

Praise for Susan Berliner's first novel, *DUST*

"Susan Berliner gives us an amazing mysterious supernatural story in *Dust*. It intrigues and holds the readers' attention, while pulling them in and not letting them put it down."

–*Night Owl Reviews (Top Pick)*

"*Dust* is an excellent first attempt for this new author. I very much enjoyed this actioned scifi/mystery/thriller...Look out Stephen King, this lady may be on your tail!"

– Dottie Taylor, *Tink's Place*

"*Dust* picks you up and takes you on a whirlwind ride, pun intended, and doesn't let you go until the final climax. The characters and settings are believable and the bantering between Karen and Jerry makes you forget these are fictional characters and makes you root for them in their quest to find the dust's weakness...It's a great piece of escapist fiction and a book to easily get lost in."

– Patricia Lane

"Susan Berliner's first novel is filled with drama, laughter, and engaging characters. I immediately connected with Karen and Jerry, a unique couple faced with a mind-boggling swirl of colorful dust...As a high school English teacher, I plan to use this captivating novel with my students this year. I give *DUST* an A+!"

– Brittany Mott

"I was able to read this book in its entirety within just a few hours, which added to its cinematic qualities; it was like watching a movie in the afternoon...The book is fast-paced, and does not dwell on technical jargon in order to explain the paranormal events or the entity, which I found refreshing...The language in the book is relatively simple and casual, easy to read, and doesn't contain much in the way of profanity, so it can be enjoyed by a wide age-group spectrum. I have quickly become a fan of this author, and look forward to her next work."

– Andy S. Adams

PEACHWOOD LAKE

by Susan Berliner

Copyright © 2011 by Susan Berliner

Peachwood Lake is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

Published by SRB Books

ISBN: 978-0-9839401-1-1

Cover design and book layout by Dianne Paulet
Author's photo by Rachel Leib Photography

Published November, 2011

eBook formatting by DLite Press/published by arrangement with the author

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is dedicated to my children—David, Meredith, and Paul. Thanks so much for your valuable suggestions and continued support.

And a special thanks to my husband, Larry, for always being there for me.

Table of Contents
Author's Note

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Epilogue
Afterward

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Each summer, a bizarre ritual takes place in Florida's Suwannee River: Large bony fish—gulf sturgeons—jump high out of the water and sometimes hit hapless boaters, breaking their arms or shattering their legs, and knocking them unconscious. According to scientists, these fish aren't mean and don't intentionally try to hurt people. But no one can figure out why they jump.

After reading about this strange annual occurrence, I wondered: What might happen if a far more ferocious jumping fish

than the Florida sturgeon seized control of a tranquil lake and viciously attacked boaters and swimmers—with the sole purpose of killing them?

Peachwood Lake answers that question.

CHAPTER 1

*Ode to a Clear Summer Day
The sun brightens the blue sky.
Its hot rays warm my naked shoulder...*

"That really sucks," Kady Gonzalez muttered as she angrily crossed out the newly-written lines with heavy pencil slashes, nearly gouging through to the next page of her spiral notebook.

Kady sat on the unused boat dock behind the small cottage she and her father rented on Peachwood Lake. At eleven o'clock on a mid-July Monday morning in 2009, it was beautiful outside—even though Kady hadn't been able to transpose that observation into acceptable poetry. The day wasn't unbearably hot yet and it promised to be far less muggy than usual.

"How'm I ever gonna be a writer if I can't even write a short poem?" she mumbled, staring at her now indecipherable words.

Her seventh-grade English teacher had said she had talent. "You've got a good grasp of language and show real promise as a writer," were Mrs. Wilson's exact words. Kady had immediately written down the teacher's statement to preserve it as an inspiration for times like this when she was feeling discouraged. She had dredged up the sentence so many times that she had memorized it.

Unfortunately, Kady didn't like anything she had written so far. But Mrs. Wilson had told her to keep writing and not give up, so she continued creating, and then destroying, poems and short stories.

"I don't have anything better to do anyway," Kady whispered, shifting her attention from her latest ruined page to the tranquil, clear blue-green water of Peachwood Lake.

