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THE BUCKET- LISTERS

Three Cape-area authors always wanted to write books; retirement gave them their break.

By Chris White

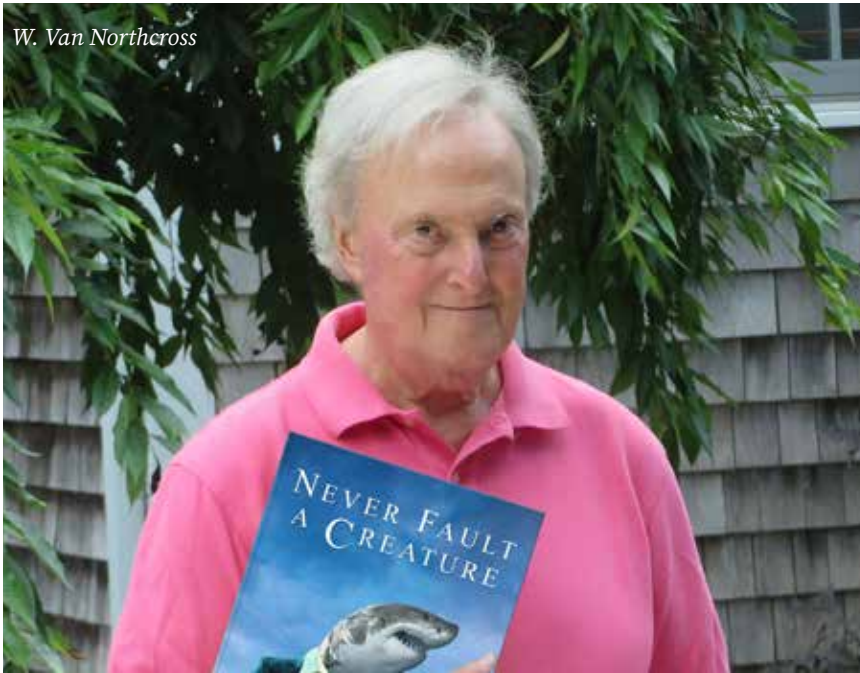
Retirement is one of those milestones in life's journey that simultaneously encompasses an end and a fresh beginning. It can be the gift of time, freedom from the responsibilities and demands of work. But since people are creatures of habits, it might also feel like a curse. After forty-five years on the job, what's a person to do? The lucky ones play with grandkids or travel, or perhaps learn pickleball or fly fishing. For some, retirement means delving into creativity, making art, tuning in to the muses. In this next chapter (haha) of life, some Cape-area retirees have decided to finally write "their" books. What follows are three examples of new authors who have learned what it takes to sit down and follow stories to completion, and who are keen to write even more.



W. Van Northcross

Throughout Van Northcross's 45-year career in public relations and marketing, he says, "I was writing every day—but to space and to deadlines. So I always thought it would be fun to work with no word limits, no due dates." When he retired in 2015, writing a novel sat high on his bucket list, and last year, he fulfilled this dream with the publication of his crime thriller, *Never Fault a Creature*. Set in the fictional Cape Cod village of Chagport, the story revolves around a murder—rooted in a conspiracy stretching to the deep South, an antebellum plantation in Mississippi. While the story is fiction, Northcross drew from his own life, especially the North-South dichotomy. From his childhood in Tennessee to attending Ole Miss to migrating here in the 1970s, he knows firsthand the ignorance around regional differences. "I used the book as a vehicle to explore some of these themes," he says. "Many of the characters contain aspects of real people mashed together. And some of the events really happened to me." For example, he attributes the novel's title to his family's housekeeper—and his mother's best friend—from when he was growing up. "Her name was Mary Hunt, and I loosely based my character Granny Lee on her," he says. "When I was young, there was an incident with a dog, which I was yelling at—and Mary grabbed me and said, 'Never fault a creature for doing what's its nature to do.' She had a lot of wisdom." When Northcross incorporated that formative scene into his story, he knew right away

W. Van Northcross



that he had found the book's title. "Up until then, I'd been calling it Get Payton," he says.

Less than year after graduating from Ole Miss, Northcross moved to the Cape, where he had spent his junior-year summer working for the now-defunct Nantucket Express ferry. "I landed here in October, which was a very hard time of year to find a job," he says. But a seasonal opening on the floor at Puritan Clothing that was supposed to end after the holidays led to his position as advertising director, one he would hold for 23 years. Northcross would finish his career at Cape Cod Hospital, where he worked for another 22 years before retiring. All the while, he was constantly telling stories, often about his childhood and adolescence down South. He says, "My wife would always say, long before I had plans for a novel, 'You gotta put that in your book!'" Now, nine years into retirement, he has done just that, and ten chapters into his second novel, he shows no signs of stopping.

