

## Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

**The Author:** Ashley Warlick

**The Books:** *Seek the Living* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), *The Summer After June* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), and *The Distance from the Heart of Things* (Houghton Mifflin 1996).

Some writers are inspired to begin their novels with an image. Others with a character. The ideas for Greenville resident Ashley Warlick's novels emerge from setting. "Everything comes out of that: where people are in the world, where they've been," she said, adding "the smells and tastes, the weather provide all the texture for a book." Warlick set her third novel, *Seek the Living* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), here in the upstate. Readers will be delighted to find a pitch-perfect sense of place in the story, as well as familiar landmarks such as The Handlebar.

*Seek the Living* is narrated by 33-year-old Joan Patee, an archivist who longs for a baby and whose husband, Marshall, is perpetually away on business. Her brother, Denny, is working as a cemetery groundskeeper in the upstate. In the course of the novel, Joan discovers that her brother has been digging up some of the graves in the area, and uncovering mysterious remains. She also discovers insight into her own past and present relationships.

Pat Conroy, a fan of Warlick's, has high praise for *Seek the Living*: "She creates an entire world out of a family that has edges, crevices, and seems to have gotten their clues by studying the wrong side of the moon," he writes. "Her prose is silken, and barbed, and clean."

Warlick, who moved to downtown Greenville six years ago with her husband, Ron Friis, a professor of Modern Languages at Furman, wrote her first novel, *The Distance from the Heart of Things* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996), a decade ago, while a junior in college. "I wrote around a full class schedule and a waitressing job, mostly at night," she says. "I think I've always been a better writer, a more conscientious writer, when my time is heavily burdened."

By the time she was 23, Warlick was a published novelist and the youngest ever recipient of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship, a prestigious award with a generous stipend that allowed her to work on her second novel, *The Summer After June* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000). "I didn't have any idea what that prize meant," Warlick said. "I think that's part of what gets lost when you start a career in your early twenties. There's a lot that escapes you because you don't know enough about what you're doing to pay attention. Sometimes, I think back and just put my face in my hands--I must have sounded so dumb so often."

Warlick, who grew up in Charlotte, also spent a good part of her childhood in York County where her father owned farms. "Rural South Carolina held a lot of sway with me," she explained. "For *The Distance From the Heart of Things*, I could ask my father anything I needed to know about vineyards."

However, *The Summer after June* takes place in Galveston, TX, and Warlick found herself “working with a setting I knew little about. I had never even visited Galveston. I read a lot of history about the city, drove there twice and stayed as long as I could.” More recently, her research for *Seek the Living* turned up historical details about local cemeteries such as the Old Stone Church in Clemson. As fascinating as poring over historical documents may be, however, Warlick discovered that research can be addictive and a “sucking pit of procrastination,” for novelists.

“I’ve cut whole swaths of a manuscript that really had nothing to do with anything other than here was something really cool I’d learned,” she said.

A mother of two young children, Warlick works at home, and teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Queens College in Charlotte. She volunteers with the local Emrys Foundation, where she helps line up regional writers to appear at “The Reading Room,” a monthly series of author readings held at The Handlebar. She’s working on a new novel based on the life of MFK Fisher, the famous essayist and food writer. “I’m reading only her work right now, getting a feeling for her habits of phrase, where she was and when,” Warlick said, adding that the novel is set in southern California and Europe in the years before WWII.

Warlick writes “on a computer at a desk that faces a wall, and it’s very, very messy in there, and everything seems very fragile and people avoid the desk altogether.” When working on a manuscript, she reads it out loud for sound, but prefers to work without an outline. “Arching concerns, for me, emerge gradually.”

With three published novels to her credit, Warlick says writing and publishing doesn’t necessarily get easier with each book. “If people don’t buy your last book, your publisher won’t want your next one,” she said. “But I think the amount of money a publisher is willing to commit to support a book is shrinking at an alarming pace,” a frustrating paradox that sometimes makes her “want to run screaming.”

And yet Warlick has sage advice for writers, both published and unpublished: “Read. Write. Read some more. The being published part is something that happens in one day, one very great lucky day, and according to a set of choices people very far away from you and your books are going to make. Your writing has to sustain you for months at a time, years and years at a time. That’s where you should spend your energy.”

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

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