

Biography

James A. Stewart was born in Baton Rouge, LA. After graduating from Louisiana State University with a BS in Industrial Technology, he spent twenty-five years on active duty with the U.S. Navy. He also holds a BA in English from National University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the UCR Palm Desert Low-Residency MFA program. He lives with his family in San Diego, CA. *The Blue Sea Cottage* is his first book.

Biography (Amazon page)

James A. Stewart was born in Baton Rouge, LA, and grew up in a small town sixteen miles to the north called Zachary. After graduating from Louisiana State University with a BS in Industrial Technology, he spent twenty-five years on active duty with the U.S. Navy, including a tour as commanding officer of USS MOUNT VERNON (LSD-39). He also holds a BA in English from National University and an MFA in Creative Writing from UC Riverside. He lives with his family in San Diego, CA. *The Blue Sea Cottage* is his first book.

Bio for WBP author page

I always wanted to be a writer. But the first time I attended college, in the 1970s at Louisiana State University, I chose a “practical” major that would’ve opened the door for certain jobs in my home town. I should’ve followed my instincts and taken a step toward my ultimate goal—to become a professional writer—by majoring in English or Journalism. I didn’t follow those instincts and instead joined the Navy after college. I didn’t plan to make the Navy my career, but things change, and I spent the next twenty-five years travelling around Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and beyond. I had a good career, eventually serving as commanding officer of USS MOUNT VERNON, an amphibious ship. I retired as a Captain. I made sporadic attempts at writing over the years but the job and Navy lifestyle are generally all-consuming and I got distracted with other interests, such as art. But writing remained my ultimate goal and I knew I’d get back to it.

After retiring from active duty and settling in San Diego with my family, I went back to school and this time did it right, earning a BA in English from National University followed by an MFA in Creative Writing from UC Riverside. The latter is a top-rated low-residency program where the majority of the work is done online, augmented by intense ten-day residency periods twice a year. In 2012, while preparing for the program on a creative non-fiction track, I began searching for a thesis subject. I’d been reading crime nonfiction since *Helter Skelter* came out back in the 70s. Over time I developed a fondness for narrative nonfiction in the tradition of *In Cold Blood*

by Truman Capote, particularly those about vintage crimes such as *The Devil in the White City* by Erik Larson. So, I started looking for an old crime, preferably one set close to home in San Diego because I knew the research requirements would be extensive.

Almost right away I came across an article by San Diego historian and author Rick Crawford called “Death of the Dancer,” originally published in 2011 in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, about an unsolved 1923 murder in San Diego. It surprised me that no one had written a book about the case. I started reading some of the hundreds of contemporary newspaper accounts. The more I read the more fascinated I became.

In January 1923, the body of beautiful twenty-year-old interpretive dancer Fritzie Mann had been found, half-nude, on Torrey Pines beach under mystifying circumstances. Two good suspects surfaced on the first day, a debonair doctor and a playboy actor, both with motives and shaky alibis. The cops learned that on the night of her death, Fritzie and a man had checked in to a La Jolla beach cottage under assumed names, prompting two big questions—who was the mysterious “Mr. Johnston?” and what happened that night at the Blue Sea Cottages? I became obsessed with learning the answers, which turned out to quite challenging.

Apart from the murder mystery with unusual characters, more drew me to the story. To me the Jazz Age is the most interesting period in U.S. history, and not just because Mr. Fitzgerald painted a frivolous world of jazz, speakeasies, flappers, and bootleggers. It was also the era of yellow journalism, which hyped and faked the news to sell papers; of a fledgling but wildly-popular Hollywood film industry reeling from a string of notorious scandals; and of Prohibition vice and corruption, which seemed to hang over everything. It was also a time of great change after a horrific war and a flu epidemic that had killed millions and disillusioned a generation. The younger set’s new attitudes and especially those of women, clashed with a Victorian moral code, touching off a culture war in the early 1920s with striking parallels to the one a century later.

Most fascinating of all to me, though, was Fritzie Mann, a talented young woman from an immigrant Jewish family who practiced an exotic and now-lost art, loved the wrong man, and ran out of options. Her story needed to be told. I underestimated the challenge of filling in gaps I found in the historical record and parsing fact from yellow fiction, but after nine years *The Blue Sea Cottage, A True Jazz Age Murder Mystery* is the result.