revived Joe Merchant recovers some semblance of decency as he assists Frank in a confrontation with Cairo's thugs, and then foils Cairo's quest to have his missing arm magically restored.

Where Is Joe Merchant? takes note of two forms of media escapism. A subplot running through the novel lampoons the societal blight of yellow journalism, a crass type of escapism attained by an unflinching disregard for dignity and reality. The personification of sleaze, Lighthouse reporter Rudy Breno engages in a pathetic chase of the Jet Ski Killer and Joe Merchant throughout the Caribbean. The episodes involving Breno and his publication make a loathsome mockery of the tabloid industry.

The theme of man's quest for the supernatural is handled with the same playful lightheartness that characterize its treatment in Buffett's music, simply put, "don't take yourself too seriously." Bama only articulates a reverential attitude when navigating his way through perilous weather or extreme danger. Then he offers quick homage to St. Christopher and the Lord sees him through the present trial. Conventional faith, however, is not the prevailing route to the supernatural in this novel. Desdemona, a self-described conduit for messages from "beyond," transports the story into the realm of the mystical. Her mission to set the Cosmic Muffin on a course which will land her somewhere in the Pleiades serves as a vehicle between the mundane and the fantastic.

A white dolphin named Albion explains ancient mysteries of heaven and earth to her and she routinely sits in an innertube at the Healing Hole. There she receives messages from the Generators, spacemen from Pleiades, who throw her clues about her destiny like so many jigsaw pieces. Her bizarre claims and her obsession with building a crystal-powered rocket ship brand her quickly as a wacko. But as a familiar phrase from one of Buffett's songs states "if we weren't all crazy we'd all go insane." The novel's exploration of the mysteries of the universe is done from the same whimsical outlook prevalent in much of Buffett's music. Desdemona's attraction to the stars and mythology express an unbridled wonder of the universe.

Adaptations

The significance of *Tales from Margaritaville* and *Where Is the Merchant?* is tied directly to Jimmy Buffett's popularity as a musician and his impact on the music industry. The books, written primarily as entertainment for his fans, are full of references to Buffett's lyrics, expanding on characters and themes which originated in his music. *Tales from Margaritaville* is especially valuable for a serious Buffett aficionado seeking deeper insight into the singer's imagination and life. Students of popular culture will want to note the interplay between Buffett's books, music and the music culture of the last two decades. However, the most fascinating aspect of Buffett's work is his creation of the Margaritaville ambiance which has stimulated the popularity of margaritas, Caribbean music, Key West, and beach-style hedonism.

These works should not be overlooked by those interested in the Caribbean and Gulf Coast regional fiction, as they provide some vivid glimpses of life along the Gulf Coast and suggest that the spirit of Margaritaville is not purely concocted.



Key Questions

The operative concept in Buffett's career is "entertainment." In his writing, as in his music, his primary goal is to bring enjoyment to his audience. A forum for discussing Buffett's work might attempt to capture the Margaritaville ambience. Hosting it in a relaxed setting, preferably with a congenial group on a porch, serving plenty of refreshments, and playing Buffett's music would create the proper setting for delving into Buffett's books and music.

1. Buffett's fiction is riddled with characters that were first introduced to his audience through his music. First listen to selections from Buffett's musical repertoire, then review the characters in *Tales from Margaritaville* and *Where Is Joe Merchant?* Note which characters were first created in his songs. What characters appear to be revisions of characters from his music?
2. Do the characters work as well in written form? How do they compare with characters that appear only in print?
3. Choose three characters from *Tales from Margaritaville* who have more stories to tell and discuss their further adventures.
4. What are some of Buffett's dominating themes? Which stories and songs express them best?
5. Compare Buffett's factual life with Buffett's fictional narrator.

Literary Precedents

Buffett has been strongly influenced by literary figures such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and his brother-in-law, novelist Tom McGuane. In recent years he has enjoyed the works of Bruce Chatwin, thus Buffett's playful use of myth and magic in *Where Is Joe Merchant?* may reflect some of Chatwin's and Marquez's influence.

The action scenes were compared by Entertainment Weekly to Robert Ludlum's work. Further comparison with Ludlum can be made in Buffett's villains, the renegade demagogue, Colonel Cairo and the lost soul with the bizarre tattoos on his eyelids, Charlie Fabian, though neither are quite as malevolent as Ludlum's creations. The comedic elements also set *Where Is Joe Merchant?* apart from more intense action/suspense novels.

