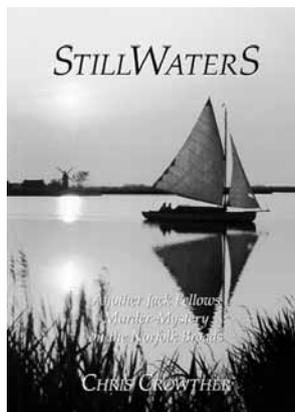


**By Keith Muscott:**

## *Still Waters*, by Chris Crowther



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These still waters certainly run deep. When Sally Beckett returns from a three-month backpacking break taken to forget a failed love affair and an unsatisfying job in the City, she finds that a grandfather she never knew she had has died in suspicious circumstances and bequeathed her a Broads boatyard and a rambling old house. Grandfather Charles was found by Broads Navigation Ranger and ex-Met detective Jack Fellows, floating face down in a reed bed after he had fallen from his beautiful old yacht *Ace of Hearts*. Fallen or pushed? The police prefer the second possibility and Sally is their main suspect.

Sally is propelled into a murky Broads waterworld which you, dear reader, will not have met on holiday there. It includes a satisfyingly long list of more or less suspicious characters, including Henry Higgs, the truculent boatyard manager, who has been kicked out by his wife for his womanising and seems to be siphoning money from the business, possibly helped by unhappy young Jayne Howlett, the book-keeper whose relationship with him may be more than strictly professional.

Then there is the attractive but cool lady GP of a certain age, Helen Newson, who resents her family's loss of the boatyard years before and seems to have secrets she is desperate to hide. And what about the two old villagers, Mollie Jenkins, who becomes Sally's housekeeper, and her friend Agatha Howlett, who, as common gossip avers, would have been burned as witches a few centuries ago? They refer to the moon as 'the Parish Lantern', routinely see 'Corpse Candles' glowing over the black water, and habitually converse with the dead. And will Sally ever discover the identity of the hooded figure in the black dinghy who trains binoculars on the house?

On the other hand, there is the handsome and personable eco-engineer Ian Haverson with his plans to maintain the wind-pump turbine that powers the house and electrify the yard's hire fleet – and Sally too, given half a chance. But the smouldering young DC Bailey sees that there is a lot more to her than being just a murder suspect. Which way is a girl to turn?

Sally loves the decaying old house, Marsh Haven, that can be reached only by water and which she insists on living in right away, to the alarm of the locals. (I knew it was a bad mistake for her to read *Ghosts and Legends of Broadland* before turning in on the first night.)

I should not list aspects of the book like this, because Chris Crowther has the skill to allow them all to unfold naturally and convincingly. The story is told with a deceptive ease and simplicity that is paradoxically difficult to achieve. It is well-plotted with plenty of cliff-hangers and in the end he attains the difficult mystery writer's goal of a surprising but believable denouement.

Jack Fellows is a likeable sleuth: avuncular and easy-going, but a regular terrier for the truth and the despair of his wife Audrey, who he is forever taking on his detecting jaunts, never to deliver his promise of a picnic *en route*. One can imagine enjoying a pint of Adnams with him in the bar of *The Boot and Oyster* while discussing shady goings-on.

Boats and nautical matters pervade the story. Sally learns to handle the launch on her own and is taught by Ian to sail the lugsail dinghy; the distant rumble of *HMS Hood* exploding and the throb of the high-revving diesels of a *Schnellboot* somewhere off the East Coast reverberate down through the years; knots and ropes provide Jack with essential clues to solving a murder (you'll never secure your halliards again without reflecting on this); and a victim's body is hauled up into the church belltower using a block and tackle (rove to advantage or disadvantage? I wondered).

These days thriller writers relish the gruesome detail of bloody murder, and glory in new and grotesque ways of perpetrating it. In its blend of mystery and vividly realised background the different focus of *Still Waters* reminded me of the popular novels of KM Peyton which we enjoyed many years ago. And not a bad thing, either.

Over two dozen charming and accomplished illustrations punctuate the text, drawn by Sarah Rogers, who has allowed us to use her work in past bulletins. A number of factual and historical elements in the story are explained by the author on his website. A thoroughly enjoyable read. **KM**

*(Chris Crowther flew aeroplanes and helicopters for a living in Europe and Africa. He now lives in Norfolk and sails his Drascombe Scaffie on the Broads.)*