

Peter Matthiessen, on *Killing Mr. Watson*



This article is excerpted from the Spring 1991 FORUM. Matthiessen made these comments during his talk at the Broward County Library on Jan. 14, 1991, after the publication of his first book on the mysterious life and violent death of the notorious Ed Watson. Matthiessen later wrote two more books on the saga. In 2008, he won the National Book Award for his retelling of this tale in Shadow Country.

It occurs to me that I should, since I am not a Floridian, make some attempt to establish my credentials for having written a book which pretends to represent Florida. Once I wrote a book about American Indian people. I spoke about this book in New York City. I tried to reassure the mainly elderly audience that I was not Indian nor anything like that. At the end of the talk there was a short silence. Then a lady in the back row said, "I don't think I've ever seen an Indian before. He's really quite attractive." So, I'm not a Floridian. However, I've been hanging out and around Florida for over 50 years.

My first memory of Florida was going up the Loxahatchee River, visiting an old trapper up there when I was eight. I remember losing a big tarpon down in Government Cut when I was little. It broke my heart. The mate on the boat was clumsy with the gaff. He hadn't had much experience with tarpon. He lost my fish. I was inconsolable for days.

I came down here to Florida in my twenties and thirties. I was a rabid ornithologist. I just loved birds. I got into conservation writing. I did a lot of writing for

Audubon magazine. I savagely attacked the Kissimmee River project. I wrote about Corkscrew Swamp. I attacked the Jet Port. I did a long piece for the *Miami Herald Sunday Magazine* on the Miccosukee Reservation situation.

When I was about 17, my father, my brother, and I were starting up the west coast in his boat. As we went by the Ten Thousand Islands region, my father told me about a big old white house sitting in the mangroves. Nothing else around it. A big strong white house. That house was taken down after Hurricane Donna. The National Park Service said it had been so damaged that it was a menace. They just used the hurricane damage as an excuse. That house was very, very strongly built.

Anyway, that was Ed Watson's famous house where terrible deeds took place. Just before he was killed by his neighbors, three people were murdered there. Watson did not do it. It was actually his foreman who did the killing. The dispute was, "Did Watson order it? Was it done under his direction, or was it not?" That question has never been successfully resolved, so here we are considering the relationship between fact and legend in Florida history.

I didn't want this book to be just a suspense story. I was much more interested in the psychological makeup of the people who killed Mr. Watson and their feelings as opposed to those who felt that he should not have been killed. So I set the execution up as a kind of myth and then work back to it at the end of the book.

Here, from the author's note to the reader: "The book is in no way 'historical,' since almost nothing here is history. On the other hand, there is nothing that could not have happened—nothing inconsistent, that is, with the very little that is actually on record. It is my hope and strong belief that this re-imagined life contains much more of

the truth of Mister Watson than the lurid and popularly accepted 'facts' of the Watson legend."

Q. What motivated you to write about Watson?

When I first heard the story I was intrigued by a man being executed by his neighbors. The neighbors were not outlaws, but peace-loving, hard-working people. And Mr. Watson was, by all accounts, very popular: a very good husband, a very good father, a very good provider. He wasn't some sort of stunted serial killer. He was quite a guy. That attracted me. The Watson story is a very strong one. The deeper one gets into it the stronger it gets.

Q. How many people has Watson been accused of murdering? Isn't it around 100?

I do not think so. The highest number I have ever heard is 55 or 57. It's hard to know. No one survived to tell. No one ever saw him kill. There is a mathematical possibility that he, in fact, killed no one. Based on what I know, there are seven deaths from which it is very hard to separate him. Let's put it that way, about seven. That is enough.

He was the only man ever arrested for the murder of Belle Starr, "The Outlaw Queen." In Oklahoma, on February 3, 1889, she was ambushed, shot off her horse, and finished off. She'd had a fight with someone named Watson. The same Ed Watson. Depending on his mood, he used to boast from the bars of Key West that he'd knocked off Belle Starr. Other times he denied it. There is no question Watson was the

man who was arrested for the killing. But they acquitted him. Not enough evidence for conviction.

Q. Wasn't there a big scandal at the time? How do the families feel about it today?

Oh, it's still going on. I am doing a second volume which is really about the fallout among his family, his sons and grandsons, how they reacted and how they lived after this. In those days it was no joke to have a man like Watson as your forbearer. The scandal must have been tremendous.

His daughter was a very beautiful woman who married the president of the First National Bank in Fort Myers. The son-in-law was a big family man, came from a very good family, and so it was a complicated business. Even the Governor, Napoleon Broward, interceded for Ed Watson at one point when he was tried for another murder up in Madison County. He had good connections. He was very well known. He was a friend of Jose Martí. He got around.

Q. How did the families react to your doing the book? Any objections?

There's a couple that are kind of cross with me. I don't think they should be. I really bent over backwards to be fair and to get it straight. But most of the people I have heard from like it a lot...But others are a little cranky about it. It is fiction, after all. It is not supposed to be dead accurate.

Q. Are there things you left out of the book?

A second book will deal with Watson's sons and grandsons and their families and resolve some of the mysteries I set up in this book. Who actually shot first? Who was Leslie Cox? Who actually killed the three people on Watson's plantation? I stay even handed because I don't know quite who Watson is and I want the readers to have their

own intuitions. The third book—I am very ambitious—will be Watson’s side of the whole story, from the time he was a little boy until the time he’s approaching this crowd of men on the shore.

Q. How did the people react when you came around?

They didn’t like me much in the beginning. I just hung around. They thought maybe they could get rid of me if they answered my questions. I’ve been doing this at least five or six years. I’ve made a lot of good friends. They introduce me to other people. Gradually other people trusted me, at least a little bit.

Q. Do you think of Watson as a typical example of a twentieth century American?

He is a classic American frontier type. Nowadays the classic frontier types have other people do their dirty work for them. We all know, from reading Carl Hiaasen and other people, that there is plenty of that. We know from the Karen Silkwood story, and many others, that people who get in the way of corporate enterprise may not survive. Watson was more direct about his methods. He took things into his own hands.

Yes, he is an American character. He is also a very classic nineteenth-century character. There were many people like him. Some ran small republics in South America. They were very ruthless, a little bit like in medieval days, or Renaissance Italy, or places like that. If people were in your way, you took care of them.

Now we have a man, Saddam Hussein, who behaves this way. Hussein is in a situation where he can do precisely what he wants and kill whom he pleases. But he is by no means unique. There have been people like this throughout history. We have a lot of them on our current frontiers—both our corporate frontiers and our wilderness frontiers.