Related Titles

Tales from Margaritaville reflects on the longings of the human spirit and the costs and rewards of their pursuit.

The collection opens with a modern cowboy's trek from his Wyoming home to the haunts of his heroes in Hannibal, Missouri and Graceland, eventually finding the place he had dreamed of all his life, a slice of Gulf Stream paradise called Margaritaville. In the course of his travels he stumbles on the tiny Gulf town of Heat Wave, Alabama, which serves as the locale for the following five stories, simple regional tales of life on the Gulf Coast. These are followed by a pair of stories set in Margaritaville, followed by four autobiographical sketches in a section called "Son of a Sailor."

The collection shows the force of wanderlust, propelling people to embark on personal quests for fulfillment.

The stories collectively portray a South whose distinction lies in its capacity to provide satisfaction. As one resident of Snake Bite Key remarks "there is no middle ground on Snake Bite, people either stay there or leave it to see the world. However, the ones who stay are just as happy as the ones who go."

Throughout the work Buffett allows his characters to follow their hearts, realize their dreams, and enjoy the adventure of life. The tales are fairly simple in construction and plot and the quests all reach a satisfying conclusion.

Like the stories found in Jimmy Buffett's musical repertoire, they support his well established good-time persona as well as his more reflective and literary bents. Buffett's tales, whether musical or literary, are shaped by the muse of the sea and the flavor of life found in the Bayou and Caribbean.

The journal and letters of Tully Mars disclose his observations and musings as he works his way down the Gulf Coast in Tales from Margaritaville's first story "Take Another Road." As a cowboy he is the emblem of both Americana and romance; he leaves Heartache, Wyoming behind, and rides off on his horse, Mr. Twain, to see the ocean and find the land of his dreams.

The man who earnestly starts out on a quest at the story's opening becomes reduced to a sight-seeing vehicle as the story progresses.

Tales from Margaritaville is saturated with characters typical of those found in Buffett's songs. They are colorful, slightly exotic, frequently nomadic personalities. Some of these transients move smoothly from song to story to novel panning out more completely with each rendition, like the affable aging hippie-turn-New Ager, Desdemona, and her ex-husband, rocker Freddy Purvis. Desdemona is referred to repeatedly in Buffett's music, particularly "Fruitcakes," appears occasionally in Tales from Margaritaville, and is a central character in Where is Joe Merchant?



The autobiographical sketches that close the collection contain Buffett's most poignant prose. He recounts how he met Gregorio Fuentes, of Hemingway's "old man and the sea," when he attached himself to a production company filming a documentary on Hemingway in Cuba. Other sketches recount Buffett's sea adventures and serve as odes to good memories with his sailing buddies, some of whom have passed away. "A Gift for the Buccaneer" tells of exploring the ruins of a pirate's lodgings with his seven-year-old daughter near Cancun, Mexico. A touching appreciation of life and people emerge in the final chapters.

The book opens with Tully Mars embarking on his journey on the back of Mr. Twain, a fitting picture of Buffett's literary hero leading him off on his literary journey. The stories that comprise "The Heat Wave Chronicles" offer a mix of humor, love, and wistful glimpses of life on the Bayou. "Off to see the Lizard," "Boomerang Love," and "The Swamp Creature Let One In" provide the details of small town life in the South in a manner reminiscent of Walker Percy. In "Boomerang Love," a couple of ex-sweethearts rekindle their romance in the midst of a hurricane. The hurricane was a scenario Percy used when his characters sense and senses were most alive. "The Swamp Creature" also shares similarities with Percy's South, ranging from its civilized country club golf course setting to the untamed elements of the swamp. Even the characters have a Percy look, a stereotypical obnoxious Northerner and a good old boy who finally gets his vindication with the collaboration of his black chum from childhood who's now head caddie. Percy's hero in *The Second Coming* has the word-play name Will Barrett; Buffett's caddie's name has a similar ring, Willett Rainer Snow.

There is a strong measure of Hemingway's influence in Buffett, if not in his writing, then certainly in his life.

As an eight-year-old Buffett first read *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) and has done so repeatedly over the years. This book has a unique place in his heart because it reminds him of his relationship with his own grandfather who was a steamship captain. The essay "Hooked in the Heart" which tells of his meeting the old man, Gregorio Fuentes, testifies that the connection between Buffett and Hemingway lies in shared passions.



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