

simply unique



# Finding HOME

Written by Mindy Friddle

WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME how I came up with the idea for my novel, "The Garden Angel," I tell them it all started a dozen years ago with a dilapidated house off White Horse road near a Taco Bell and strip mall. I'd drive by and glimpse the boarded up windows, the sagging wrap-around porch, the neglected garden. The place managed to look both defiant and melancholy, fending off the sprawl and faceless development, holding the modern world at bay. It was for sale, but there were clearly no takers.

One day, I arranged for a realtor to let me inside for a peek. I was immediately taken with the hidden beauty there: stained glass lamps, threadbare rugs, claw foot tubs, water-stained wallpaper. Outside, a kitchen garden was gone to seed, heirloom roses battled kudzu. All that ruined finery!

What kind of people might have lived there, I wondered, back when the nearby textile mills – Union Bleachery and Cone Mill – flourished, back when Sans Souci was a vibrant place, indeed. The house, more than a century old, had been vacant for years and ravaged by trespassers, but the rumor was that two sisters from a once prestigious family had lived – and died – there, spinsters.

I'm a Greenville native and graduated from Berea High. I spent a lot of time in the Sans Souci area as a child, and both my grandmothers still live there. So, it wasn't as if these tantalizing glimpses of historical homes and mills were new sights, only that I had started to see them with a new sense of appreciation.

Later that afternoon, after I'd toured the house, I began writing on a deposit slip while waiting in line at the bank. I envisioned a woman in a claw foot bathtub in an attic of a ramshackle Victorian house. She was soaking, and patting

on a homemade herbal facemask. She was fiercely attached to this ancestral homestead of hers, and she was plotting to... what? Thwart buyers? She was young, but nostalgic and odd – she knitted hair doilies and wrote obituaries for the local newspaper and gardened in the family cemetery. Her voice – sardonic, determined – came to me very quickly. I began to understand that she was in the warm comfort of her homestead, a kind of elegiac, shabby museum that honored her once prominent family, a home she was determined to keep.

What might happen if this character befriended someone out in the modern suburbs, one who finds a home a trap, an agoraphobic who is literally

confined to her house? The idea of home as both a trap and a safety hatch from the world emerged, the pull and poison of that kind of sanctuary. What might the two of these characters do together to face the world out there?

It took me several years to find out.

By the time I finished my novel and sold it in 2003, I lived in a newly constructed house in the suburbs on the eastside of town. It was pristine, well-insulated, with large, airy bathrooms and garden tubs, roomy closets – all those modern conveniences – but I longed for the creaky floorboards and glass doorknobs, the plaster walls and wavy glass of an old house. I missed eclectic neighborhood architecture

– turrets and iron gates on an enormous dwelling, and right next door, a modest bungalow. And so we moved back to downtown Greenville to a historical neighborhood and yes, there are drafts and small bathrooms and tiny closets, peeling paint and leaky faucets, and not nearly enough electrical outlets – but I wouldn't live anywhere else.

A strong attachment to geography, or a "sense of place" is widely seen as a trademark of southern literature. Even these days, when chains and superstores devour our landscape and small towns, there remains, thank goodness, preserved areas and historical neighborhoods. Hampton-Pinckney, Clarendon Avenue, Hampton Heights, Converse Heights, Linley Park,

McDuffie St., Earle Street: we still have our own sense of place.

The house in "The Garden Angel" evolved into a unique structure, a compilation of several homes I admire around Greenville. Alas, the house off White Horse Road that first inspired me is gone. When I discovered that sad fact last year, I got out my bottle of Jameson whiskey – reserved for family tragedies, triumphs and miracles – and toasted that creepy, once-grand homestead that had been bulldozed to make room for a gas station. 