The sparkling lake was surrounded by about sixty houses, most of them small cottages like hers, converted from summer

homes into year-round residences. The lake was also framed by numerous trees and bushes. Strangely, as far as anyone could determine, none of the trees produced peaches. Off to the left, Kady could just barely see the town's small beach and recreation area, a place she never visited. Across from her home, on the far right side of the lake, Fairview Day Camp boasted a much larger beach. Most summer afternoons when she was outside, Kady could hear the sounds of children screaming and laughing as they swam and cavorted in the water.

Sighing deeply, she turned the page of her notebook and tried to come up with an idea for a new poem. Her thoughts were soon interrupted by a loud splashing noise. She scanned the water, but saw no one in the lake. *Who made that sound?* she wondered.

Kady frowned and again studied the peaceful lake. She could see an undulating eddy towards the middle, but nothing else was visible. She picked up her pencil and wrote "Hot Summer..." Then she heard a second splash.

Kady put the pencil on the dock and stood up, focusing on the lake. *Really weird*, she thought as she continued to stare and listen. It was absolutely quiet except for a few intermittent bird chirps. Suddenly, a long fish, covered with segmented pieces of silver, jumped high out of the water and splashed heavily back down.

"Wow!" Kady said aloud. "That was awesome! A jumping fish that looks like it's wearing a suit of armor!" Again she sat, this time crossing her legs as she faced the lake. Then she picked up the pencil, erased the words "Hot Summer," and wrote a new title: "Ode to a Silver Jumping Fish." Sitting on the dock, she started to compose her new poem.

Marty Urloch finished making his peanut butter sandwich and began assembling his fishing gear. *Great day to be out on the lake*, the retired appliance salesman thought as he packed his favorite bait—carp doughballs—a tasty concoction Marty had prepared especially for the unsuspecting fish. He grabbed a couple of cold cans of beer from the fridge, picked up his fishing rod, reel, and tackle box, and headed to the backyard boat dock.

Marty placed his fishing equipment and food on a small bench while he retrieved a pair of oars from under the rear porch.

After securing the oars, he lowered his gear into the rowboat. Then, carefully, he stepped inside, untied the rope, and headed towards the middle of Peachwood Lake.

"Ahhh," Marty murmured as he rowed leisurely towards his favorite fishing location. "Best day of the summer so far." He glanced at the shore and spotted Kady, who lived three houses down the street, sitting on her dock, busily writing. "Hi there, young lady!" he shouted, waving at the girl. "Enjoying the sun?"

Kady looked up from her notebook and nodded. Then, with a smile, she returned her neighbor's wave.

Marty arrived at his preferred fishing spot and carefully rested the oars inside the small boat. As he reached for his fishing rod and doughball bait, he heard a ripple in the water. Turning to see where the noise was coming from, he caught a glimpse of a silvery streak followed by a loud splash. *What the hell fish was that?* he thought. The man sat quietly, but heard no other sound.

Again Marty bent to pick up his fishing gear. This time, he saw a segmented silver fish leap high out of the water and plummet back in. "Strange," he muttered. "Never seen a jumping fish in the lake." He continued preparing his rod, attaching the special bait.

Marty heard yet another noisy splash. Like a sleek silver missile, the jumping fish rammed into the man's face, landing hard on the left side of his cheek before quickly bouncing back into the lake. "Oww," he groaned, putting down his fishing pole and rubbing the injured part of his face. "That damn fish!"

With another warp-speed splash, the brazen fish jumped into the boat again, aiming for Marty's right eye. The man ducked slightly and the creature bit him hard on the forehead. He wiped his head with his hand, saw the blood, and immediately reached for his oars. "I'm gettin' out of here," he murmured.

As Marty started to maneuver the oars, the silver fish leaped up yet again, zooming directly at his neck. Since Marty had both his hands on the oars, he was unable to protect himself as the whizzing fish projectile reached its target. Flashing a mouthful of sharp dagger-like teeth, the charging creature slashed his neck, creating a deep jagged wound.

