



# Fortune Island

A NOVEL BY  
**E.M. SCHORB**

Advanced Praise for  
***FORTUNE ISLAND***

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“A many-stranded storyline, a cast of colorful personalities, and a pervasive sense of place: These qualities make *Fortune Island* a good, strong read. Here is a fit companion for the beach umbrella, the front-porch rocking chair, and the mellow bedside lamp. E.M. Schorb creates a world in which much happens—and all of it to the point.”

—**Fred Chappell**

Recipient of the *Thomas Wolfe Prize*, Former North Carolina Poet Laureate

“*Fortune Island* is an exquisite reading adventure. We are hooked from the start by the poignant situation of William Makespace Thackery McQueen, and are compelled forward both by the remarkable story and by the very human characters whom we love and identify with, not, despite their flaws, but because of their flaws---Bill McQueen himself, the beautiful and mysterious Susannah, and the remarkable Jessie Judas, whose life story is the real centerpiece of this skillfully written book. The setting of the Outer Banks is vividly detailed and contains the best description of Hurricane Hazel I have ever read. And finally there is a wonderfully despicable snake-handling villain, The Rev. Jason Pettitt Cogburn, who makes a magnificent foil to the other characters. This is a must read.”

—**Anthony S. Abbott**

Author of the Novello Award Winner, *Leaving Maggie Hope*

“I loved *Fortune Island*! I was driven by the suspense, and by the phrases that freeze you in place, mesmerizing you by what has been laid bare. E. M. Schorb isn’t a prize-winning poet for nothing.”

—**Joy Calderwood**

Reviewers’ Choice Reviews

“A masterpiece in scope, characterization and drama, *Fortune Island* captures the imagination and excites the mind. A masterful achievement!”

—**Pat Mullan**

Author of *Childhood Hills*

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### **EPIGRAPHS**

“The Darkling Thrush: A Centennial Appreciation”

by A.E. Stallings

“The Alsop Review”

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*The Outer Banks Of North Carolina, 1584-1958*

by David Stick

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University of North Carolina Press

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### **SONGS**

“Don’t Sit Under The Apple Tree (With Anyone Else But Me)”

by Charlie Tobias, Lew Brown and Sam H. Stept

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“You Belong to Me,”

by Pee Wee King, Chilton Price and Redd Stewart

Hal Leonard Corporation

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### **POEMS**

“The Diamond Merchant,” Voices Israel, Tel Aviv

“The Souls,” Stand, London, England

“An Appalachian Tale,” The Coe Review, USA

“Leadbelly,” Frank, Paris, France

“The Sex of Water,” The North American Review, USA

Thomas Hardy's famous poem, "The Darkling Thrush," first appeared in print a couple of days prior to the last day of the 19th century. Hardy was watching the sun set on one century, and dawn on another.

*The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.*

As Hardy did, we enter a new century (and millennium) with trepidation. May we find we have better grounds for hope now than Europe, on the brink of two devastating world wars, did a hundred years ago.

*The Darkling Thrush: A Centennial Appreciation*  
A.E. Stallings, "The Alsop Review"

*He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune . . .*  
Francis Bacon

*Stretching along the North Carolina coast for more than 175 miles, from the Virginia line to below Cape Lookout, is a string of low, narrow, sandy islands known as the Outer Banks. They are separated from the mainland by broad, shallow sounds, sometimes as much as thirty miles in breadth, and are breached periodically by narrow inlets which are forever opening and closing.*

*The Outer Banks of North Carolina*  
David Stick

# Chapter One

January 2000

**T**he Lufthansa flight attendant, a tall blue-eyed blonde, strode down the aisle in her dark blue suit with its white, yellow, and black signature scarf a half hour after takeoff from Berlin and surveyed her passengers, mostly French and German, going and coming on business or pleasure. But she took special notice of a rangy man with dark hair and pale skin sitting toward the middle of the plane, by a window, an empty aisle seat beside him. He stood out from the crowd—for the second time, the first time being when he boarded, wearing a long taupe cashmere overcoat, and a Versace silk scarf—she had an eye for these things—tucked under his chin. When he boarded, she had noticed first how handsome he was, then how well-mannered, his Borsalino fedora crushed in his free hand. He had no bag, only a stack of papers and a magazine gripped outside his laptop. It looked as if he had been working up until the last minute before boarding. Now he sat tall in his seat, looking out at the tops of the sunset sand-colored clouds.