Len Egan

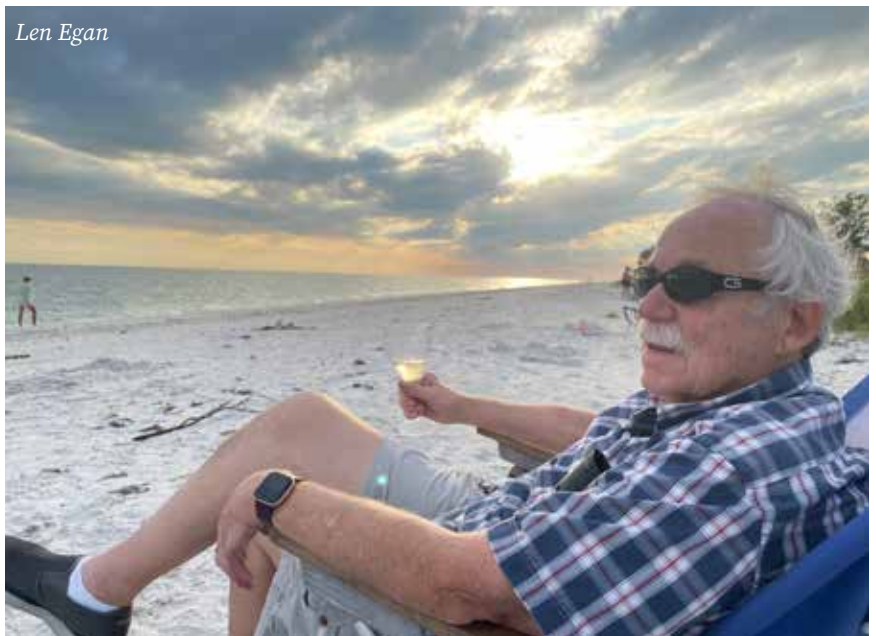
Like Northcross, Len Egan always dreamed of writing a novel, but work got in the way. Of his debut mystery, *The Night Not at the Blue Heron Inn*, he says, "I started writing it about ten years ago. I was a consultant, in process improvement, and I was traveling a lot for work. Occasionally, I'd pick up the story and write a little when I was on the road. Then COVID came along and killed my consulting business. People didn't

want to interact with someone flying in from somewhere else. Suddenly, I had a lot of free time and decided to take it up again." While Egan's career hadn't been writing-based, he did graduate from college with a degree in Journalism. "Writing is something I've always enjoyed doing," he says. "It's also a pretty good mode of relaxation."

Egan read a few books about the craft of fiction, including parts of Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, and for the *The Night Not at the Blue Heron Inn*, he developed a routine of working for about four hours per day. "I'd start by editing the previous chapter, then continue on," he says, "I didn't use an outline, so I didn't know how it would end. It's a whodunnit with a lot of twists and turns." He attributes his writing process to the reading experience, as well, saying, "My early readers didn't know who the murderer was either."

After completing a first draft, revising, and then cutting out about one-third of it entirely, he self-published his first novel last December. "I edited the book five times, tried to boil it down to what the reader really needs

Len Egan





to know.” During the process, he caught the writing bug. “Now that I’ve finished the first one, I’m motivated to keep going. I’m working on two more books right now,” he explains. “Another unrelated mystery, and a satire based on the current political situation. I feel like I have a deadline on the political one, though—it needs to come out soon, during this cycle.”

A major part of Egan’s writing journey has been learning about publishing. “This was a bucket list thing more than trying to make money,” he says, “and for an unknown author, to be honest, I was spending rather than making any. But if I’m going to do it, I’d like to at least break even.” He learned about online publishers and about the importance of formatting from his “self-publishing mentor, I. Michael Grossman of EBook Bakery,” based in Rhode Island, and from Cape Cod Writers Center in Osterville. “It’s a good cadre of people who can help,” he says. He has also noticed from his author talks at local Cape libraries that many people are following his path. He says, “Of a half-dozen people, four were authors working on their first books. It’s amazing how many people are motivated to write.”

East End Eddie Doherty

Like Egan’s current work-in-progress, East End Eddie Doherty (so named because he religiously fishes the east end of the Cape Cod Canal) chose to focus on humor in his second book, *Laughs, Lies & American Justice*, which he published last year. His first book is about striped fishing, but this one is a memoir about his career in the court system, where he spent over 36 years—18 as an Assistant Clerk-Magistrate in Attleboro and the last 18 as Clerk-Magistrate of the Wrentham District Court after appointment by Governor A. Paul Cellucci. Many of those days required working odd hours. He says, “I’d be on call with the police 24-7, in and out of stations all night long. I always enjoyed writing, but I never had much time for it until I retired in 2016.” With his career in the rearview mirror, Doherty established his routine of fishing—starting before dawn, he says, “most days from April

through November”—then coming home to write. He published his first book in 2018, and is still writing. Now, he says, “I have a loosely-structured plan for a crime novel, probably set in Mattapoisett or Marion. I’m looking forward to making things up and not having to check facts!”

