

A Word from Nan Graham...

An early jobette (I can't really call it a job) I had after graduation from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was as a soup maker. The **Times** ad read "Soup maker needed at elementary school on West 113th Street and Riverside Drive in Manhattan." How hard can that be? thought I, whose highest culinary achievement at that time was cooking hard-boiled eggs.

I got the job and learned that it consisted of opening packets of Lipton's chicken noodle soup and dumping the contents into a pot of boiling water. Exactly my skill level. Job duration: two weeks. Turns out it was really a test, like those in fairy tales, to see if I were competent to teach fourth grade at the school. I passed the soup test and began my twenty-eight-year career teaching English.

Lesson learned: Lowly jobs may lead to a career.

The author business really began as something else, too. For me, writing means radio... and one of the best jobettes I've had, as the "Southern" commentator on our public-radio station, WHQR in Wilmington, North Carolina. The fact that I have had a commentary due every other Thursday since 1995 is the equivalent of a literary cattle prod.

I interviewed for the commentator job with Aileen Le Blanc, the no-nonsense producer at WHQR at the time, who asked me what kind of stories I wrote. I really hadn't written in years, but I told her I had worked on an essay recently about the maimed people I remembered

so vividly as a child growing up in Alabama. People with missing limbs and fingers and glass eyes populated my youth but do not seem in evidence so much in the modern world.

The blood momentarily drained from Aileen's puzzled face. I hastened to add that these real-life characters were usually accompanied by a cautionary tale about not leaning out of car windows or running with a stick in your hand. And that I always admired the understated courage of those people who seemed to accommodate themselves to the vagaries of life with such grace.

We were interrupted by a tap on the door. It was a deep-sea-diver friend of Aileen's who had stopped by to say hello.

"And how are you doing, Sam?"

"Well, had a bit of an accident a few weeks back. Out at a salvage site off the Outer Banks. On the last dive...caught my wedding ring on a bolt."

He held up his left hand...missing the fourth finger. Aileen and I looked at each other. It was the cosmic seal of approval.

That "maimed" essay Aileen and I talked about on the interview and five years of other assorted essays make up my first book, **Turn South at the Next Magnolia: Directions from a Lifelong Southerner**. Like the soup maker turned teacher, even better things were in store for the commentator.

This book, **In a Magnolia Minute: Secrets of a Late Bloomer**, is even more fun than the first. I have become an on-the-road author and have loved meeting Southerners and, yes, those from "someplace else" as we say, avoiding the "Y" word. We always seem to find familiar themes and funny stories to exchange.

The South is the place these days, the fastest growing

section in the country, according to statistics. The way I figure, in a few years, everybody will be a Southerner...and that's a good thing. We're quirky, independent, eccentric, opinionated, and more well-mannered than most...usually. Everybody is a storyteller...it's in the genes.

Language is one of the earmarks (please excuse!) of the Southern scene. Liberally sprinkled with colorful metaphors, our speech is as layered with similes as a banana pudding with vanilla wafers. The new baby is "not even big as a butterbean." Or "Cud'n Clarisse is sure looking prosperous" meaning Clarisse must have gained a minimum of sixty-three pounds since you last saw her. My sister has a rabbit named Rabbit E. Lee, and we lived three doors down from a marine colonel named States Rights Jones. You won't find that in Nebraska.

A sure sign that the South is the Comeback Kid: food. A recent **New York Times Magazine** section actually featured deviled eggs, elevating the ubiquitous mainstay of every funeral and reunion south of the Mason-Dixon line to haute cuisine. The **Times** deviled egg recipe calls for butter. You heard right. Four heart-stopping tablespoons of real butter mixed with the usual mayonnaise. I admit having to lie down and put a cold compress on my head on reading that heresy.

Native foods on the national scene include North Carolina's own Krispy Kreme donuts, which promise to raise the blood sugar of every citizen on the planet. Year-round iced tea--sweet, of course!--is also available to Americans not born in God's country, joining Pepsi and Co-Cola in the pantheon of vintage Southern champagnes.

The Southernization of the country is well under

way. I have lived through hurricanes, cancer, race riots, and an influx of folks to these parts in numbers you wouldn't believe. And since growing up Southern and growing old Southern is my shtick, I feel right in the thick of it. Like Brer Rabbit in the briar patch, I'm loving every minute!



*Praise for **Turn South at the Next Magnolia***

As pleasingly Southern as a perfectly baked buttermilk biscuit.

~Winston-Salem Journal

Charming.

~Birmingham News

Nan Graham has managed to capture "live" many of the nooks and crannies of everyday life in the South of yesterday as well as today—family, food, fun, and more—that keeps insiders as well as outsiders fascinated with this place we call home.

~Clyde Edgerton

Nan Graham is as Southern as black-eyed peas, scuppernon wine, she-crab soup, Crimson Tide tail-gating and a dog with ticks. She is so relentlessly Southern, she makes me feel that I was born in Minnesota and Bailey White in Ohio.

~Pat Conroy



About the Author

Nan Graham was born in Tallahassee, Florida. She spent her childhood in Columbia, South Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; Summerville, South Carolina; and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She attended Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes University), the University of Alabama, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she received a B.A. in English. She received her M.A.T. in English from the Citadel.

Graham has worked as a soup maker in Manhattan, a clerk in the Empire State Building bookstore, and a personnel trainer at Holmes Department Store in New Orleans. She is a graduate of Muffler U. in Houston, though her career in the muffler world was mercifully short.

*She began her teaching career in Manhattan and has taught first grade and high school for students with learning disabilities. She presently teaches honor classes in Southern literature at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Graham has been a biweekly commentator for WHQR Public Radio since 1995. Her first book, **Turn South at the Next Magnolia**, was on the SEBA bestseller list.*

Nan Graham has two married children and lives in Wilmington, North Carolina, with her husband, Ernie, and Sumter, their aging semi-feral cat.



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Reading Group Guide



by Nan Graham