

books about the south

Neat and stylishly decorated, Ashley Warlick's warm South Carolina home invites relaxation. As the author cheerfully gives a quick tour, her husband and young daughter depart for a morning outing, while the family's Chesapeake Bay retriever barks in the huge backyard.

Tour completed, Ashley curls up on a sofa, tucking her feet under her legs. "As a kid, I was a voracious reader," the Charlotte native begins, running a hand through her long, light brown hair. "My mom said I would read books so fast, I wouldn't even break the spine." At age 4, she "read" *Snow White* to her younger brother, having memorized the words and appropriate page-turning points. Still, she never thought about becoming a writer.

In fact, in high school she remembers penning an "abysmal" short story. "Let's see, the plot was a blind woman who's died," Ashley stage-whispers melodramatically. "It's all told in flashbacks—but she falls out a window." Storyteller and listener pause, then simultaneously break into laughter. "It was horrible!" she hoots.

Yet, something clicked in her college creative writing classes. One semester she talked a professor into an independent-study class for which she was to produce a 30-page fictional piece. Then she procrastinated. "I ended up FedExing him 30 pages just before the grades were due," she says. "I think the 30th page ended in mid-sentence."

When a voice mail message from the professor demanded she see him "immediately," she envisioned dire consequences. Instead, "he told me he sent the first page to his agent and his editor, and they were 'suitably impressed,'" Ashley recalls. That short teaser eventually became her first book, *The Distance From the Heart of Things*. At 23, she became the youngest recipient ever of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship. Next, she published *The Summer After June*, again with Houghton Mifflin. She's now at work on her third novel.

"Ideas come from all over the place," she says. "Once you get the basis of it on the page, something's got to come alive and start generating its own path and direction."

Family does receive top priority for this successful young writer. "If it were necessary for me to stop writing professionally in order to do something for my daughter,



Novelist Ashley Warlick never thought she'd become a writer. Then a hastily assembled paper caught the interest of a publisher.

there's no contest," she says. But, published or not, she can't stop thinking like a writer. "It's like my mind is grained in that direction—I can't find another way to think about the world," she says.

Just then, Ashley's husband and child return. "That's my mommy," announces the blond moppet, pointing to a photo on a book jacket. In this home, such acknowledgement easily surpasses best-seller status.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

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