

books about the south



I was in my late forties by the time I started writing," says author Pat Cunningham Devoto. Now 60, this willowy Atlanta resident radiates a youthful glow.

Her constant smile, gracious manner, and warm Southern drawl invite instant rapport.

"I wrote this manuscript about 10 years ago. Then I just threw it in a drawer and left it," she says of her debut novel, *My Last Days as Roy Rogers* tells of the friendship among black and white children in 1950s Alabama during the polio epidemic. The title represents the children's dwindling time of innocence.

With help from her sisters, Joanne and Sally, and friends of friends of friends, Pat's put-aside manuscript eventually ended up with the president

Pat Cunningham Devoto never envisioned life as a writer. Now she's the author of two well-received, critically acclaimed novels.

of Warner Books. The moment Pat found out that Warner wanted to publish her work, she scribbled down the date and time for posterity—after joyously leaping up and down on the bed a few times.

Until then, Pat had followed the script written for many women of her generation. She was born in Florence, Alabama, where her father farmed while her mother stayed home with the couple's five children. Pat received a bachelor's in education from the University of Tennessee and returned home after graduation. "This friend of mine and I were the only two girls that were not married in Florence at the time," she laughs. So Pat headed for Atlanta "to find some really romantic job. I thought

they'd love to have me as a reporter at the [Atlanta] Journal. They were like, 'Puh-leeze.' So I took a job teaching [history]. I loved it." Next she married, had children, and gave up teaching to raise her family.

Along the way she satisfied her intense devotion to tennis, serving with the U.S. Tennis Association and working the tennis venue at the Atlanta Olympics. She also taught the game to inner-city youth and developed a Southeastern adult tennis league. She's still involved with the game, but when sons Andy and Mike moved out on their own and her marriage ended, Pat faced a turning point.

"You think you have one life. And then, as they say, one door closes and another opens," she says. Her schedule now consists of meetings with editors in New York, book tours, and invitations to read for book clubs. She beams as she describes one group that served wine in paper bags, representing Pat's bootlegging character, Mr. Jake.

Out of the Night That Covers Me, Pat's second book, which came out in January, is the story of 8-year-old John McMillan. The bespectacled, puny child is confined to a basement by his mother to protect him from polio. The story tells what happens to the child when his mother dies. John's harsh introduction to the bleak farm of his aunt, cousins, and abusive alcoholic uncle nearly kills him. He toughens and grows in character, learning from such figures as the Judge, a banker of quiet ethics, and Tuway, a disfigured black man whose need to help others spills over to John. Pat skillfully moves John from a self-centered child to a wise young man, capable of noble decisions that would give most adults pause. The story is a portrayal of the human spirit and how it can triumph even when life delivers moral choices in shades of gray.

Of course, this novelist has a firsthand understanding of life's choices—and how triumph resides in even the least likely. *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

For more books, visit southernliving.com (AOL keyword: Southern Living).