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Living

BOOK BUZZ

Storytellers find fertile ground in Lowcountry

By **DON O'BRIANT** / dobriant@ajc.com

It may be too early to create a category called Lowcountry Lit, but suddenly bookstores seem to be awash in novels draped in Spanish moss and smelling of the salt marsh.

At least half a dozen novels set on the South Carolina coast are being published this spring and summer. Already in stores are Sue Monk Kidd's "The Mermaid Chair," Karen Robards' "Superstition," Dorothea Benton Frank's "Pawleys Island" and Patti Callahan Henry's "Where the River Runs." Mary Alice Monroe's "Sweetgrass" will be published in July and Anne Rivers Siddons will add "Sweetwater Creek" on Sept. 1.

One obvious reason for the proliferation of Lowcountry novels is that many of the writers — including Frank and Siddons — live on



Paula Illingworth

Anne Rivers Siddons' next novel, "Sweetwater Creek," is set on Wadmalaw Island, S.C.

the coast. Frank, who grew up on Sullivan Island, seems to have found a home on best-seller lists with novels such as "Isle Palms," "Shem Creek," "Sullivan's Island" and now "Pawleys Island."

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Siddons, who fled from Atlanta traffic several years ago and moved to Charleston, recently bought a house on Fripp Island, S.C., near the home of another author who has set fiction in the region — Pat Conroy. Siddons is following her best-selling beach books “Islands” and “Lowcountry” late this summer with “Sweetwater Creek,” a novel set on Wadmalaw Island.

“It’s almost impossible *not* to write about the Lowcountry,” Siddons says. “When you cross the bridges going to the islands, it’s as if you’re entering another world, an older world.”

Frank agrees that the atmosphere of mystery and legend makes it fertile ground for fiction. In her new novel, lawyer Abigail Thurmond comes out of retirement to help a young artist on the island who is involved in a bitter divorce and custody battle with her husband in Charleston.

“The real story is about the secrets,” Frank says. “And Pawleys is such a magical, mystical place. Since the day Edgar Allan Poe dug his toes in the pristine sands of Sullivan’s Island to write ‘The Gold Bug,’ generation after generation of writers has tried to solve the mysteries of the South. It may have something to do with living closer to nature. On the other hand, it may be the ghosts of our past.”

Pawleys Island also is the setting of Robards’ thriller “Superstition.” The plot involves a big-city cop who moved to the island to be police chief, a sexy female TV reporter investigating the mysterious deaths of three teenagers 15 years ago, and a mayor determined to keep the

MEET THE AUTHOR

► Dorothea Benton Frank will sign books at 2 p.m. Saturday at Barnes & Noble in Alpharetta.

7660 North Point Parkway, 770-993-8340. Also, she’ll talk about her new novel at 7 p.m. Monday at the Margaret Mitchell House, 990 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. \$8. 770-578-3502, www.gwtw.org.



program from airing.

In “The Mermaid Chair,” the follow-up to her best-selling novel “The Secret Life of Bees,” Kidd writes about Jessie Sullivan, a middle-aged woman who leaves her family behind to look after her troubled mother on Egret Island. While there, she begins to suspect her mother is keeping a secret about the death of Jessie’s father 33 years earlier.

Secrets also are a part of Atlanta writer Callahan Henry’s new novel, “Where the River Runs,” a Lowcountry tale of Meridy Dresden, who returns to South Carolina to protect the reputation of an old friend who is being unfairly blamed for a fire that killed Meridy’s first love.

“There’s something rich and mysterious and lush and unexplainable about the

Lowcountry,” Henry says. “The way my characters interact with the landscape is how they would interact with person.”

One of the main characters in Henry’s novel is an old Gullah woman, who inspired the author to do a lot of research before writing.

“I’m not an expert on Gullah culture,” says Henry, who has a vacation home on Da fuskie Island. “I wanted to make sure I got it right.”

As fans of Siddons might expect, a dark secret also is the heart of her forthcoming “Sweetwater Creek.” It is the story of Lilly Parmenter, who is left virtually alone after the disappearance of her mother and the death of her old brother. Her father and brothers are too busy raising Boykin spaniels to pay attention to her. Then Charleston debutante Lulu Wentworth arrives, fleeing from her hectic social life, with a secret that will tear Lilly’s world apart.

“It’s about loss and how they both come to terms with it,” Siddons says. “As for secrets, I don’t know any family down here who doesn’t have an untold story. There’s a lot going on under the surface.”

COMING SUNDAY IN ARTS & BOOKS

► **Leisure Lit**, your complete guide to summer reading. We’ll tell you what’s hot, what’s cool and what’s coming up.