Because *Laughs, Lies & American Justice* is a work of nonfiction, Doherty needed to doublecheck the validity of his tales. He says, “It’s a collection of stories, all true. So I had to research a lot of it, track people down and see if they remembered things the way I did.” Many events in the court system are quite heavy, so he chose to write mostly about light-hearted moments. “I tried to focus on the humor of situations,” he says. “But I also needed to make it clear that I’m taking things like drunk driving very seriously while also recognizing that some funny stories can come out.” He organized these

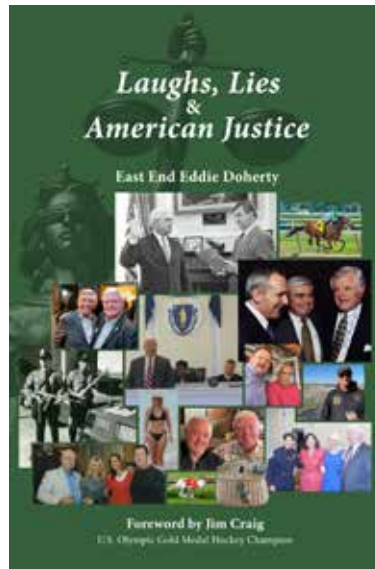


East End Eddie Doherty

thematically, into twelve chapters, but he notes that some of the stories could have fit into different categories. "If one chapter got too long, I'd look for one of its stories that could fit somewhere else and move it," he says.

While Doherty lives across Buzzards Bay from North Falmouth, he's a Cape fixture, as was his late brother Chris, who owned the 19th Hole Tavern in Hyannis until, says Doherty, "He unfortunately passed away at too young an age." When he was a boy, he visited his grandfather in Mattapoisett in the summers, and when he and his wife retired, they moved here full-time. With their daughters and grandchildren living in neighboring Marion and Lakeville, he says, "I'm lucky to live in Mattapoisett."

Doherty writes for a few different reasons, and it's become an important part of his life. "I love it here," he says. "And writing



is something that I can do now that I'm retired. For this book, I wanted people in the court system to be able to relate to happy events in their lives. It's a nice way to express yourself, and it's nice to put a smile on a person's face." 🏠

Chris White is a freelance writer for Cape Cod LIFE.

The Life of Retirement

It's a pretty swell time to retire on the Cape these days. The weather's agreeable most months, the year-round population has boomed, and a lot of interesting people live here and on the islands full-time. Long a local secret, the offseason has become primetime—and the Retired Men's Club of Cape Cod has noticed, and has adapted to the current era.

Membership Director Gary Gyss exemplifies the RMC and is a driving force behind its reinvigoration. He and his wife purchased a home on the Cape in 2013, but they moved here in retirement, in 2020. Since then, he's become an active leader in the RMC, and he's bullish on the organization's recruiting class of 2024, saying, "We're tracking ahead of 2023 in terms of new members, and I expect we'll add between 40 and 50 by the end of this year. The word is spreading, and the RMC is moving in a good direction."

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Gyss notes that the RMC is the oldest and largest men’s club in the area. “We have members from all over the Cape,” he says. “The majority are from the Dennis-Yarmouth area, but some guys live in Mashpee, Harwich, all over.” Back in March, 1952, Rev. Carl F. Schultz founded the club, and its first central activity was singing, in the Retired Men’s Club Chorus. This remained part of its core for over thirty years before branching off into its own organization in 1988. Over its 72-year history, the RMC has moved its meeting hall four times and now convenes every second Thursday of each month excepting July, August, and December at St. David’s Episcopal Church in South Yarmouth. “We usually have about 80 members in attendance at any given meeting,” says Gyss, “and we always have a speaker. We try to stay Cape-centric, so we’ve had the Dennis Police Chief John Brady Jr., people from the Cape Cod League, from the Cape Cod Foundation.”

Today, the group’s charter remains straightforward and clear, beginning with: “The Retired Men’s Club of Cape Cod was formed for men to come together for social events and to exchange ideas with the goal of expanding the opportunities for enjoying their lives in retirement.” In addition to adding members to bolster the club’s already robust numbers of over 220 retired men, the RMC has been expanding its activities and events. Gyss says, “Historically



the club had a view that it was essentially for golf and bowling. Lately we've been working to change the image a little by adding more activities and broadening our appeal." The RMC has maintained its traditions with its first two sports—members will golf at five different courses in the spring and at another five venues in the fall, and bowling remains popular with league play on Tuesday afternoons from Labor Day through mid-May—while complementing the menu with options both active and intellectual. They've added an investment club, a ROMEO (Retired Old Men Eating Out) that meets for breakfasts, weekly shuffleboard, chess, and a cycling group. "The first ride took place last week, on the rail trail," says Gyss, "and there will be another in late July, on the Canal path. Fourteen members have already signed up." Over the upcoming months, the RMC is also looking to add a cards, billiards, and a bocci tournament. The men also host Octoberfest (in September) at the Barnstable Brewery, a clambake in October, and their annual Christmas Lunch at The Cove in Yarmouth. Clearly, like the old American Express tagline, with the RMC, "Membership has its privileges." 🏰

~Chris White

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