Another thing that drew her attention to him was that he was wearing evening dress, black tie, whereas almost uniformly the other passengers were travelling in blue jeans, leather jackets, and, in general, motley. His dark, even features and aquiline nose could have been Levantine, but his blue eyes sparkled with unmistakable Irish mischief. Adding things up, she decided that he must be an American.

His name was David Perle—she had checked. He had a loose, confident way with his long body, like a cowboy; otherwise he was thoroughly urbane in manner, a man who must have travelled widely in his youthful forty-odd years, a man who had been around.

As she approached him, the plane took a speed-bump and dropped, and the whiskey sour another attendant must have brought him flew from

his hand. She almost caught the glass, got turned, and landed in the seat beside him. The plane steadied. She found his glass wedged between them, got back into the aisle and, with a slight risibility, asked him if she could replace his drink. "You can keep the next drink," she said. "There's little chance of two mishaps between Berlin and Paris. Of course, we have a stopover in Frankfurt. And you can get in trouble there. I should know, it's my hometown." She laughed.

"Oh, really?" He brushed his lapels.

"Yes," she said, then retrieved a fresh drink and a towel. As she patted his lapels, she said, "It's unusual to see anyone flying in evening dress."

"I'm on a tight schedule. I'm with the American Embassy in Berlin. I had to take time out because something very important is happening in Paris tonight." He showed her the cover of the new January issue of *Time* magazine. "That's my sister," he said, a forefinger tapping the cover. The attendant looked at the picture of a pale-eyed, red-haired woman of about sixty. Except for the fact that the woman in the picture looked much more Irish than the handsome man by the window, she could see the resemblance. The caption read:

PERSON OF THE YEAR—JESSIE JUDAS, WHO IS SHE?

"Your sister is Jessie Judas?"

"You've heard of her?"

"I've read her book. I read it in the German edition—*Andenken des Meeres. Souvenirs of the Sea* is one of the greatest books on the environment since *Silent Spring*. Of course I have read her book. Everyone has read it. It won the Pulitzer Prize, didn't it?"

"Yes, and tonight she is being awarded the Prix de Science. The ceremony is at eight and I haven't got time even to stop at a hotel or the American Embassy in Paris, which is why I'm flying in this monkey suit."

"You look very handsome. And you must be very proud."

"Yes, I am—very!"

"Have no fear, your jacket will look perfect. I'm honored to have spoken with you. I'll tell my friends." As she spoke she was looking at his fine, large, well-manicured hands. No wedding ring but in its place a large gold ring with *LL* on its face. "Your ring," she said. "Those are not your initials, are they?"

"It's a family heirloom. Love and Luck."

"Not a wedding ring?"

"No, no, I'm not married."

“Love and Luck. I like that. Let me give you something.” She handed him a card, which he read:



“Perhaps you would like to contact me when you’re back in Berlin.”

“I’d like that very much.”

“Then do. I look forward to seeing you again. Now I have others to attend to. Auf wiedersehen.”

The momentary trappings of a vicarious celebrity, plus Fraulein Schnepf’s directness, had left David a bit pleasantly flustered. He liked everything about Fraulein Schnepf—that she was beautiful, that she had read his sister’s book, that her voice was soft and appealing, velvety English with a slight German accent, and that she was direct. During the stopover at Frankfurt, he stayed aboard, watching her when he could, as she worked. Near the end of the flight, she caught him looking at her, smiled, and he smiled back, then turned to the window in time to see the City of Light sprawled out below him like a great pinwheel galaxy of stars.



The building housing the Institut des Science was soot-gray, gothic, and gargoyled, and seemed to be pressing away the two modern glass buildings to each side of it—out with the new, long live the old—but they clung to it like two young guards desperately trying to do their duty by a difficult elder statesman. They were, in fact, a Bauhausian attempt to give wings to the heavy body of white stone and marble façade they flanked. And out of this contradiction in terms, between two fluted columns, rose the statue of a gray lady, gray of rain hat and hair, gray of face, gray of raincoat, stockings, and flat shoes, a gray umbrella tucked under her arm. But David looked for sharp, living, dark eyes, and found them in the statue’s face, and found sudden animation as his mother opened her umbrella and

swept down the wide marble steps toward him.

He paid the taxi driver and scurried through the rain and the crowd that climbed toward his mother, holding back her progress toward him, and was finally able to take her in his arms.

“So good to see you, Ruth. But where’s Jessie?”

