

An abstract, painterly illustration of a beach scene. In the upper center, a person in a white shirt and dark pants stands on a sandy beach. To their left, a colorful striped beach umbrella is partially visible. In the foreground, a person is sitting on the sand, leaning back, wearing a blue shirt and dark pants. The background features a body of water and a distant shoreline. The overall style is expressive and textured, with a rich palette of earthy and cool tones.

# FERRET ISLAND

RICHARD W. JENNINGS

A rollicking adventure  
for brave young readers


# FERRET


# ISLAND

Richard W. Jennings



Houghton Mifflin Company Boston 2007

Walter Lorraine  Books

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# FERRET ISLAND

**For Vivien Bolen Jennings**

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*All I wanted was to go somewhere.  
All I wanted was a change.  
I warn't particular.*

—Mark Twain,  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

## A Freak of Nature

Perhaps if our brains were larger we could understand nature's grand plan, but what I've seen of the world so far seems like a series of unsuccessful experiments, with no species holding the upper hand forever.

Marine invertebrates, giant reptiles, packs of apes—all have had their shot at running things on earth, and failed. And from the latest evidence, it appears that our days may be numbered, too.

So who's next in nature's line of succession?

Some scientists say it will be microbes. Others predict that once man has eliminated himself, cockroaches will rule. A few dreamers are hoping for the arrival of kindly visitors from outer space. To my way



of thinking, they're all wrong. Because with nature, the one thing you can always count on is a surprise.

One such surprise arose in the Mississippi River on a backwater sandbar formed by an oxbow some seventy miles south of Memphis. For years, despite being within earshot of around-the-clock barge traffic, the weedy little island managed to escape all human habitation.

It was less successful at avoiding a pair of displaced household pets.

In 1957, in the middle of the night, two domesticated ferrets (whose names were Snowball and Louise), clinging to a warped kitchen table sent southward by the spring floods from a farmhouse near the little river town of Kennett, Missouri, were deposited by the swirling water onto the sandbar. *my!*

Right away, under a pale yellow moon, the two soggy weasels set up housekeeping.

Like the achievement of Adam and Eve, the origin of weasel life on the island occurred many years before I was born. Indeed, it wasn't until 1990 that I drew my first breath in a hospital delivery room in Kansas City, Missouri, and it was 2004 before fate, circumstances, and my own bad temper took me to this strange hidden land that time forgot.

Running away from home is always a mistake, but I had no intention of being gone for good. Yet before I fully appreciated what I'd done, I was on a smelly, diesel-powered Greyhound bus headed east on a crowded interstate highway filled with potholes.

Ah, the open road! As the barn-dotted landscape zips by, every strange sound, pungent smell, and whispered conversation hints at adventure. Until you get hungry, that is, which for me was less than an hour after the bus pulled away from the station.

*What an idiot I am*, I thought. *Why didn't I have the foresight to bring an apple, or string cheese, or a Snickers bar?*

All I had in my backpack was a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and a book by the celebrated author Daschell Potts.

In St. Louis, I transferred to a bus bound for Memphis, Tennessee, where my stepgrandmother lives, taking a seat beside a woman who reminded me of my sixth grade guidance counselor.

Kind-looking, sweet-smelling, and packing a loaf of zucchini bread that she insisted on sharing, the guidance counselor look-alike introduced herself as Miss Foster, a dance instructor from St. Charles, Missouri,

en route to her great-uncle's funeral in Yazoo City, Mississippi.

"He was a brilliant man," Miss Foster told me. "He invented the McDonald's Happy Meal."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "Your great-uncle invented hamburgers, fries, and a small Coca-Cola?"

"Oh, goodness, no," Miss Foster corrected me. "They already had those."

"Oh," I said. "So he invented the prizes."

"No," she replied. "Those came later from factories working around the clock in Taiwan."

"I get it," I said, nodding. "Your great-uncle came up with the pictures for the box."

"Well, not exactly," Miss Foster said. "The first designs were suggested by three young men in Cleveland whose names were Eric, Billy Joe, and Dick."

"But if he didn't think up the food, the drink, the toys, or the pictures," I asked politely, "what's left?"

"Well," Miss Foster said, pausing as a bewildered look crossed her face, "there's the Golden Arches handle."

From the terminal, I set off on foot. My stars, but it gets hot in Memphis! In no time at all, I was sweating like a pig on a spit.

The atmosphere notwithstanding, here's what I like about Memphis: Whereas in some places people are rewarded for conforming to the same bland standards, in Memphis the population values eccentricity.

What others call quirky, Memphians see as artistic, or, at the very least, interesting. That's partly because southerners are suckers for a good story and a good story requires unique characters, and partly because underneath their Mississippi Delta politeness, every last one of them is as crazy as a loon and they know it.

And though I wasn't aware of it at the time, I'd soon find myself pitted against the craziest one of all.

## Stormy Weather

My stepgrandmother was in the front yard watering her zinnias when I walked up.

