Wavelets: Marine Schoolhouse Series No. 14

The CLAM CLAN CAPER - *a Whodunnit Mystery*

by Mary E. Sparrow

It was only a matter of minutes between the anonymous phone call and the arrival of *Sergeant Fish* and his squad of fish detectives at the scene of the crime. It wasn't a pretty sight, what with bits and pieces of the clam clan scattered about. An entire clam community had been wiped out, except for a single survivor, *Mya A. Renaria*. She was being rushed to the fish hospital by seahorse-drawn ambulance, so the sergeant had no opportunity to question her as yet.

"Ann Chovy" the sergeant called to his aide, "get over to the hospital in case that survivor is able to give us a description of the killer. The rest of you look around for clues and gather up those shell remains: Perhaps Coroner *Croaker* can shed some light on this disaster."

With final instruction to his staff to comb the area for eyewitnesses, *Sergeant Fish* sought a quiet eddy in which to reflect upon the facts, such as they were. The Chesapeake Bay eelgrass community was fairly heavily populated. Dense stands of eelgrass offered shelter and food to residents and visitors, alike. The long ribbon-like leaves poking out of the estuary's sand and mud sediments also afforded a ready hide-out to

practically any assassin.

It was unlikely that one of the community's residents was responsible for the death of the clam clan. Most of them, small crustaceans and worms, assorted mollusks and snails, would be incapable of such violence. The pipefish and sticklebacks were equally harmless.

The large number of teenagers in the area, juvenile spot, croaker and bluefish, only rarely attacked small soft clams, so ***Sergeant Fish*** thought further on the incident. It was probable that the killer was a visitor and not a resident.

That evening at the police station, *Sergeant Fish* waited for a telephone call from *Ann Chovy* for a report on the survivor, *Mya.* In the meantime, he pulled the files on all known clam killers with the same modus operandi, that is, the same method of operation.

These included:

Pagonias cromis, the Black Drum
Scianops ocellatus, the Red Drum or Channel Bass
Lopholatilus chamaelonticeps, the Tilefish
Opsanus tau, the Toadfish
Tetraodon muculatus, the Puffer or Swellfish
Rhinoptera bonasus, the Cownose Ray

The sergeant drew a line through "tilefish." That character was strictly a deepwater operator, and the eelgrass beds were in the shallows. At this time an assistant came in with information gleaned from frightened residents that were hiding in the grass bed. The information was spotty….. even Mr. *Scallop* with his forty eyes didn't see enough to pinpoint the culprit. Still, there were bits and pieces to go on. Here is what *Sergeant Fish* heard from those who caught a glimpse of the clam clan killer:

1. Olive green in color
2. Dark bands and spots on side
3. 10-14 inches in length
4. Small mouth
5. Chubby shape
6. Yellow side
7. Oval shaped eyes
8. White belly
9. Fan-shaped pectoral (side) fins
10. Rounded caudal (tail) fin
11. Scales, if present, very small

He looked over the list. Not bad. Now if only he could match it up with one of the suspects from the files. Still, there was a problem. Not one witness actually saw the killer clearly, and there was one tidbit of information that just did not seem to fit. Shortly after the crime, a witness noticed a yellowish globe floating at the surface. She was too far away to get a good look, but she thought it was alive and that it had bumps, maybe spines all over it.

Sergeant Fish was baffled. Perhaps, it was just an innocent bystander, or an accomplice (helper) to the killer's crime or maybe, even the killer in disguise! Sergeant needed more information. He fed the suspects' names into the computer. If he could learn their usual hangouts, maybe he could place them in the area of the crime.

The phone rang. It was policewoman *Ann Chovy.* The *sturgeons* had done all they could, but *Mya* didn't make it. And *Ann Chovy* didn't get a final statement from her either.

Sergeant Fish hung up. He was sorry about *Mya,* but he would not need her statement. Finally he knew. He knew who the culprit was when he compared the witness accounts to the characteristics of each suspect. If only the computer could give him a match to verify his conclusion, he could clinch this case. He skimmed the printout. There it was! The description matched, the time frame matched (April to November) and the last known address matched: The Chesapeake Bay and its brackish water tributaries.

Who do you think did it? Are you sure? How can you find out? How did *Sergeant Fish* (XX) find out? Talk over a plan to identify the culprit with your family, a friend or teacher. Follow your plan, and when you think you know who did it, write the answer in the blank.

(XX) Words in the story that are in italic type are either "hidden" common names (*Ann Chovy* = anchovy) or scientific names of the organisms (*Mya A. Renaria* = Mya arenaria).

NOW READ ON!

This is a very "fishy" story. But interwoven with the fiction are facts. In nature, the puffer eating the clams would not necessarily be "good" or "bad." In nature, it is simply a matter of survival. Many organisms are eaten by other organisms, which in turn are eaten by still others. This is called a food chain.

This story illustrates how to identify fish. Look at the list of witness descriptions. What kinds of information does *Sergeant Fish* use to identify the clam killer? Fish can be identified by a combination of characteristics:

1. Body shape
2. Shape and position of their fins
3. Size and shape of the gills
4. Color
5. Eye shape
6. Mouth (and teeth) shape and size
7. Scale shape and size

Knowing what kind of environmental conditions exist in an area may help you predict what kind of fish and other organisms you'll find there. Most animals not only have a preference, but are adapted to a certain habitat.

The shape of a fish's mouth, its location on the head and the shape of the teeth gives clues to what a fish eats. In the case of the clams, a fish's teeth would have to break through the shell. The plate-like teeth of the puffer are well suited for this. Pointed teeth, good for grasping or breaking off chunks of flesh, would break on the clam's shells.

There are many fascinating organisms that live in the Chesapeake Bay, and learning about them can be fun. Writing a creative story is one way to learn. You can use your imagination, but also include facts that you have learned by reading about the setting and your cast of characters -- the organisms.

WANTED!
for the
CLAM CLAN
MURDERS!!!