

**A Matter of Pedigree:  
the Southern regional mystery as written by women**

**by Deborah Adams**

No story begins on page one. There is always a convoluted ancestry of greats, grands, and twice-removeds that have intertwined to create the germ of the tale. Likewise no writer comes to page one free of cultural and familial influences.

For Southerners in particular there is strong social and historical pressure to create and share entertaining yarns. In our largely agricultural areas storytelling skills were honed among farm families who turned their isolation and the ability to survive it into a point of pride. To counteract loneliness and stave off madness (although some would say it wasn't successfully staved), these pioneers depended on each other for diversion. Family stories became an evening's entertainment --near-legends of heroic grandfathers who battled the hostile land to build homes, strong grandmothers who defended the hearth and hid the family silver while the men were away, and of course, eccentric but charming aunts, uncles, and cousins who exhibited their own unique versions of bravery.

The stories were convenient and affordable pastimes, and they sustained us during the most difficult spells, so naturally a good storyteller was prized above gold. The tradition continued long after easy communication became widespread and families left behind the farms for crowded cities.

Still, consciously or not, many of us understood that whipping up an entertaining account of some everyday event was an act every bit as important and patriotic as farming or fighting, and in our fondest dreams we were the creators of magnificent yarns that warmed the room and brought satisfaction to our kin.

In recent years the mystery genre has been invaded by Southern writers --a move that should come as no surprise to anyone with even a vague knowledge of our history. Of all the diverse groups in this country, those of us raised below the Mason-Dixon line are most likely to find satisfaction in a good mystery. While the popular old stories explored the human spirit or, as Faulkner preferred, "the human heart in conflict with itself," each was, in some way, a morality play.

It has been noted that Southerners are the only Americans who know how it feels to lose a war, and much has been made of our reluctance to let go of that loss. We seem determined to cling to the harsh perception of ourselves as underdog --vulnerable weaklings fighting valiantly against a large and well-armed foe. But we manage to find in the David and Goliath tales some vindication of our stubborn self-definition, a reassurance that the small but clever scrapper can, indeed, defeat the more powerful enemy. It follows, then, that Southerners would be drawn to the mystery story, the ultimate morality tale in which the small but clever amateur sleuth or lone, outnumbered law officer outwits and defeats a powerful villain.

Having found a fictional genre that fills our need for familiarity and optimism, we set out to make the form fit the tradition of all those comforting tales we grew up with. Southern fiction is so often explained by the superficial elements it contains. "It's a story about the region," critics say, "or written by someone from the region." The most

important element, though, will inevitably be the unique and thoroughly human characters created by the Southern author, and the female author has a particularly strong advantage here.

Keen perception of human behavior is a prerequisite for creating believable fictional characters, and this is a skill that is taught to our young ladies early on. You see, there remains within Southern society a rigid caste system, of which women are the caretakers. It is vital that we be able to size up a stranger within seconds, to understand where he or she fits in the social order, and how to behave toward that person. After a lifetime of practice, a feminine perception has developed that is so sharp, it eerily mimics psychic ability.

As writers, this allows us to collect and file subconsciously all the minute but telling quirks and ticks that add flesh to the character on the page. We instantly assign full pasts and rich presents to the shadowy skeletons in our minds, just as we immediately recognize (or imagine!) the life histories of everyone we meet.

The purpose of our novels is to explore the wealth of people who spring to life from our minds. When a Southern woman sits down to write, she may begin with deliberately constructed plot, clues, and setting, but inevitably, with or without her blessing, the characters will take center stage, drawing the spotlight to themselves and directing the action of the story around their own personalities.

It seems to me, though, that the greatest strength we possess, and the one that so often truly defines a Southern novel, is our immense appreciation for peculiarity. What some view as threatening abnormality, we call enchanting eccentricity. When literary legend Flannery O'Connor was asked why Southerners so often write about freaks, she reportedly replied, "Perhaps it's because we can still recognize them."

In these politically correct times, I feel obligated to provide an explanation for that amusing comment, other than the obvious. Surely Ms. O'Connor meant to suggest that Southerners have a whole-hearted appreciation for aberration and therefore look closer to find and admire the freak in everyone.

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