In great pain, Marty grabbed his bleeding neck and swerved sharply, toppling the boat. Trying to staunch the blood flowing through his throbbing neck with one hand while paddling to stay

afloat in the water with the other hand, he shouted "Help me!" desperately hoping his young neighbor on the dock could hear his cries.

Switching to an underwater attack mode, the tenacious fish continued its war on the man, biting his thighs and legs with its razor-sharp teeth. *This can't be happening!* Marty thought as he tried to swim away from the savage creature. Then the silver fish again hurled itself out of the water, hitting him squarely in the face, and the man sank below the surface.

Kady was engrossed in composing her new poem when she heard a commotion in the water. Looking up, she saw Mr. Urloch flailing at something in his rowboat. Squinting from the sun, she held her hand over her eyes to get a clearer picture of what was happening. Her neighbor was fighting with a fish and it looked like that jumping silver fish. It had huge teeth and was biting him! She watched as the man started to row. But then the boat capsized and he tumbled into the water.

"Oh my God!" Kady shouted as she jumped up and ran inside to call the police. Grabbing the kitchen phone, she dialed 911. "There's been a bad accident in the middle of Peachwood Lake," she gasped when the operator answered. "A man was fighting with a fish and his boat turned over and now he's in the water. Please hurry. I think he could be badly hurt." Quickly, she gave the operator her name and address and rushed back outside.

Kady ran to the edge of her dock and scanned the water for Mr. Urloch. While she clearly saw the rowboat undulating softly in the middle of the lake, there was no sign of her neighbor. With tears flowing down her cheeks, she sat down and waited for help to arrive.

Within minutes, Kady heard the whirr of sirens heading down her street. Wiping her eyes, she ran to the front of her house just as a police car pulled up, followed by an ambulance and a small white van with the words "Water Rescue Unit" printed in blue. Two young men dressed in diving gear jumped out of the van and rushed to Kady.

"You called in the emergency?" one of the divers asked as he strode purposefully towards the lake.

"Yes." Kady had to run to keep up with the fast-moving man.
"Show us where you saw him last."

"Mr. Urloch was in the water right in the middle of the lake, near where his boat is." She pointed to the rowboat, which still rocked gently in the water.

"Thanks," the man said as he and his companion hurried into the lake. Then, while she watched from the dock, the two men swam rapidly towards the rowboat and dived under the water.

Kady was still staring intently at the lake when she heard footsteps behind her. Turning around, she faced a handsome curly-haired policeman.

The tall, lanky officer stood next to her. "Are you Kady Gonzalez?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you think Mr. Urloch could be okay?"

The young policeman paused. "Honestly, it doesn't look very good," he said, shaking his head sadly. "The man's been in the water at least ten minutes...My name's Officer Malone and, while we're waiting, I'd like to know exactly what you saw happen here." He took a small pad and a pen from his pants pocket and began writing.

"It was really weird," Kady said. "At first I heard some kind of strange noise...I think Mr. Urloch was fighting with a fish in the boat."

"What do you mean 'fighting with a fish'? Was the fish so big that the man was struggling to get it off his pole?"

"No. That's not what happened." She spoke quietly and gazed at the ground. "I think this fish jumped into his boat. Then it was biting his neck."

"What?" The policeman gave the girl an incredulous look.

"I know it sounds like I'm nuts," Kady said. "But I saw a silver fish jumping high up out of the water just before Mr. Urloch went out in his boat." She bent down and picked up her notebook, which, with all the commotion, she had tossed on the dock. "Look, I even started to write a poem about it." She quickly flipped the pages to "Ode to a Silver Jumping Fish" and pointed to her half-finished poem. "See?"

Officer Malone shook his head in disbelief. "I've lived in Peachwood all my life," he said. "Been swimming and sailing here every summer and I've never seen or heard anybody mention a jumping fish."

"Yeah," Kady agreed. "I'd never seen any fish like that in the lake until today either."

"Do you know if Mr. Urloch is married?" the policeman asked.

"I don't think so. He lives by himself. My dad said Mr. Urloch told him he moved here after he retired so he could spend lots of time fishing."

"Thank you." Officer Malone scribbled something in his pad. Then he looked up and sighed.

