

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: Tommy Hays

The book: THE PLEASURE WAS MINE

by Tommy Hays. St. Martin's Press, \$24.95

After his father was diagnosed with Alzheimers several years ago, Tommy Hays wrote about the experience, hoping to document his father's life and harness the family's grief. He wrote 300 pages. And then he threw those pages out.

Hays found his memoir so dark, "I couldn't do it anymore. Dad was at a nursing home by then. I felt so down. So I made a big fictional leap." After deciding to embark on writing a novel that included a character with Alzheimers, Hays "felt free to write about feelings, and not be weighted down by truth. Fiction freed me up."

"The Pleasure Was Mine," the result of that fictional leap, was published in March by St. Martin's Press. The novel, Hays' third, features protagonist Prate Marshbanks, a retired housepainter whose wife of 50 years, Irene, is suffering from Alzheimer's. While tending to her, Marshbanks agrees to keep his 9-year-old grandson, Jackson, for the summer while the boy's widowed father, Prate's son, visits an artists colony. That their marriage not only survived for fifty years, but flourished, is a source of constant wonder to the plain-spoken, occasionally cantankerous, Prate, who reflects: "How in the world did a tall, thin, fair-skinned beauty and one of the most respected high school English teachers in all of Greenville County, in all of South Carolina for that matter, wind up married to a short, dark, fat-faced, jug-eared house painter?"

A graduate of Greenville High School and Furman University, Hays serves as Executive Director of the Great Smokies Writing Program in Asheville, NC and Director of Creative Writing for the Academy at the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. "The Pleasure Was Mine" is set in Greenville, and local readers will recognize familiar landmarks such as Jones Gap, Pete's Drive-in, and Travelers Rest.

The novel has drawn the kind of glowing reviews that prompt writers and their editors to break out the bubbly. *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* calls the novel, "A beautifully drawn portrait of tragic loss and transcendent love," while *The Charlotte Observer* pronounces it "charming, unpretentious... deeply engaging." *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly* both gave the novel starred reviews, a coveted and uncommon honor. Walter Edgar has recently begun reading "The Pleasure Was Mine" on SC-Public Radio's "Southern Read" at noon on Sundays.

Not bad for a novel that "scared a lot of people off," Hays said. His former publisher, Random House, passed when his editor there felt "Alzheimer's was too depressing" a subject for a novel. Hays' agent later sold the manuscript to St. Martin's Press.

"People assume the third book is easier to write and to publish, but it's not," Hays said. His first novel, "Sam's Crossing," received a glowing notice in the *New York Times Book Review*; his second, "In the Family Way," won the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Award in 2000. "Each book is subject to market forces. I'm doing even more now with my third novel," he said, adding that he is taking the initiative on booking himself at events, touring, and networking with booksellers. For the first time, he has a website

www.tommyhays.com, vital to authors these days for posting excerpts, events, and providing quick contact via email from booksellers and readers.

“The business part of writing is important and consuming, and I can see some people aren’t comfortable with that,” he said. “But you have to contain it eventually,” and get back to the isolated world of writing.

Hays, who lives with his wife, Connie, a family therapist, and their two children in Asheville, began a “checkered career” after college as reporter and editor at a number of weekly newspapers, from Fountain Inn to Connecticut. Meanwhile, he found himself writing “bad, bad, bad” stories and 200 pages of a “bad, bad” novel. He eventually enrolled in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers, where he worked with writers such as Francine Prose and Robert Boswell. He wrote another novel, “Sam’s Crossing,” and landed a New York agent.

Nothing happened. The agent held onto his manuscript for 18 months, and after Hays called, hoping for an update on submissions, she returned the novel to him in September, 1991, with a acerbic but memorable letter, which he has kept to this day.

In it she says, *“I thought I had explained - heaven knows I tried - that when there is news of your book I will be in touch with you. ... I am prepared to believe that there are people in this world who respond positively to nagging, and some of them may be literary agents (although I have yet to meet one); but I am not among them. Talking with you when I have only bad news to report makes me feel like a ship’s officer on the Titanic, trying to explain to an impatient and incredulous passenger that not only will dinner be delayed, but there may well not be any dinner at all, ever ...”*

Hays eventually found another agent who sold “Sam’s Crossing” to Random House.

While a writer’s career, finances and emotions may have more ups and downs than an EKG, Hays, now at work on a Young Adult novel, “wouldn’t do anything else.”

“A lot of people want to make money these days,” he says. “But at parties people still come up to me and say, ‘Oh, I wish I’d been a writer, I’ve been thinking about writing this book in my head for years.’ I come back to that and realize I am trying to live my dream the best I can. That’s comforting.”