

# FIRST DRAFT

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## How Life is Very mixed up in the South

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Autobiographer Judith Paterson talks about  
*Sweet Mystery: A Book of Remembering*

# How Life Is Very Mixed Up in the South

An interview with Judith Paterson

by Jay Lamar



Judith Hillman Paterson was born in Montgomery, Alabama, late in the decade before World War II. *Sweet Mystery: A Book of Remembering*, to be published in January by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, is the story of her young childhood in a remarkable and troubled family. The book, which ends with her mother's death when Paterson is nine, has been described as a "southern memoir about alcoholism, denial, and recovery." At the same time as it testifies to the harm that can come to children in dysfunctional families, it also deals with the conflicts in southern history and caste, the transformative power of books, and children's capacity for discovery, joy, and profundity. In a recent interview, Paterson, who teaches journalism at the University of Maryland, talked about the word *numinous*, history, art, and "crossover" writing.

**Q.** Tell me why and how you began remembering and writing.

**A.** My kids triggered it. As soon as I had children, I heard the voice of my mother, whom I was supposed to have forgotten. Before I wrote this book, all the writing I had done was very journalistic or scholarly. And you know how linear that is: you get the facts, you get them in order, and you tell them as accurately as you can. I would write the family history in that linear way that I knew how to write, and then these anecdotes, I think of them as bubbles, as these bubbles of memory, would pop out on the page. A week later I would read and I would realize that the bubbles were more interesting than the narrative. And that's the way I wrote it, for five or six years, every day I would do some of the old style and some of the new style. Gradually the expository part shrank and the impressionistic memories grew. Then the problem was how to make them work together.

**Q.** Your book is described by Farrar, Straus as "a southern memoir about alcoholism, denial and recovery." How do you describe it?

**A.** They talk in the publishing business about crossover books. *Sweet Mystery* is a literary biography, and literary biography isn't supposed to sell well. Then there are the "child of alcoholics" books, which do

sell well. Some statistics report that 50 percent of the population say that they are troubled by addiction, their own or someone else's. And I think that may be conservative.

I have a Ph.D. in English from Auburn, and I love literature. I was trying to write a literary book. I don't have any other creative talents, like painting, but because those memories came back in those bubbles of light and color, I wished I had a gigantic canvas, that it just covered the side of the room I was working in. And I always thought of a big brush, a big canvas—writing is so small and tedious....you're putting these little squiggles down on paper....

Writing is not natural in the way painting or sculpture is. But the writing was therapeutic for me when I thought it approached art, when I transcended the journalistic account of this traumatic childhood and turned it into a thing all its own.

**Q.** There are issues of reliability in memory—how reliably we recall even the most significant events, what we really know and how much we imagine or misremember. Did you trust your memory?

**A.** I learned that a lot of my memories really did need checking out. I was stunned by how vivid my memories are but how wrong I could be. For instance, I would think that I had grouped events chronologically, but I had really grouped them thematically.

I read a good deal about the effect of trauma on memory. I had to deal with my editor

because he thought I was describing some things in a way that couldn't be accurate; he couldn't believe I was remembering this the way it really happened. But I think from the point of view of how traumatic memory works, it is accurate. The scariest thing for a writer is that they say you can't really remember, that if something is genuinely traumatic you only remember around it. But I think children in these situations are hyper-attentive to what's going on around them, and I think I just happened to be the kind of child who paid a whole lot of attention to what the adults were saying and doing.

**Q.** Did you verify your memories of the events—or check the family versions of them?

**A.** You can ask whether the family tells it the way it really was. The family never tells it the way it really was. I mean, who can recreate how it really was? But the person who helped me with genealogical work told me some interesting things. One was that if everyone in the family tells the story in exactly the same way, you should doubt it. The other was to talk to the people the rest of the family wasn't speaking to. I talked to everyone I possibly could, including some people who had been quite unfavorably viewed by my family. I will never forget how anxious it made me to think about telling "the story" in another way. The nurse, "Connie," who had a very complex and questionable relationship with my mother, hadn't seen me since I was 4 or 5

years old. I called her on the phone, and she said, "Oh I remember you children!" I knew she was going to talk to me. She of course put a different spin on things. I think it would have been disastrous for the book, for the truthfulness of what I was doing, if I hadn't talked to her.

**Q.** Creativity and memory, fiction making and fact (re)collecting, work together then?

**A.** I think memory is an act of creation, that you create the story. This bothers people, particularly journalists, for instance. But most of my memories, the bubbles, were not repressed memories that came back. I never had forgotten them; it was that, instead of looking at them, I would turn away. The memory of a "help" note I wrote when I was six and a memory of my mother and the nurse, those things never stopped coming through. It is intriguing to wonder what *don't* I remember.

