

One of the wonderful things about living in North Carolina is its spectacular coastline, and its relationship to the ocean.

Most people in these parts don't refer to it as "the ocean." Down here it is known as "the beach."

North Carolina's beaches are pretty much the same as Florida's, without the hype, and without the people. Finding space to throw the Frisbee, or clearing a section for volleyball is no trouble at all.

I've spent the last couple of decades in North Carolina, and in doing so I have become a great fan of the coast. I've fallen in love with the sun and the waves, and especially the birdlife that frequents our shores.

I find myself at the beach a few times a year, and when I do I am caught between the hedonist in me, who loves the beach, and the environmentalist in me, who knows that humans shouldn't really occupy the beach the way we do.

Since 2005 I have written [three books](#). Each one has been written at the kitchen table, after the children are in bed and the stickiness of dinner has been removed. I write amidst Lego blocks and Yu Gi Oh cards. Surrounded by both Homies and homework. And when the manuscript is nearing completion, I escape to the beach for a week of solitude to "finish her."

For my first book I spent a week on Kilby Island—a private island in the [Pamlico Sound](#) in which all of the houses are built on stilts. Every few years Kilby Island is washed away by a weather event, and the ground floor of each house is typically destroyed.

After each storm, people repair any damage that might occur to the second floor, replace their mangled decks and staircases, and slowly, as the memory of the destruction passes, they build new docks, and ground floor bathrooms, and tool

sheds—slowly, and carefully, until another storm surge washes everything out to sea.

I love Kilby Island. Its estuary is filled with crabs and eels and ospreys and herons, and there is nothing finer than watching the morning mists rise from its brackish waters through the picture window of a waterfront dwelling. At the same time it is clearly a place that humans should not inhabit. In nature its job is to protect the inland from storms. It is supposed to shift and change, and it was never meant as a foundation for second homes.

For my second book I borrowed a house on [Oak Island](#). Its beach is odd, because it is populated with strange rounded chunks that get in the way of a decent touch football game. Prior to play, everybody scans the sands and removes the solid pieces prior to the game.

A close inspection of the chunks reveals them to be polished asphalt from a road that was once there, and cement aggregates from foundations gone by. The ocean has taken a share of Oak Island, and those residences that were once a few blocks from the beach are now beachfront.

I love Oak Island. When I launch my kayak there, I can see shore birds, ocean birds, and woodland birds all on the same day. But it is painfully obvious that Oak Island is not a place suited to human habitation. While nothing is finer than sleeping with the window open ten yards from the crashing waves, it will not be long before that island has vanished into the sea.

For my third book I snagged a place on [Topsail Island](#), which is by far my favorite, and a place I have been every year for the past decade. To finish my manuscript I stole away for a week in March, a time when the tourists have yet to arrive.

The place I borrowed was far and away the most spectacular house on earth. From the front porch

was a clear view of dolphins jumping in the sound at sunset. And the back door was pure oceanfront.

To my horror my first day there was accompanied by the “beep,” “beep,” “beep” of earthmoving equipment. Thinking that perhaps a foundation was being dug next door, I stepped out onto the spacious deck to see a bulldozer heaping sand against a staircase that led to the beach.

I went beachcombing on subsequent days, and realized that every mile or so there is another piece of heavy equipment, pushing sand in a mighty wall against the wonderful houses. At least it looks like a mighty wall. Until you look back at the ocean. Giant earthmovers look puny next to her. Clearly an encroaching ocean will wash away the beach houses of Topsail Island.

My books are often called “hopeful.” I don’t really trade in “doom and gloom” like so many writers found in the “energy and society” section of the bookstore. That makes me wonder how I can put a hopeful spin on the three island paradises that I have used to finish my books.

And unfortunately I can’t do that. They are all marked for deletion. Whether it is rising sea levels, or warmer water temperatures, or the natural progression of geologic time is not that important. They will all be gone, just like me.

And I think that is where the hope comes in. Just as the promise of death is what makes life interesting (no one wants to suffer like a vampire after all), the impending death of North Carolina’s barrier islands is part of what makes them beautiful.

What I am going to do is continue to love “the beach.” I’m going to vacation there. I’m going to take my children there. I am going to continue to go there to watch the birds. And any chance I get, I’m going to borrow a place to write there.

I might as well. It is magnificent while it’s here.