

Media Information

SHELLEY
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River City Publishing



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About River City Publishing

Like the nearby Alabama River that flows through the heart of the South, literature sustains us, transports us outside of ourselves, and brings us home. River City Publishing, a literary press located in Montgomery, Alabama, is dedicated to discovering the books that do just that.

Carolyn Newman
Publisher

Praise for

“Beginning in Boston in the disruptive early 1960s, this vividly-told love story moves south to the Gulf Coast, encompasses attraction, lust, torment and seeming exhaustion, only to flame up again over the years in an impassioned renewal. Shelley Mickle understands these fascinating complicated people of hers, and their discoveries and dilemmas become ours.”

—**Louis Rubin**, author or editor of more than fifty books, recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award of the National Book Critics Circle.

“Shelley Fraser Mickle’s skillful juxtaposition of time, place and voice pulled me immediately into the lives of an ambitious Mississippi belle, a handsome young idealist, a famous antiwar protestor, a smoldering beauty, and a community determined to protect its own. This believable and complex story has stayed with me, long after the surprising and gratifying ending.”

—**Cassandra King**, author of *Making Waves*, *The Sunday Wife*, and *The Same Sweet Girls*.

“In luminous language and transcendent imagery, *The Assigned Visit* evokes the raw innocence and passion of our collective youth. More important, it summons a message of hope for our ravaged times. “There is nothing lost, but may be found, if sought.”

—**Laurie Viera Rigler**, coauthor of *He Rents*, *She Rents* and *Popping the Question*.

“This unique novel grabs your attention right at the beginning and never lets go. The characters are real, and the situations are real—a fascinating read.”

—**Patrick D. Smith**, five-time nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature and author of the beloved novel, *A Land Remembered*.



A Synopsis

Twenty-two-year-old Susan Masters travels from Holly Springs, Mississippi, to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to study writing. There she meets Caleb Montiel, and while studying in the same Harvard class, they make a pact: if either of them lives out a story they know they are too emotionally close to handle, they will give it to the other to write. However, life intervenes and Susan and Caleb lose track of each other. Twenty years later, after Susan has become a successful novelist, she receives a box of journals, from Caleb. They tell of his social service on the Mississippi Gulf Coast following Hurricane Camille. There, Caleb meets Grayce Chadwick—Mississippi bred, a wife and mother, extraordinary and irresistible—and is transformed by love. When the town of Pass Christian forces Caleb to flee in order to preserve the Chadwick family, his life becomes a metaphor for the complicated shame the nation suffers over the Vietnam years. Using the journals as a starting point, Susan embarks on writing his story—eventually leading to their reunion, and a way for her to love him as she always wished she could. *The Assigned Visit* is an extraordinary love story not unlike *Dr. Zhivago* in its portrait of how powerful emotion transforms two lives.



Q & A

This is a book that's been a long time in the works. Why and why now?

The world needs a love story. Rather desperately now, I think. Nothing renews our sense of hope more. And true, this story rattled around in my head for nearly forty years. Tolstoy once said a writer's job is to celebrate life and give the encouragement to stick it out—or, at least he said something like that. Basically that's what *The Assigned Visit* does—celebrate the mysterious force that can draw two separate lives together.

How did the story come to you?

I was living in Boston in the first year of my marriage while my husband trained as a surgeon. I took a part-time job editing a textbook in neuroanatomy at Harvard Medical School. (Actually, it was my first acting job. Thank heavens it turned out to be mostly typing.) I wanted free days to begin my career as a writer, and the part-time job allowed this. I was too dumb and poor to go to graduate school but was brazen enough to think I could give myself my own graduate education by reading 9 to 5.

So you did?

Yes. In a little farm house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1969, I turned off the heat to save money, got under an electric blanket and read three days a week for a year. I started with the Bible and ended with Tolstoy. That's when I came upon Tolstoy's lovely novella, "The Cossacks." It expressed almost exactly what I had felt in my twenties in that universal search we all undertake in finding who will love us, and whom will we love.

So "*The Assigned Visit*" was inspired by Tolstoy?"

Well, by his novella, "The Cossacks." It is not one of his famous works, but it spoke to me. So much of the phenomenon of falling in love is beyond our control. Passion, both biological and spiritual, is much stronger than our intellect and can rule us mightily. "The Cossacks" is all about culture and duty and wild passion and the transformative power of love. All those years I remembered the story and intended one day to borrow the plot to inspire a story about America—the East and the South, the turbulent 60s, the power of love. But of course I had to live through that time to write about it. Now in my early 60s, if I haven't digested my youth, heaven help me.