People ask me if this is fiction. Well, I think the truest answer from my point of view is that memory is fictional in that you remember it in different ways and from different angles.

**Q.** Are there particular writers whose work was especially important to you as you wrote *Sweet Mystery*? Can you identify specific influences on your work?

**A.** Alice Miller was very influential. She deals a lot with the importance of remembering and the importance of not repeating the silence, in my case, the silence that followed the "help" note. I didn't read her for a long time. People would say, "You should read Alice Miller," and I would think, *Oh no, not now*. I also got very interested in Lacan's notions that you can't remember what you can't verbalize. I've read a little Lacan, and a lot of it doesn't apply to me, but he does pretty clearly connect memory with language, and so much of my memory is associated with wordplay and my father. Words and reading and writing and talking have sort of a special value for some kids. My own children, who read and are very literate, don't have that sense of being saved by the printed word, and that was certainly part of the feeling I had when I was writing this book: if I could get the memories right, if I could get them right on the page, that somehow—it definitely has religious overtones for me—we would all be redeemed or set free. And that's what kept me going. People say, "Wasn't that painful?" It was horrible. And that was the hardest part: once the book was done, I wasn't redeemed. The tears weren't all shed, you know.

Other influences? Fairy tales, blues, spirituals. And every Southerner says this, but I have to say it, too: the rhythm of the Bible, the prayer book, black and white speech. In fact, the oral influences of my early childhood are really as important as books were.

I also love French films—Truffaut, Malle—in which children have fully developed psychological lives and are not just little creatures responding to adults.

But the real relief and satisfaction came when I got it right on the page. Gigantic relief like that help note really had been trying to say something and 40 years later I was writing it in a way I thought people could understand.

**Q.** Did your family support your writing *Sweet Mystery*?

**A.** After my mother died my father did not want her name mentioned. I think he felt so guilty and so stunned by the fact that she had died, and he just couldn't face emotional conflict and disaster. I really was not able to write this book until after he died. The truth is that I don't think I would have published a word of it if he had lived to be 90. He died when he was in his early seventies. But the great bonus of the book to me is that it took me back to remembering how close I had been to him when I was little and why I was so close to him. I remember how sensitive he was, very sensitive, especially to small children and animals. I let my nieces and nephews and children read the manuscript—they were the only people who read it—and they were very supportive. They are still supportive.

**Q.** Is this a "southern" book?

**A.** I let one friend, a writer, read it, and—she'll kill me, she's still a great good friend—she just sort of didn't get it. She's from New York. Then I didn't let anybody see it for five years. Now my friend gets it. But her reaction told me how far I had to go in that five years: so a New Yorker would get it. One reader at Farrar, Straus said the part that most moved her was when my father got so upset over our pet goat dying. That was one of those bubble memories that brought up my father's insecurity about his—I think this is very male, very southern male—his sense that he had to protect people from all danger and that if he couldn't chaos would come. She's the only person who has said that was the moment that most interested her.

The biggest difference between the southern readers I've had feedback from and the nonsouthern readers: the southern readers tend to respond more to the joy of the child and the humor in the book. Northern readers focus on the trouble. Southerners will inevitably read it more dimensionally than people from parts of the country who don't know that life is very mixed up in the South.

**Q.** Did your scholarly work contribute to this book?

**A.** I did a thesis and dissertation on St. Thomas More's late work. I got very interested in his mystical thought and think there is a connection in the close personal rela-

tionship to God that you find in medieval spirituality. For me, spirituality is very personal—back to the Protestant idea of being in direct communication with God. But More was much influenced by those medieval writers who are in some ways ancestors of what we think of as "new age." I saw that I couldn't really remember and write about and create out of my childhood until I could somehow get back to the spirituality of childhood. Part of what those bubbles are about is being momentarily in the hands of creation, of God, and that's the way I remember my childhood, incredibly vivid even though some of it was vivid-dash-traumatic. I like the word *numinous*, even though no one knows it. I felt very close to God as a child. And I found that in this book talking about that wasn't the thing to do; I tried to infer it. And to me that was why the trauma was so affecting. It was breaking into heaven. In some ways my childhood was very protected. Certainly, one of the messages of the book is the importance of extended family. If I had only had my parents I would have been up a creek. I had my grandmother, my Aunt Bessie, I had Mary Willie, I had Uncle Sonny. I think the trauma broke into heaven, a childhood Eden, which is one reason it was so memorable.

People tend to think of my career as very heterogeneous: I did a lot of work on Thomas More, and I did a lot of plain old journalism and a lot of literary criticism, but I see this book as a culmination of all that work.

**Q.** So much of this book is also about southern history in a broad sense, I think, and I was very interested in the historical and cultural context you give your parents and their marriage.

