The Southern Woman Writer

by Jill McCorkle

Editor's note: *Author Jill McCorkle presented this speech sponsored by the Round Table on the Status of Women in Librarianship.*

Quite often I'm asked to speak as a *woman* writer or as a *southern* writer, sometimes as a *southern woman* writer and then inevitably I'm asked the question: Does it bother you to be labeled as a woman or as a southerner? Since both adjectives are accurate and will remain so, I have to say I am NOT bothered. To say otherwise is to commit myself to a lifetime of bothers. I'm not one who believes in needless suffering. As a writer, I rely on what I know, and to take away my knowledge of my own southeastern North Carolina landscape or my sex, is to rob me of a lot of valuable information. I find that with myself, with my characters, with anyone I've ever met, it is the process of categorizing that ultimately gives us our own sense of identification. Certainly within fiction, it's important to make a character as believeable as possible. The more believeable he or she is, the more believeable the situation and thus, the easier it is for the reader to identify. I think a lot of people shy away from adjectives for fear that they will be locked into a limited audience, but to say that a southern woman writer would only be of interest to southern women is absurd.

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Although I have lived other places, when I sit down to write, the setting that comes to my mind is one that looks tremendously like my hometown of Lumberton. But it doesn't look like Lumberton does now. It looks like the Lumberton of my childhood, I-95 making its way through and bringing with it a Pizza Hut (before that we had to drive to Fayetteville) and motels other than those with sleazy reputations. For me, that interstate was and is symbolic; it was the bridge, the beginning of the New South, the connective device between the old and the new. I-95 finds its way into my work often.

Within my language, the southerness creeps in even when I don't invite it. For example when I received my editor's comments on my novel *July 7th*, she had circled where a character said, "I might could go" and she wrote in the margin: I don't think Kate would use poor grammar, do you?

I wrote back and said, "Well, she might would, because I am twenty-five years old and this is the first time I've been told that something is wrong with that construction."

My husband is from New York and so he's always calling little things to my attention, like he might ask me what is the difference between saying Who was there and Who *all* was there? We crack windows and cut lights and mash elevator buttons — all rather violent acts — and then we set abut *fixing* everything: hair and supper and *to go out.*

I suppose in the same way that southerness is an unavoidable part of my writing, so is being a female. I feel that within my experience (which encompasses what I have observed and imagined as well as what I have lived) I have seen dramatic changes in the roles of women. I do not come from a long line of literary women, but I do come from a long line of creative ones. The difference is that instead of a nice bound volume to file on a shelf, their creations were either eaten later that day or washed threadbare over the next several years. Because of this realization, I have a great respect for the domestic arts, and it shows itself in my work again and again. People are always sewing and cooking or planting or building. I believe that it's the same energy that fuels a novel and, though my grandmother and I never discussed literature, this is what she gave me: the energy and sense of how to have a vision and then to set about bringing it to life, be it with bread dough or fabric scraps or hammer and nail. And along with this, I also — thanks to my grandmother, great-aunt, mother and others — developed a method of storytelling that encompasses wide, sweeping paths of information. I used to think it was a strictly southern thing, but my mother-in-law who grew up in Brooklyn also practices the fine art of what I call the Historical Meandering Method of Storytelling. It goes something like, "I can't wait to tell you what happened to poor Betty Jane Doe, but first let me remind you that Betty Jane used to be Betty Jane Smith, her daddy owned the old hardware store which was there on the corner where the A&P is now." The hook is set. We know that sooner or later we WILL learn what happened to Betty Jane; in the meantime, just sit back and take in the sights and history lesson. This is where growing up and hanging out with the women crosses into my location and strong sense of place. I know my hometown as it was when my grandmother was a child, when my mother was a child, and when I was a child. As explored in my novel, *Tending to Virginia*, such knowledge is very

important. It is our heritage; it's what makes each and every one of us someone unique with a unique story to tell.

My grandmother was born in 1896 and I've never known anyone as self-sufficient as she was. She only went through the eighth grade. She was widowed in her mid-fifties and yet she knew how to take care of and control her world. I learned a lot by observing her. I was able to glimpse the life of another era because she lived as if we were still in the depression. By choice, I used to go spend the night with her almost every weekend and even then, I knew that I was witnessing an important contrast. On one side of town, there she was, her day controlled by the weather, neatly contained by sunrise and sunset as she set about canning and sewing and saving every scrap of twine and foil, singing old hymns and telling stories that find their way into my work, and on the other side of town was my home, my mother working a full-time job and coming home and doing everything there, too. Yet, my mother often marveled at how easy her life was: imagine what her mother had had to do to eat fried chicken: catch it, wring the neck (I once witnessed all of this and it was not a pretty sight), bleed it, scald it, pluck it, cut it, fry it. As my mother always said: "How could you possibly EAT it after all of that?" My mother also remembered my grandmother boiling clothes in the yard, and so it was with great affection and gratefulness that she used her washer and dryer. She had come a long way and yet still, people were making choices; in many cases — as it still is — it wasn't as easy as making a choice; work was necessity. I watched my mother work full-time during the height of housewifedom and just when she was getting close to retirement age, everything was spinning back and around and women were going *out* to work. For a long time it seems there was a pattern that you either fit or you didn't. Again I found myself addressing all of this in my novel, *Tending to Virginia*. I keep referring to that novel because it was my attempt at understanding how much faith does go into our family stories, and it was the novel inspired by the changing roles within my family: my grandmother's failing, my mother's step into the caretaker's role, leaving me to feel as well that it was my turn to step up. It terrified me: the loss, the change.

In my novel *The Cheer Leader*, I half-jokingly have my character, Jo Spencer, write a term paper about how you can view the changing society by what's on TV. I say half-jokingly when the truth is that I made Jo Spencer spout my own personal theory of how I can summarize the changing world. There was Lucy Ricardo, spending Ricky's money and getting into trouble. They couldn't even say the word "pregnant" on television. They slept in twin beds as did Rob and Laura Petrie from "Dick Van Dyke." Laura had to slip HER money out of HIS money. Of course, by the time Mary Tyler Moore got her own show, she had come quite a long way, the road paved by the likes of Marlo Thomas, single working girl: independent and capable all leading us to people like Murphy Brown who obviously doesn't have twin beds and is now having a baby of her own. A lot of ground has been covered and I feel I've witnessed it firsthand.

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I was in college when I read *The Feminine Mystique*, and I was most impressed. It was then I realized that women had been making huge choices, that they had been forced by society to make these choices. I remember feeling grateful that I had not felt that pressure, that for whatever reason, maybe from watching too much TV, I had decided that I could try on a lot of different hats, that I could even wear more than one. This freedom is not something to be taken lightly; it's something that needs to be guarded and protected so that no step backwards is ever taken. I think that I often address women's issues in my fiction because they are important facets of my life. I don't set out to make a statement, and yet it's my way of seeking preservation and recognition of all walks and situations.

In my new short story collection, *Crash Diet*, which will be published in May, I have eleven stories, all with women protagonists. All of these characters who range in age, background, and race, share a common variable. They are all at the sink or swim point. There are decisions to be made about how they want to live. I have women going through divorces, and retirement, infidelities, single parenthood, and adolescence. I have a woman dealing with the loss of her husband and a story entitled "Departures" which was inspired by spending too much time in airports, and that is the one I'd like to read now.

Editors note: Ms. McCorkle concluded her presentation with a reading of her short story, "Departures."