"Land sakes!" she exclaimed, dropping the hose to the ground. "Look what the cat dragged in!"

My stepgrandmother has no cats, but she does have a dog, a retired hunting hound named Lucas, who was sleeping on the wood plank porch. Lucas raised his head, blinked his eyes, and, seeing nothing worth

pursuing in the stifling summer heat, promptly returned to his nap.

“Hello, Nana,” I said, submitting to a hug. “Can you put me up for a while?”

“Why, Will,” she replied, “nothing would please me more.”

Will.

That’s what they call me. My full name is a mouthful: William Alexander Madison Lee Cooper Finn. How this happened, I don’t know, but it seems to have happened to any number of southern people. I’m just happy that no one calls me Willie. My personal motto, which was given to me by my teacher in the fourth grade, is “Where there’s a Will, there’s a way.”

By this, I think she meant that I’m resourceful.

Nana assigned me the front bedroom on the second floor, one with French doors that open to a balcony over the porch. At night, with these doors open, it’s the coolest room in the house.

In the early morning, sunlight filters through the waxy leaves of the big magnolia tree, casting swaying puppet-theater silhouettes on the peeling wallpaper. From a hook on the closet door, a nightgown hung like a limp flag on a deserted Civil War battlefield.

This is a peaceful house—quite the opposite of the one I left behind.

Instead of my usual cereal poured from a box, breakfast at Nana's consisted of steaming muffins with strawberry preserves and country ham washed down with fresh-squeezed orange juice, hot coffee, and milk.

*Man*, I thought. *I could get used to this!*

To which fate replied, *Not so fast.*

No matter where you happen to land in life, it doesn't pay to get too comfortable. Every place is a way station to someplace else. Like ferrets cavorting in a pet store window, we're only where we are until fate takes notice of us.

"If you haven't taken a ride on a riverboat," my stepgrandmother announced, "you haven't seen Memphis."

Shortly afterward, I found myself sitting on a plank bench on the *Memphis Empress*, a statuesque white-painted stern-wheeler chugging along the Wolf River to the main channel of the wide and magnificent Mississippi.

The *Memphis Empress* is a tourist boat. Once in a while, locals rent it for special occasions, such as weddings, bar mitzvahs, and Mary Kay awards

ceremonies, but most of the time the riverboat's passengers hail from India, China, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and far-off Nebraska.

Tripping across cobblestones that in a previous century served as riverboat ballast, I presented my ticket, scurried up the gangplank, and took a seat well away from the nonstop digital photography and cell phone chatter.

Had I not been intoxicated with a sense of adventure, I might have noticed the clouds rolling in from Arkansas. I have no idea what the captain's excuse may have been, but at the point at which the pilot should have turned back, the *Memphis Empress* was miles from a safe landing point, and the Mississippi River, always treacherous, had become a dark, churning, fearsome force of nature, with whirlpools, deadly flotsam, and a current so powerful, it could well have been Zeus's bathtub drain.

Wind and rain whipped us from above, while from below the river dragged us southward. At unpredictable intervals, lightning illuminated the terrified passengers, some of whom were clutching each other, their faces stricken with silent screams, while others gripped bags of Elvis souvenirs so tightly that their fingers punctured the plastic.

Without warning, the engines stopped cold. Cries went up across the deck. The *Memphis Empress*, freed from man's intervention, its huge, painted paddlewheel powered only by the storm, succumbed to the malevolent guidance of a navigator whose hometown was surely Hades. At that awful moment, every man, woman, and child on board knew in his or her heart that the *Empress* was lost, its human cargo doomed to the opaque depths of the mighty and unforgiving Father of Waters.

As it turned out, all but one of them was wrong. Gripping the slippery railing while watching the thick brown soup boil below, I was the only one thrown off when the captain, coming to his senses, suddenly restarted the engines.

"Man overboard!" I cried. Then correcting myself, I added with a sputtering *glug-glug-glug*, "Boy, actually."

But no one can hear you when the water's running.

## Life on the Mississippi

Whether an event is good or bad depends on your point of view. Not just whether it's happening to you



or to someone else, but whether it's rushing up to meet you or you're recalling it long after it's passed by.

They say what we fear most is the unknown.

Clearly "they" don't know much about ferrets.

I was terrified when I woke up on Ferret Island, lost, wet, and alone. But now that I've had time to think about it, I consider that day to be among the best of my life.

Except for a carefree week at church camp, I'd never been away from home. Ninety-nine percent of my life experiences had taken place within a twenty-mile radius of my house in Kansas City, and almost always in the company of adults. So once I got over the shock of discovering I was a solo castaway, and had shed a few tears over those I'd left behind, I rejoiced in my sudden liberation, although I had no idea where I was.

From where I stood in the sandy silt, my new home was an unkempt wilderness that stretched as far as the eye could see, which was maybe fifty feet before the tangled vegetation obscured everything.

A great blue heron landed on a gnarled branch of a nearby willow tree, startling me and scattering a flock