

BLACK WATER

Also titled THE OKEECHOBEE

An original historical fiction concept from The House
ryansmann.com / Ryan S Mann

The storm they tried to forget.

This leave-behind is public. The full treatment is under NDA.

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The House owns this original concept, story, and characters.

It does not own the 1928 hurricane or the books of others.

No talent, music, venue, or consultant is attached here.

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Logline

When a Category 4 hurricane drives Lake Okeechobee over its inadequate dike, the lives of Bahamian cane workers, a landowner's son, a schoolteacher keeping the record, and the official who ignored the warnings collide in the deadliest night Florida has never been made to remember.

Synopsis

September 1928. Around the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee, the sugar harvest is at its peak. Bahamian cutter Elias Rolle and his wife Celestine have already crossed one body of water to work a season in the Florida muck. A few miles of cane away, Wade Harper drinks to a dike his father paid to hold. In a one-room school, Ruth Bennett writes down names the county does not count. In a West Palm office, Commissioner Clayton Hale decides the crop is worth the risk.

When the hurricane comes, it does not so much break the lake as lift it. What follows is not only survival. It is the accounting of who is pulled from the water, who is buried without a marker, and who is permitted to forget.

Historical fiction, grounded in documented events.

Why this story. Why now.

The 1928 Okeechobee hurricane killed an estimated 2,500 or more people in the United States, most of them Black migrant farm workers from the Bahamas and the Jim Crow South. Bodies were burned or placed in mass graves at West Palm Beach and Port Mayaca. It remains one of America's least-known major disasters.

Themes of environmental hubris, racial disposability, class, and memory are urgently contemporary. The project is a prestige awards-season theatrical with authentic Florida and Caribbean talent and global resonance.

The film does not sensationalize the dead. It is a way to finally give the forgotten their due on the big screen.

Characters (fictional ensemble)

Elias Rolle - Bahamian cane cutter. Reads weather in the lake.
Must decide what he can still carry when the water comes.

Celestine Rolle - His wife, expecting a child. She has already survived one crossing of water. She will not let this one take her name.

Ruth Bennett - Schoolteacher recording the camps.
Writing a people into the record before they are erased.

Wade Harper - Landowner's son. Certain the dike will hold because his father paid for it to.

Commissioner Clayton Hale - The official who delays evacuation to protect the harvest. Banality, not cartoon villainy.

The Record (citation, not a license)

BLACK WATER does not adapt Their Eyes Were Watching God.

The House names the published path that was laid before.

Citation is not a license. No one named here is attached.

Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937).

Lawrence E. Will, Okeechobee Hurricane and the Hoover Dike (1961).

Eliot Kleinberg, Black Cloud (2003, 2016).

Robert Mykle, Killer 'Cane (2002, 2006).

Wayne Neely, The Great Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 (2014).

Eric L. Gross, Somebody Got Drowned, Lord (1995).

Market, The House, IP

Comparables (not property): 12 Years a Slave. The Revenant.
The Perfect Storm. Schindler's List. Killers of the Flower Moon.

Intended window: adult theatrical. Conceivably 2028, a century
after the lake rose. No exhibition deal is claimed.

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It does not own the history. Ryan S Mann. ryansmann.com.

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