

# VILLAGER

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## ON THE TOWN

### *Trouble in paradise*

Longtime St. Paulite Charles Locks sets first novel in a far balmier clime

by Bob Gilbert

Charles Locks was living in a beautifully restored Irvine Avenue carriage house behind a Summit Hill mansion built by James J. Hill's family when construction commenced on the I-35E freeway below the Ramsey Hill bluff. The prospect disgusted him so that in 1989 Locks changed Saints. He left St. Paul and moved to the Caribbean island of St. John.

There in the land of eternal summer, Locks spent the next five years running restaurants, living on the beach, absorbing the indigenous culture and getting to know the quirky

characters who inhabit that 26-square-mile island.

The culture shock stimulated his literary imagination. This month Scarletta Press of Minneapolis published Locks' new novel, *Greater Trouble in the Lesser Antilles*. For those who are unable to leave Minnesota this winter for points south, Locks claims that curling up with his book beneath a comforter may be the next best thing.

The novel is populated by a cast of two dozen, including American ex-patriots escaping their sordid past, indigenous West Indian residents and wealthy sybarites in search of reckless abandon. The murder mystery details the island's sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll culture narrated through Locks' first-person point of view.

"Life in the islands was a revelation to me; it was so different from the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood I grew up in," Locks said. "When I left St. Paul that December day, the temperature was below zero. A few hours later I was on St. John, sweating like a pig in this cab sitting beside a bunch of West Indians singing Christmas carols. It was like my whole world had been turned on its head.

"Coming from somewhere else, you notice things that the locals take for granted," he

said. "Had I grown up in the Virgin Islands, I would never have been able to write this book."

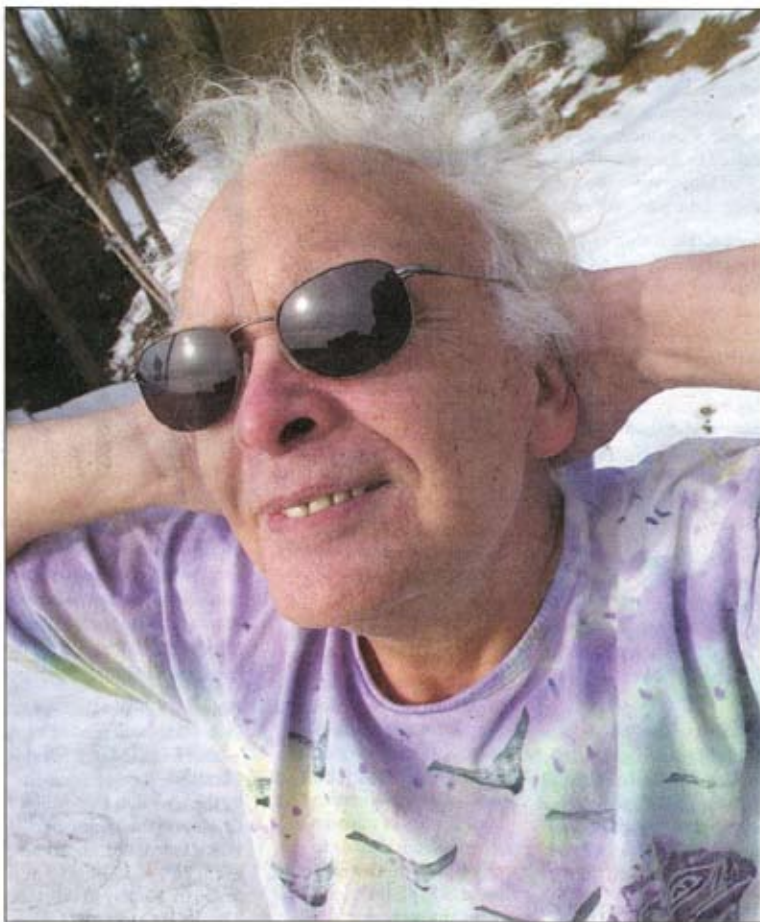
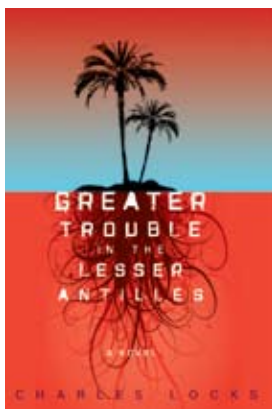
As a lifelong St. Paul resident up to that point, Locks was used to the anonymity of city life. On St. John, he found the beachcomber community fascinating. It was so small-townish that everyone knew everything about everybody else—except their last names.

In *Greater Trouble in the Lesser Antilles*, Locks takes great pains to depict the rhythms of daily island life, the interaction between the locals and the continentals, and the topsy-turvy criminal justice system. He pays equal attention to the area's flora and fauna: tropical plants and free-running goats, pigs, donkeys, cows, mongooses and key deer.

The book's protagonist is Captain Brian Clancy, whose 110-foot sailboat, the *Island Trader*, shows up on the fictional island of St. Judas hours before Hurricane Hugo lashes the island with high winds and waves. Determined to make a new life for himself on St. Judas, the wayward sailor is lured into solving the murder of his friend, Leif the Thief, and in the process comes across sociopathic cops, renegade feds, bales of cocaine, shady characters and a beautiful young paramour with whom the depressed, middle-aged captain falls hopelessly in love.

"What's fascinating about the Antilles is that the name predates the discovery of the islands themselves," Locks said. "The Antilles was a fantasy word for exotic islands even before Columbus sailed the seas looking for a trade route to the East. When the islands were discovered, they became the Antilles."

The United States purchased St. John from Denmark during World War I lest Germany anchor its fleet in the large harbor and threaten the U.S. mainland. Laurence Rockefeller bought much of the island and turned it into a resort in the 1950s. Today, two-thirds of the island is a park,



Charles Locks gives readers a reason to come out of the cold with his mystery novel *Greater Trouble in the Lesser Antilles*. Photo by Brad Stauffer.

compliments of Rockefeller, who donated the land to the National Park Service.

St. John has one of the highest standards of living in the Caribbean. In the 1990s, *Economist* magazine referred to it as "the land of the lotus-eaters," a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*, describing people who live in the drugged, indolent state that gave Locks so much colorful material to draw upon.

"In the great frozen North, the cold weather keeps people on the straight and narrow," Locks said. "But the islands are like the final frontier. It's a place away from civilization and the rules are different."

Locks grew up on Lincoln Avenue in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood and graduated from Central High School. He earned a bachelor's degree in English from Macalester College in 1971.

He supported himself in his early years working at the St. Clair Broiler. Later, he sold real estate and operated the bar in the Commodore on Western Avenue. These days when he is not writing, he works as a painter and contractor.

Apart from his years in the Caribbean, Locks has only left St. Paul one other time. He did a 15-month tour of duty in Vietnam with the U.S. Marine Corps. At Quang Tri and Da Nang, he served as a machine gunner on a truck convoy.

Despite being an eyewitness to that turbulent episode of American history, Locks has never written about Vietnam. He said it never made as deep an impression on him as his experiences in the Virgin Islands did.

*Greater Trouble in the Lesser Antilles* is Locks' first book. "I thought, 'How hard can it be?'" he said. "You walk into a bookstore and there are thousands of titles. But writing a novel is a huge emotional investment." The book took him almost eight years to complete.

"Everybody has a story to tell," Locks said, "but just because it happened to you doesn't make it interesting to others."

Though Locks tells his tale in *Greater Trouble in the Lesser Antilles*, he has a lot more to say about it. He is already at work on its sequel.