“We’ve got her tucked away backstage. Oh, David, she’s been so ill! The chemo is taking a lot out of her. You’ll be shocked. She’s lost her beautiful red hair. But it’s coming back. She’s wearing a wig tonight. She still hasn’t gotten over the nine-hour flight from the States. She’s been vomiting the whole time, but she refuses to let anyone else accept the award for her. Do I look awful?” She took out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. David took it from her and wiped the mascara streaks from her cheeks. They huddled under her umbrella, indifferent to the wake they were causing in the crowd around them. They were locked in the small invisible cage of their own concern.

“We don’t have much time,” Ruth Perle told her son. “I’m not going to sit with you. I’m going to stay in the wings, so I can be close to Jessie if anything happens. If she needs me.”

Ruth and David made their way into the lobby, where they parted. David watched his mother as she went to the door leading to the backstage area and the wings. A standing sign read:

Ce soir  
 Jessie Judas  
 Gagnante du Prix Pulitzer  
 pour ses  
 Souvenirs d’une biologiste marine  
 recevra le Grand Prix en science

David patted the sign for luck, but he was worried: no unmixed blessings in life. He entered the auditorium in time to hear Jessie being introduced, “...Jessie Judas, auteuret spécialiste en biologie marine. Mlle Judas a reçu le Prix Pulitzer pour son livre, *Souvenirs of the Sea...*” David found a seat and added to the welcoming applause for his sister. “Ce soir on lui decerne le Grand Prix en science...”

Nobody had told him how sick Jessie was. Away in Berlin, he hadn’t seen his family for six months. E-mails had hinted that she had been suffering health problems, but nothing so serious as his mother had just told him about. He felt the return of the benign paranoia of his childhood, the sense that his mother and sister were always trying to keep him from

some secret they seemed to share. They had kept the seriousness of Jessie's illness from him as they kept everything from him and to themselves.

But now, as Jessie approached the lectern, he could see for himself how ill she was. She had always been an athlete, a great swimmer. But it was a red-haired wraith, in a sequin-glittering aquamarine gown, that unsteadily crossed the stage and stood looking out at the audience. Who here really knew his famous sister? He no more than the audience of strangers. Only Ruth, he supposed.

Jessie was accepting a plaque to more applause, when she leaned into the Master of Ceremonies and seemed to slide down his body to the floor. Ruth ran from the wings. Then David's view was blocked by a rising curtain of photographers stationed just in front of the stage. People in the auditorium, too, got to their feet and tried to see over the paparazzi, who were climbing up on the stage now. David, seized with dismay, was trapped in his place, with hundreds of heads between him, Jessie, and Ruth.



At the "Gunpowder" Hospital—Pitié-Salpêtrière—where Princess Diana had died in August of '97, a nurse led him to Ruth. She was drinking coffee and chain-smoking in a room she had taken for herself, away from the paparazzi. Jessie was in the next room.

"What happened?" he asked his mother. "What is it?"

"Just a fainting spell," she answered. He saw that Ruth had been crying, but now her emotions were gathered—Ruth was never thrown for long, always right back on the horse—and she was focused. "I didn't think we should make this trip, but Jessie was determined. The literary prize for the book was wonderful, but this is a scientific award, you know. And this is her true life's work, she says. She made me bring her. She said it was the triumph of her life and she wasn't going to miss it for anything."

"Can we see her?"

"Yes. She's fine—for now," Ruth said.

Jessie was sitting up in bed, wearing a hospital gown, and not wearing her red wig. Her fading red hair was as short as a Marine recruit's. She smiled. "What a stupid stunt, eh?" she said, in her odd amalgam of North Carolina country and proper Bostonian. "Everyone knows an old hen can't do a swan dive." David kissed her. "I need a smoke and a Co-Cola," she said, fidgeting. "Well, I got my international scientific recognition, didn't I, even if I made a fool of myself just as I was being proclaimed a

genius?” She snorted. “Now get me the hell out of here, Ruth. I don’t want to be buried at Père-Lachaise next to a crazy American rock star, no matter how much a piece of attractive he is.”

Ruth and David couldn’t help smiling. Ruth winked at David, but shook her head as if to say, “What can you do with her?”

“David,” Jessie said, “I guess Ruth has told you everything by now, so get your little ol’ spankable diplomatic butt back to Berlin and do your job. I may need a doctor but I don’t need a diplomat. And, Ruth, you get me the hell back to the States. If I should die, which I have no intention of doing, ever, I want to be cremated and have my ashes scattered where I was born—on Fortune Island.”