**A.** I became very interested in how the family history, and I think genetic predisposition, creates a situation like that of my childhood. You don't have to be a psychiatrist to figure out what some of the personal angles are. But I also got interested in the *cultural* and family history. If you had picked two people who most represented the opposition in Central Alabama, in Black Belt Alabama history, you couldn't have picked two better than my father and mother. I wanted the factual part to be as true as I could make it. At the same time I knew that the story that carried the most power was the story of how it impinged on this child.

**Q.** We've talked about memory and creativity, and you mentioned that some children are especially sensitive to what goes on around them. In your case, do you relate creativity and loss?

**A.** I read on this subject any time I can, not in a very orderly or systematic way, but I suppose I agree with those people who say

(continued on p. 10)

(Interview with Judith Paterson, continued from p. 9)

most creativity comes from suffering. When I was teaching literature at Auburn University at Montgomery, students about halfway through the course would say "why is all this stuff so sad, so depressing?" Well I don't see it that way, but I did understand the question. Most literature is serious and addresses the fact that we don't get what we want and that our egos are beat up every minute of the day and we die and the people we love die. And I think that's why we create.

I think we, modern Americans, really aren't comfortable with suffering and loss. When I say that creativity comes out of disappointment and loss, I think a lot of people find that unacceptable. "Well your children, for instance, aren't *that* unhappy, are they?" Well, everybody is *that* unhappy. My mother died when I was nine and I couldn't deal with it—maybe no nine-year-old can. The psychological and emotional inappropriateness with which it was handled in my family probably did as much harm as her death.

But death and the reality of death and how we ignore it and run from it are very interesting to me, and when I first started it I thought this book would be about that. Maybe the next book will be. I am thinking about the next book, which will be autobiographical but which I think I will call fiction. I may get back to that subject. ■

Jay Lamar is Assistant Director for the Auburn University Center for the Arts and Humanities. She is currently editing an anthology of Southern autobiographical writings from the nineteenth and twentieth century for *Reading Our Lives: Southern Autobiography*, a program funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and administered by the Center.

## HOMEPAGE

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## Sweet Mystery: A Book of Remembering

Almost all of what I knew as a child of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction came from my aunt Bessie's strange, disembodied, out-of-context stories. But the spirit of the tension between families like my father's (though in fact, there were no others like it) and families like my mother's (whose ways and beliefs still set the tone of the place) went deep into my bones as part of the class warfare between my parents.

I remember them arguing heatedly once because Duke said "Reconstruction"—like ordinary people, like Yankees, like people who don't know what they are talking about—rather than "the Reconstruction," the way Emily said it was supposed to be said, the way it was said by people like Bessie and Knoxie . . . *thu* Reekunstruukshun.

Emily walks out the back door into the yard where Duke is planting bushes and says something about how her Ware ancestors came to Alabama on the Old Federal Road in whose very tracks our house now stands. Duke says something about "Reconstruction," minus the article, perhaps insinuating the moral and economic slippage that had set in among those Revolutionary backwoodsmen since they made the pioneering trek from one Southern wilderness to another. Her reply—whatever it is—starts off logical, but in a voice overly emphatic and full of metal, the way people sound when a little thing suddenly becomes more important than it has any natural right to be.

"You *have* to say *thu* Reconstruction; that's the way it's *always* said because, you know, there was only *one*. You don't say just 'war.' You say '*thu* war.'" Loud now, defending something crucial. She doesn't say, "We get to name it because we suffered it, and it was *ours*. Your people lost nothing because they *had* nothing." Nothing but scrub farmland on Gram's side, down there in the wilds of Wilcox County, where people had either gotten filthy rich off slaves and cotton as soon as the seeds hit the ground or they had been black and owned by somebody else or they had been next to nothing.

She doesn't say, wouldn't dare, "Carpetbaggers, foreigners, Yankees, abolitionists on your father's side, living with black people as if they were white, and by some outlandish subterfuge turning it into something to be proud of and admired for even by people who would ordinarily have despised them [and for a long time did and never stopped condescending to in secret] that had no right to be here anyway and everybody would have been better off if they had stayed where they were and minded their own business."

Who was she to talk, he might have replied, born to folks half mad on one side, as inept as they were arrogant on the other, believing nothing, contributing nothing, as if being itself were of no consequence, . . . In truth, Emily and Duke fought over race and class and their immense vulnerability to each other. Fought over things that were happening then and things that happened before they were born and either couldn't be remembered or couldn't be told. And though I couldn't say exactly where family history ended and personal destiny began, I believe some of the troubles between my parents and the terrible outcome of their love sprang at least in part from the extreme way in which Southern reality played itself out in our family.