Kady and the policeman stood quietly on the dock watching the two divers search for Marty Urloch. As they waited, the girl heard several voices nearby. On her left, she saw about ten of her neighbors, who must have heard the sirens and seen the emergency vehicles, standing on the grass near the water. Mrs. Winzinski from up the street smiled at her and she nodded to the woman.

A few minutes later, one of the divers gestured to Officer Malone. "They've found him," the policeman said. With a quick hand wave, he signaled the two EMTs—a young African-American man and an older blonde woman who had been standing near the ambulance—that he needed them. Meanwhile, Officer Malone walked off the dock and headed for the edge of the grass, motioning the congregating people to move back.

The policeman turned to Kady, who had followed him. "I want you to go inside your house now," he said. "This isn't something you should see."

"Please let me stay," she begged. "I won't scream or yell or say anything. I promise."

"Your parents at work?"

"My dad is."

Officer Malone studied the girl. "All right," he finally said. "But if you make a sound, you'll have to leave."

Kady nodded in agreement.

Then, as they both watched, the divers carried Marty Urloch towards the shore and carefully lowered him onto the grass. Although Kady had never seen a dead body before, it was obvious her neighbor was no longer alive. His eyes were open, but they gazed motionlessly upward, not looking at anything. His mouth seemed to have a questioning look, as if he couldn't believe what

had happened to him. There was a large gash on his forehead and an even larger jagged slice across his neck. Bite marks covered his cheeks and his exposed arms.

Kady covered her mouth with her right hand to stifle a scream. *What happened out there?* she wondered. *What kind of fish does this?*

As the crowd whispered quietly, she watched the two EMTs put Mr. Urloch's body on a stretcher and carry him to the ambulance.

"Is your father able to get off work?" Officer Malone asked.

Kady was still afraid she would scream if she opened her mouth so she just shook her head.

"Can you at least call him?" the policeman continued.

Kady tried to talk. "Okay," she whispered. But the word came out chokingly and heavy tears started to flow down her cheeks.

Officer Malone put his arm around the young teen. "You wanted to be here, but this is tough for anyone." He spoke in a soft, soothing voice. "Come down to the station with me for the rest of the day till your dad gets home."

"No," Kady murmured, wiping the tears with her palm and hoping they would stop. "I'll be okay." She moved away from the policeman. "I'll go inside and read or watch TV till he comes home."

"And when will that be?"

"A little after five. He works right in town."

"What does he do?"

"He's a data processor for CompuTechno Industries." Kady paused and slowly looked up at the policeman. "My dad gets paid by the hour and he says we really need the money." The tears had finally stopped and her voice no longer sounded quivery.

"You promise you'll call him right now?" Officer Malone persisted.

"Yes," she whispered.

The policeman took his wallet from his pants pocket and pulled out a business card. Then he quickly wrote something on it and handed the card to Kady. "Here," he said. "Take this. My full name's Pete Malone and I wrote down my cell number. If you change your mind or just want to talk, call me."

Kady stared at the ground. Officer Malone gently lifted her chin so that she had to look at him. "Okay?"

"Okay," she murmured.

"Now you go on inside and call your dad," the policeman repeated.

"Yes sir," Kady mumbled. As Officer Malone watched, she slowly walked to the sliding glass door and entered the cottage.

She stepped into the small kitchen, put the card the officer had given her on the counter, and poured a glass of water. After taking a few sips, she picked up the phone and dialed her father's work number.

"Edgar Gonzalez speaking."

"Hi, Dad," Kady began. "I know you don't like me to call, but..."

"What's wrong?"

"Something really bad just happened." She tried not to choke on her words. "Mr. Urloch went out in his rowboat and this jumping fish went after him and then the police and divers came..."

"What do you mean a 'jumping fish went after him'?" her father interrupted.

"I saw this big silver fish jump high out of the water this morning. Then, a few minutes later, I'm pretty sure I saw Mr. Urloch fighting with it."

Edgar was quiet for several moments. "You said something about police and divers," he finally said.

"Yes, when I saw Mr. Urloch fall into the lake, I called the police. The divers pulled him out of the water, but he was already de-de-dea..." She was sobbing too heavily to pronounce the last word clearly.