Your other novels have not had this scope of history. They were basically domestic comedies. Was this novel difficult technically?

For several years I pondered how I would tell a man's story about falling in love and make it believable. Being trained as a novelist by the renowned editor, Louis Rubin, I can forever hear his voice coaching me: "If it ain't emotionally true, trash it." I finally came upon the narrative device of letting the story be revealed through journals and letters that would be sent to a female novelist who would then tell the story. That's when I created my alter ego, Susan Masters. She allowed me to grab the story by the tail and spin it. And of course the most interesting aspect of storytelling is to explore the effect of the story on the storyteller.

How else is your character, Susan Masters, similar to you?

I made her younger. I made her smarter. She's prettier and a lot better flirt. I needed a believable explanation, though, on how she could outfox her family in Mississippi to travel all the way to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1969, alone. So I decided to use some of my own personal history. I put Susan in the polio epidemic of 1952, when in reality I was in the polio epidemic of 1950. Those of us who were held down as children by this wicked virus tended to become rebellious, secretive adults. And then of course, Susan's slight physical difference plagued her self-confidence as a woman. It fit in nicely with her reticence to make her feelings known to Caleb Montiel, whom she loves deeply and long, in secret.

So *The Assigned Visit* may be the first literary novel since Summerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* to have a physically different narrator who makes it part of the story.

Maybe. Although it is a small part.

Did the novel require much research?

More than most novels I have done. And I welcomed the chance to understand, finally, the historical signposts of the Vietnam War—such as the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the Pentagon Papers, the Supreme Court's rulings on Conscientious Objectors. But the sweetest moment was in visiting my neighbor, Claude Jones, to ask about his personal history of serving in World War II. He told me the amazing story of his father having been in his front yard in North Carolina when part of Sherman's army marched through. Claude allowed me to use that personal history in *The Assigned Visit*. I gave it to the character who plays Grayciana Chadwick's father. She is at the center of the novel, providing the fire and passion. It was a wonderful exercise to create a character with that sort of charisma. I'm not sure we can ever define those traits, which are so universally captivating. Every man who comes in contact with her loses his head over her. She's a force of nature.



Your neighbor let you borrow his Civil War story for your story?

Graciously so. But the sad, ironic circle is that a year after Claude told me his story, he suffered the onset of Alzheimer's. In some ways, I have preserved his family history by passing it on to a fictional character.

You have also preserved much of the Gulf Coast prior to Katrina ravaging it.

Yes, I went to the Gulf Coast twice in researching the novel. Actually I lived there in 1976 and '77 when my husband was in the military. My son was born there. The photographs I took are now precious to me. In my research, I found real settings in which I placed certain scenes in *The Assigned Visit*. Knowing that I may have preserved much of what was once there is poignant, indeed.

So, what's next?

I am writing my memoir about being in the polio epidemic, making it a study of the psychological effects on any childhood that undergoes a life-changing event. It just happens to be my childhood. I read part of it as a commentary on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" this past April on the Anniversary of the Salk Vaccine. The memoir is titled, "The Rotten Egg Spills the Beans." It's turning out to be Tom Sawyer meets Helen Keller. But the main reason I'm writing it is that so many of the current generation are unaware of this part of our cultural history. Silence robs future generations of their sense of power.

What surprised you most in writing *The Assigned Visit*?

That I could overcome the current literary fashion that frowns on a happy ending. We need one.





About the Author

SHELLEY FRASER MICKLE is an energetic, modest person who sees the good in the world and tries to make it even better. A commentator for Florida Public Radio since 1995, she has read many humorous essays on NPR's Morning Edition, which have been published in a collection titled *The Kids Are Gone, the Dog Is Depressed, and Mom's on the Loose*. Many other essays of hers have been published in the *Orlando Sentinel*. She is the author of three previous novels: *The Queen of October*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book; *Replacing Dad*, which was made into a CBS television movie; and *The Turning Hour*, which has been taught in classrooms across the state of Florida. Mickle is the mother of two grown children and lives on a farm in Alachua County, Florida. Her website is www.shelleymickle.com



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