

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: Dot Jackson

The Book: "Refuge" (Novello Festival Press)

Dot Jackson's debut novel, "Refuge," has just been published by Novello Festival Press, and the 73-year old is still pinching herself: "Now in my antiquity, it is kind of like waking up with a newborn baby in my bed! Surprise, surprise!"

After working for more than 40 years as a journalist, including 15 years as an award-winning investigative reporter for the Charlotte Observer where she was awarded the National Conservation Writer of the Year, Jackson has plenty of experience writing nonfiction. But a novel? Because she wrote for newspapers most of her life, she said, "I just assumed that fiction was never my thing."

But a family scandal--with its innuendo and tidbits of facts--provided an irresistible opportunity for trying her hand at fiction. The seeds of "Refuge" were planted many years ago when an elderly relative told her about a scandalous adventure committed by a cousin, a girl of about 17. "I knew 'adventure' for a woman back then could only mean sex," Jackson quips.

Since the novel's origins were "sort of anchored in truth, that helped me, at least in the beginning," she said, adding that she started writing the novel thirty years ago. She couldn't get the story out of her mind, she said, perhaps "because we are Southern we are sort of baptized in family drama and scandal and will tell all we can get away with." She began the draft of "Refuge", only to find that "something interesting, and eerie, began to take over. It was as though a young woman stepped in, brushed all these lame attempts aside, and said, 'Let ME do this. I have been there.' "

And that, Jackson said, was the novel's character Mary Seneca Steele, a naive Charleston belle, runaway wife and unrepentant lover of her father's first cousin. "And the more I wrote," Jackson said, "the more attached to Mary Sen and Ben Aaron I became, and -- as with so

many wholly-factual stories about life and love and death--I began to feel, sort of fiercely, that they deserved to be heard."

The novel tells about one night in the spring of 1929, when Mary Seneca Steele, a young Charleston society matron, goes to bed while considering what to wear for her suicide. Instead of going through with it, she takes her children and her husband's new Auburn Phaeton and heads for the hills, in search of a new life.

When Jackson finished the novel in the late 1970s, the typed manuscript was delivered to the publisher who had mentored it. It was rejected. "My agent took it over and thought at least twice that he had sold it. But there were glitches, and ultimately, it went under the bed," she said. Literally. Until several years ago, horrified that there was but one surviving manuscript copy, Jackson's friend, Louis Henry, took the manuscript home and put it in his refrigerator, "to thwart fire and mice," she said. That is where it was when long-time friend and book editor Frye Gaillard remembered reading it some 30 years ago, asked to see it again, she said, and "soon after, Novello bought it." That lone chilly manuscript is now a novel, hot off the press, drawing praise from the likes of writer Doris Sanders, who calls the book "an intensely readable novel of the complexity of family ties... Dot Jackson is a true Southern voice, a master storyteller and an Appalachian treasure."

Novello Festival Press is an award-winning independent literary publisher out of Charlotte, NC, with a sterling reputation for supporting its authors, and Jackson has found herself booked at a number of events. A mentor to many writers and artists, she is a natural storyteller who never fails to draw a knot of listeners. At the Open Book recently, her signing table was crowded with friends and readers and curious customers as Jackson took her time, shaking and holding hands, gathering hugs, and laughing.

Born in Miami, during the Depression, Jackson went to college at the University of Miami on a music scholarship, but considers herself, "a product of a Southern Appalachian family, born and raised in exile." She now lives in the shadows of Table Rock, where she is co-founder and on-site manager of the nonprofit Birchwood Center for Arts and Folklife. "In the case of the Appalachian exiles, we were always watchful and ready for a chance to go home," she said. "In my own case, I was in my 50s when I finally got here. And it was so glorious."

The years before she returned “home,” she married in Florida, had three children and lived in Charlotte for 22 years. In addition to the Charlotte Observer, Jackson has worked for the Greenville News and Anderson Independent Mail. One of her fondest memories, she said, is the year she won an Alicia Patterson journalism fellowship to study the economics of Southern Appalachia.

At any rate, Jackson is both philosophical and humorous about the years it took to get “back home” to the Blue Ridge mountains where she now lives: “Got divorced, got fired, got broke but that was okay,” she said. “Along the way, I wrote some books, lived hand to mouth, rediscovered poke sallet and blackberries and creasy greens. Then, we started Birchwood, and I moved here, into an ancient trailer my colleagues call ‘Paradise.’ They may be kidding, but I am not. I love it every bit.”

She also loves the fact that her novel’s characters, who clamored to have their story told, are being discovered by a slew of readers. “The sun has actually risen on these people that I spent so many years with, getting them on paper, and grew to love so much,” she said. “They now have a life.”

Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel “The Garden Angel” (St. Martin’s Press/Picador.) Visit her website, www.mindyfriddle.com, for more information on writing and publishing.