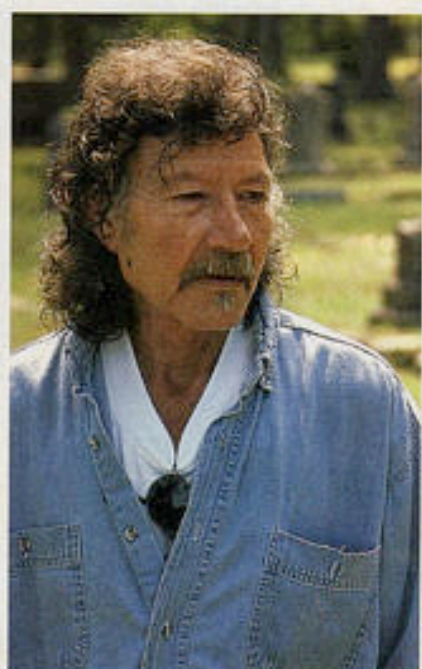


books about the south

Meet three novelists whose early works promise enduring contributions to the South's literary bounty.



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LEFT: Talk show host Oprah Winfrey spotlighted Melinda Haynes's book, *Mother of Pearl*, and catapulted the Alabama author to fame. But Melinda's aim remains "to write something that I can look back on years from now and say, 'That was a true thing.'" CENTER: Phyllis Perry often writes in a local Atlanta cafe among friends and neighbors. RIGHT: William Gay of Tennessee finds beauty and poetry in the dark recesses of the rural South.

Trying to narrow a list of Southern authors is like trying to choose specific grains of sand when sculpting a sandcastle with a bulldozer. Worthy regional writers abound.

Nevertheless, we polled our staff, scoured book notices, and asked opinions at literati gatherings. All agree: These three authors seem destined for posterity, making them writers to watch.

Melinda Haynes

"I just finished *Mother of Pearl* and I loved it," said the low-voiced woman on the phone. "How did you do it?"

The call to Melinda Haynes's unlisted number was a surprise. The Mobile author had received advanced copies of her debut novel, but the book had not hit the presses. Nonetheless, Melinda obligingly launched into an explanation.

She told the caller about how writing helped her manage the crippling panic disorder that had ruled her life. She revealed how the embarrassing affliction drove her to drop out of school in the 11th grade. She talked about compen-

sating for her lack of education by hungrily reading great works.

She described meeting her husband, Ray, after he read the first story she'd ever written. "He said I wrote like a tall woman," recalled the 5-foot, height-sensitive author. She explained that Ray inspired her to create *Even Grade*, the book's main character.

Finally, she drew a breath and apologized to the caller. "I'm sorry," Melinda said. "I forgot to ask your name."

"This is Oprah Winfrey," replied the television host. With that phone call, Melinda hit the literary mother lode with *Mother of Pearl*. Oprah selected the book for her summer book club choice, prompting the publisher, Hyperion, to change that first printing order from a mere 6,800 copies to 750,000.

Oprah's support propelled the book,

and Melinda and Ray modestly upgraded their lives. They moved from their mobile home to "a house with a doorbell," the writer says.

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Melinda Haynes

But, the author contends, the real transformation in her life occurred when she first began writing. When she and Ray married, the groom bought his bride a computer instead of an engagement ring. She, in turn, began writing a novel for him as a gift. With each chapter, Ray urged her to send the work to a publisher, but she resisted. She feared rejection would kill the creativity consuming her.

"Sometimes we'd be on a motorcycle, and I'd make Ray pull over so I could write something down," she says. "All these things in my past that I cursed, this affliction that drove me indoors, really showed me a way to expand that internal world. I could transfer

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all these deep emotions into these characters."

Without his wife's knowledge, Ray sent 117 pages of the book to an agent. Melinda first learned of his subterfuge when the agent called to accept her as a client. Within months, the manuscript sold to Hyperion. Melinda's second book, *Chalktown*, set in Mississippi, comes out in May, and she's working on a third.

Says the author, who still suffers panic attacks, "I've decided I'm not going to stop doing something because I'm afraid." She refuses medication to suppress the disorder, because it leaves her unable to write. Instead, she braves public appearances armed only with her newfound courage.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

Phyllis Perry

Never underestimate the power of the written word. In subtle and bold ways, books change lives forever. As an adolescent, Phyllis Alesia Perry opened her mind to a new world because of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Phyllis's mother received Angelou's classic memoir as just another Book-of-the-Month Club selection, never realizing how deeply it would influence her daughter.

"Even though I was too young to read it, I remember being completely astonished because Maya Angelou's life was familiar to me," says Phyllis. "It was about a black girl in the South. For the first time in my life, I realized you could actually get a book published about you."

Even before this revelation, Phyllis passionately read favorite works by writers such as Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, and Madeleine L'Engle. These authors as well as many others also influenced her. Still, Phyllis explains, "The black writers came along and said, 'Okay, you love books; you love words, but did you know

you can write about yourself?'"

Born in Atlanta but raised in Tuskegee, Alabama, Phyllis began working at the weekly paper, *The Tuskegee News*, after graduating from college. She went on to work for newspapers in Tupelo, Mississippi, and Montgomery before joining

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution for a 10-year span.

During this time, Phyllis kept ideas and thoughts for books in journals, which became the beginning of a novel.

"I had a handful of friends who knew I was doing this stuff, and one of them kept bugging me to see it,"

she recalls. "She read it and said, 'I think you should show this work to my agent.'" The agent accepted Phyllis as a client.

For the next six months, Phyllis worked without stopping to complete *Stigmata*, a haunting psychological tale of a young black woman who inherits her grandmother's quilt and begins a search for herself and the past.

When Hyperion accepted the book, Phyllis worked with the same editor who worked on the widely recognized tale of Irish woe, *Angela's Ashes*.

Stigmata greatly appealed to readers and prompted translations in three languages. Phyllis quit her job to devote a couple of years to the book's promotion. Today, she lives in Atlanta and works at Morehouse School of Medicine, while creating her second novel, a prequel to *Stigmata*.

In a sense, Phyllis has come full circle from that youthful encounter with Maya Angelou's life-changing, powerful writing. The author remembers her mother's reaction when the Book-of-the-Month Club honored *Stigmata*. "My mother thinks this is so ironic or prophetic," Phyllis says with a chuckle.

Undoubtedly, Phyllis's book is also making crucial differences in the lives of others. And so the circle continues.

Sara Askew Orr ▶

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