"Kady, take it easy," her father said quietly. "I'm real sorry you had to see that. Poor Mr. Urloch. He was a good guy." Edgar hesitated before continuing. "Listen, I'm going to tell my boss that I have an emergency and have to go home early. Meanwhile, turn on the TV and find something funny or dumb to watch. Don't think about what you saw. Okay?"

"There's not much funny stuff on TV except stupid cartoons so I'm just gonna try to read."

"I'm sorry, Kady, but my boss just gave me a dirty look so I'm going to hang up and talk to him right now. I'll be home very soon. Bye."

Kady was reading a copy of *Entertainment Weekly* and trying to forget about Mr. Urloch and the fish when the phone rang. She answered it and said "Hello."

"Hi," said a pleasant male voice. "Is this Katy Gonzalez?"

"Yes, but it's 'Kady' with a 'd.'" She was forever correcting people about the spelling of her name.

"Sorry, Kady. I'm Jake Ellsbury from the *County Courier* and I'm writing a story about what happened in Peachwood Lake earlier today. I'd like to ask you a couple of questions." He paused. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"You saw the accident?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Just what did you see?"

"Like I told Officer Malone," she said, talking quickly, "I heard noise in the water and when I looked up, I saw Mr. Urloch fighting with a big silver fish."

"A shark?"

"No, I'm sure it wasn't a shark. It was just a long silver fish with lots of big pointy teeth."

"The fish was in the man's boat?"

"Yes."

"Still on his fishing rod?"

"No, it wasn't like that." Kady was getting annoyed. She kept telling people what she had seen, but no one believed her. "Mr. Urloch didn't catch that fish. I think the fish jumped into his boat."

The reporter was quiet. "You saw this fish jump into the man's boat?" he finally asked.

"No, I didn't see that. But I saw the same kind of fish jumping high out of the water just before Mr. Urloch went out fishing in his boat. I'm sorry, but that's all I saw. Goodbye." Before the reporter could ask another question, she hung up.

"Hi, Kady. I'm home!"

The girl lowered the book she had just started reading and looked at the clock on her night table. It was only 2:00 so her dad had left work very soon after their phone conversation. *He must've really been worried*, she thought, jumping off the bed.

"Hi, Dad." Kady walked into the kitchen and gave her father a quick hug.

Edgar Gonzalez, a short man with thinning hair and a slight paunch, held Kady tightly and returned the hug. Then he took two steps back and studied his daughter. Her heavily-lashed eyes were puffy and her wavy dark-brown hair looked unkempt, tumbling freely around her shoulders, not neatly tied in the usual ponytail. "Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

"I guess so," Kady said. "I did like you said and tried not to think about what happened. I was reading a pretty good mystery when you came in."

"I listened to the local news driving home and Mr. Urloch's accident was the main story," Edgar said, looking directly into her brown eyes. "Are you sure you saw a fish jump into that boat and attack him?"

"I didn't actually see the fish jump in, but I know Mr. Urloch was fighting with it in the boat...And it wasn't on any fishing pole."

"Maybe it was on the pole first and fell off."

"No." Kady shook her head vehemently. "It wasn't that kind of fight at all. This fish was really trying to hurt Mr. Urloch." She lowered her head. "When they took him out of the lake, he had big cuts and bite marks all over his body," she whispered.

"You shouldn't have seen that."

"Maybe I should have jumped in and tried to help Mr. Urloch." Kady looked up, teary-eyed. "I'm a real good swimmer."

Edgar waved his forefinger at her. "That's crazy talk, Kady. You did the right thing, calling the police and waiting for them. If you went in the water, you'd probably be dead too. I don't want you going into the lake again until they find that fish and kill it."

He smiled and put his arm around the girl. "Let's not talk about this any more...Have you eaten any lunch?"

Kady shook her head.

"I didn't think so. How about I make you something to eat and then we'll play a Scrabble tournament? Bet I can beat you two out of three!"

Kady grinned. "Okay," she said. "But you know I always win."

**If you enjoyed this sample, continue reading. Buy Now at
<http://www.dlitepress.com>**