

FAMILY SECRETS AND AMAZING GRACE

a review by Elaine Thomas

Patti Frye Meredith. *South of Heaven: A Novel*. Mint Hill Books, 2022.

ELAINE THOMAS is a hospital chaplain who holds an MDiv from Duke and a BA from St. Andrews Presbyterian College (now University). She grew up in Richmond County, NC, and now lives in Wilmington. She won the North Carolina Writers' Network's 2018 Rose Post Competition, recently received second prize in the 2022 short story contest for Living Springs Publishers' *Stories Through the Ages*, and has published in numerous small magazines.

PATTI FRYE MEREDITH lives in Chapel Hill, NC. She has worked in commercial and public television, including North Carolina Public Television. A native of Galax, VA, she has deep family roots in the North Carolina Sandhills. She holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Memphis. Her stories have appeared in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Still*, and *Mulberry Fork Review*.



COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE READERS PODCAST

Even if Tolstoy's assertion that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way resonates for you, you will no doubt find at least one familiar source of trauma with which to identify in Patti Frye Meredith's *South of Heaven*. The characters in this engaging first novel face all sorts of miseries, some torn straight from contemporary headlines, others known well throughout the history of the human heart: emotional scars from the loss of parents at a tender age, the generational costs of alcohol abuse, Alzheimer's and creeping dementia at the declining end of the age spectrum, infidelity, homophobia, guilt and shame, secrets and lies. And one that we all feel acutely these days, destruction caused by unpredictable weather patterns.

Meredith's characters may be challenged, even damaged, but they are also funny and lovable, and, while they don't always realize it themselves, they are struggling toward self-acceptance and peace. None of us is perfect "south of heaven." We all make mistakes. We all have to learn to forgive ourselves and those around us. This unhappy family's story is

ultimately a story of learning to live in and accept grace and, through that acceptance to bring into the light the secrets they have worked so hard, for so long, to hide.

South of Heaven is told in chapters from the consecutive individual perspectives of three main characters – Fern McQueen, her sister Leona Thomas, and Fern's twenty-six-year-old son Dean. Meredith does not aim for literary pyrotechnics but uses a straightforward, conversational style familiar to anyone who understands life in small Southern towns. Think of Clyde Edgerton's intimate knowledge of smalltown North Carolina and his easygoing storytelling style. The result is warm and respectful, even as the family in Meredith's novel wrestles with the burdens of their personal and collective demons. The reader just wants to sit a spell on the porch with these people to listen to their stories and maybe hug a neck or two. For those who hail from similar smalltown backgrounds, these voices ring with authenticity.

Fern has settled into a too-safe middle-aged life. Her days consist primarily of taking care

of her grown son and an aging aunt and working in the office of the local bureau of a countywide newspaper. She judges herself harshly for what she views as past indiscretions and has withdrawn into herself for fear of seeing similar judgment in the eyes of others in her community and the church she no longer attends. From page one, we feel Fern's guilt about her young husband who never returned from the war in Vietnam: "Mac's going missing was a misery dealt by the hand of God." Worse, to her it is a "misery she'd brought upon herself" (1). She holds tight to her deep belief that falls from grace mark a life, asking, "Who could recall a single thing Adam and Eve did before that apple got picked?" (8).

Fern's sister has built a life that seems the exact opposite. By external appearances, at least, Leona is polished and perfect, married to a successful doctor, living in a beautiful home, with a happy family life as a mother and grandmother. But she and Fern share the same traumatic childhood, and each has adapted in her own way to the scars as each sought the security of feeling in control. When things gone awry bring Leona back to the family home for a while, the two sisters must



COURTESY OF PATTI FRYE MEREDITH

readjust to one another and learn to face the damage they are doing themselves through the secrets they carry.

Fern's son Dean wishes to be viewed as a grown man but knows he is somehow different. He talks often in his mind with his lost father, whom he never knew, having been born after Mac went missing in the jungles of Vietnam. A gifted mechanic, Dean longs to be a serious businessman. His entrepreneurial attempts to become an emu farmer offer some of the book's livelier scenes. The openness and purity of Dean's heart help the entire family progress beyond the secrets

they have held onto for far too long. Words he delivers in a significant culminating scene may draw tears from readers who feel as humbled as his own mother does witnessing Dean's courage and capacity to forgive.

Set in the North Carolina Sandhills, in the upper Moore County town of Carthage during the 1990s, *South of Heaven* vividly captures its time and place. Even the names of Dean's two emus convey the political climate of the day (those names withheld here so as not to spoil that for the reader). Fern and Leona's family goes back generations in upper Moore County, where longtime citizens all seem to know one another well. They live in the historic family home, complete with a grandmother's prominent portrait and in need of a bit of updating. Meredith captures well the simultaneous suspicion and affection held for the southern part of the county, with wealthy outsiders who flock to Pinehurst to play golf and the comparative affluence and resources of Southern Pines. She understands the important role of smalltown newspapers in that time and place. And she knows the central influence a church can hold within smalltown communities, a place where both gossip and grace can be sought and found. ■



COURTESY OF PATTI FRYE MEREDITH