

# A Sense of Place

*Orientation, at least for the fiction writer, is often in the eye of the beholder*

WRITTEN BY MINDY FRIDDLE

**T**here's this parking garage in downtown Greenville that makes me feel trapped in the surreal staircase of an Escher painting—I drive around and around, stuck on the same level. But then, I've never had a strong sense of direction. Using a compass? Reading topography maps? Yikes. That navigation badge in Girl Scouts always eluded me. These days, despite the modern wonder of GPS—with that nice lady telling you where to exit—I still veer off course. "Recalculating route," the GPS lady repeats, with a certain edge to her voice.

Maybe that explains why one of my favorite things about writing fiction is taking a familiar setting, tweaking it, and making it my own. Or—more accurately—a character's own. You wouldn't believe how liberating it is to depart from a map, wander away from the grid of streets, and imagine a slightly skewed version of a place. Two novels I've written are set in "Palmetto," a thinly veiled Greenville. But the resemblance isn't so much identical as fraternal. Familiar landmarks have a way of appearing in my fiction—only a little warped.

I call one of my fictional places in an upcoming novel McCann Square—the first temperature-controlled shopping center in Palmetto, which once "dazzled the fickle



town like a mistress," and lured away downtown's department stores.

*From the moment it opened in 1968, McCann Square's long passages of indoor shops and artificial lighting, the acres of asphalt parking, left the town smitten. Suddenly, downtown Palmetto, with its paved-over trolley tracks, old-fashioned tattered awnings, and stand-alone three-story brick buildings, seemed shopworn and tired, and a little embarrassing. Who wanted to brave the elements anymore for a pair of socks?*

If you've lived in Greenville long enough and you're of my generation, you might assume that's based on the history of McAlister Square, and you'd be right.

Of course, my grandmother remembers when shopping was limited to downtown Greenville, during the post-war boom of the 1950s. On Friday nights, she strolled along Main Street, shopping at the crowded department stores and browsing in the new dress shops. If you needed gloves or shoes or curtains—anything fashionable—downtown was the place to go.

I can imagine just how liberating a little "walking-around" money felt after a decade of economic depression and a world war. Finally the sounds of noisy commerce had returned to Main Street: coins rattling, cash registers ringing, and downtown trolley bells clanging.

That was before the mall, of course. In the next decade, my mother's generation took shopping inside. When McAlister Square opened its doors in 1968, it was the largest mall in South Carolina, anchored by Ivey's and Meyers-Arnold, department stores that shuttered their downtown locations. In 1982, when I had a driver's license, a part-time job, and a penchant for a little retail therapy of my own, McAlister Square included shops such as the Record Bar, where I'd buy REO Speedwagon and Styx cassette tapes. I put a dress on lay-away at Casual Corner and bought my first Member's Only jacket at Ivey's.

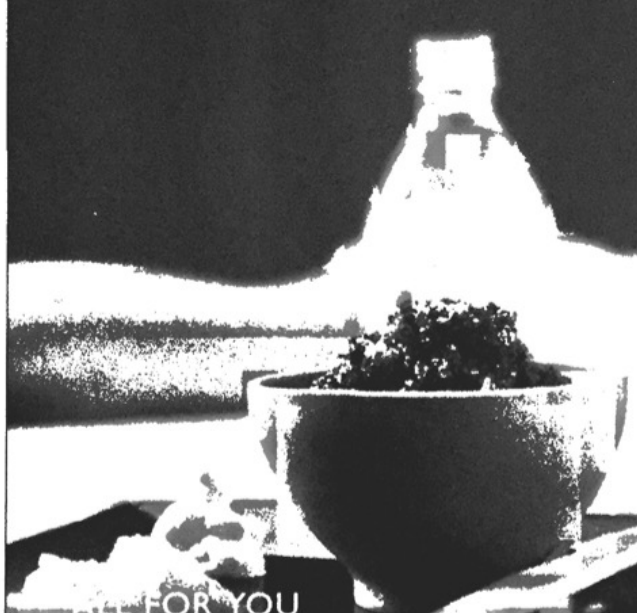
If you remember McAlister Square in its heyday, you may find strolling through it now a little disorienting. By the 1990s, in the face of increased competition from Haywood Mall, McAlister Square began to lose its stores, and its fate looked grim until

it was rescued and reinvented. These days the center is anchored by Greenville Tech and the University Center. As I walked through its eerily quiet corridors recently, passing government offices, classrooms, a lone restaurant, and a pipe shop, I was unprepared for a twinge of nostalgia. The same cheery lights overhead, the familiar tiles underfoot, the empty stage in the center, on which countless school choruses had sung. Same structure, but a different place entirely.

McCann Square is also rescued from abandonment, but in an altogether different way, when investors turn the place into a "faith-based commerce mall." Renamed "Crossroads," it attracts stores such as Hole in the Sole Shoe Repair, Pray and Pay Title Loans, and Testamunts Candy Shop. One character in the novel, Dora, harbors an uneasy attachment to the revamped shopping center. In her wayward youth Dora frequented McCann Square, but now she is trying—and failing—to forget her past and

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reinvent herself. But try as she may, she still sees McCann Square winking at her behind the veil of Crossroads.

McAlister Square and the fictional Crossroads clearly share a similar history and appearance, but when the fate of Crossroads takes an entirely different trajectory a new landscape emerges.

In a similar fashion, there is an old house that figures prominently in my first novel that was originally based on a boarded up

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residence off White Horse Road. By the time I finished the first draft, the house had sprouted cupolas and spires—a composite of architecture from Earle Street and Hampton Pinckney—moved across town, and gained a family cemetery in the backyard. In other words, the city-swallowed, once-grand estate in the story had come into its own.

Still, some folks want to know where the "real" house is. They want to visit it, to see a solid structure, perhaps to compare it with the house they pictured in their heads. As for me, I like to believe that imagination transcends boundaries of geography. If you think it up, you can make it better.

"I created a cosmos of my own," William Faulkner said about Yoknapatawpha County, the setting for most of his novels and short stories, patterned upon Faulkner's actual home in Lafayette County, Mississippi. In his 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, he even included a hand-drawn map of his "apocryphal county," signing it, "William Faulkner, Sole Owner & Proprietor."

I don't know if I'll ever go as far as sketching a map. But when people tell me they loved getting lost in my book, it pretty much makes my day.