

SOUTHERN SHORT STORIES

*grace, grits,*  
*and*  
*ghosts*



SUSAN GABRIEL

## Introduction

When I became a writer twenty years ago, I swore that I would never, ever write southern fiction. Perhaps it was because I had more than a few odd southern characters in my gene pool that I would have liked to forget. Like many with young and rebellious spirits, I wanted to divorce myself from the South and from its sometimes backward ways and write literary fiction set in other locations. Distant places I'd only visited, instead of the ones I'd been rooted in. And, like many of us, what I set out to avoid is exactly what I found myself doing.

My “never say never” moment happened in the middle of the night one summer many years ago (about six years after I'd made that promise) when a character by the name of Louisa May “Wildflower” McAllister started talking to me out of a dream. I heard her voice as clearly as my own. Since I am a writer, and also a Southerner, I figure I get to be a little crazy, so I hesitated only momentarily before I started writing down what she told me and continued to do so in the weeks and months that followed.

Over a decade later those writings became my novel, *The Secret Sense of Wildflower*. To my delight, the book was given a starred review by the esteemed Kirkus Reviews, which named it to their Best Book of 2012 list. I also have a short story by the same name, the last story in this collection. *The Secret Sense of Wildflower* is considered southern gothic, or southern historical fiction, although any true Southerner would call it normal, everyday life.

One of the things that makes southern fiction “southern” is its sense of place. Not only are the characters quirky and sometimes bigger than life, but they are also grounded in the landscape. Throw in a crackpot, an old wise woman and a preacher, and we love it even more. We southerners, those born-and-raised like me, as well as transplants from all over the world, love our countryside.

Abandoned houses, cemeteries, eccentric relatives, even murderers and rapists show up in southern gothic fiction. These tales contain flawed, bigger-than-life characters—characters who are quirky, intense, and often commit a necessary sin to set them firmly on the path to seeking redemption. Or not.

Southern gothic fiction is packed with mystery, rooted in the landscape where the South itself is a character that is haunted by the past. Ghosts show up to remind us of our history, and perhaps our need to transform it.

The eight short stories in *Grace, Grits and Ghosts: Southern Short Stories* are set in the southeastern United States and have their share of quirky, poignant and deep characters.

*Temple Secrets* takes place in a mansion in Savannah, Georgia and is narrated by Queenie, the funny half-sister of Iris Temple, a prominent Savannah matriarch. Please note that it is also the only story in my twenty-year writing career that contains several occurrences of flatulence. Forgive me. I kept trying to edit it out, but—like Iris—it refused to go away. This short story is also adapted from a longer

work, a novel by the same name. Novelists, like me, frequently create a short story from a longer work, just as short story writers often turn one of their short pieces into a novel.

*The Mail Slot* is set in another old mansion, this one past its glory days, in Atlanta, Georgia. The main character, Allison Whitworth, fears leaving her house. As a former psychotherapist, my stories often have characters with interesting psychological traits. This story came to me during a writer's workshop with Marge Piercy.

*The End* was first published in *Cease, Cows* literary journal, and is a piece of flash fiction, a short, short story. After I experienced a hot flash in the middle of the night, I awoke to write this flash fiction (no pun intended) told by a man who just turned fifty. I get some of my best characters from dreams.

*Gullah Secrets* takes place in the 1960s on an island off the coast of South Carolina and is told in the voice of Old Sally, a Gullah woman whose mother was a slave. This is also a story pulled from the novel, *Temple Secrets*, so you will read about some of the same characters you met in the first short story in this collection.

*Country Obituary - #1* is another work of flash fiction and takes place in the fictional small town of Jacob's Ridge in North Carolina. I wrote it specifically for this short story collection after being inspired by an obituary in our small town newspaper.

*Country Obituary - #2* After reading *Country Obituary - #1*, you may find this obituary especially poignant. I created these characters from my imagination, however they feel like they might have lived right down the road. I wish I'd known them in real life.

*River Reunion* is the newest short story in the collection and is more representative of what I like to think of as the *new* South. The characters—four women in their seventies—have already been through the rough stuff and are well on their way to transformation. I hope you love these gals as much as I do.

*Scarlett & Rhett Redux* is another flash fiction story, told by a male narrator who comes upon an elderly couple pushing a baby carriage. Something similar happened to me, although I came across them on a walking trail in the North Carolina mountains. I changed the setting to historic St. Augustine, Florida, simply because that's where my imagination wanted to go with it. This story is an example of southern humor.

*The Secret Sense of Wildflower* (a short story based on the book by the same name) is historical fiction, set in the Appalachian mountains of 1940s Tennessee. It is narrated by a resilient and courageous 12-year-old girl nicknamed Wildflower as she comes of age and faces danger, death and new life.

With the exception of the three years I lived in Colorado, I have lived in the Southeastern United States my entire life. I grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. Then as an adult I lived in Charleston, South Carolina for fourteen years. After Hurricane Hugo's devastation, I went searching for higher ground and ended up in Asheville, North Carolina.

Since 2009 I have lived in the small town of Brevard, NC, nestled in the arms of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a place known for waterfalls, forests and hiking trails. A place that houses not only a fine liberal arts college, but an internationally renowned music festival. A place with mountain bikers, white squirrels, and a squirrely character or two. I study them all to get new material for my stories.

Some may look disdainfully at the South's sleepy little towns. But in a nation that is sleep-deprived, stressed-out, and searching for answers, a little slower pace makes sense. It's true, we have a different rhythm here. It is the rhythm of waterfalls, mountain streams and walks by the river, of a front porch welcoming locals and visitors alike to ponder their place and purpose on earth.

It wasn't until I left the South that I realized how deeply southern I am. I love shade. I love moss growing on trees, and the warm, humid breezes that flow along the southern coasts. I love people who take the time to ponder, mosey, and sit a spell. I am one of those people.

As I sit here overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains, located in one of the most lush and bio-diverse areas in the world, I invite you to read these stories and let the land speak to you. Even if you're not from around here, you will catch a glimpse of a special place. A place where Native Americans thought the story of creation began. A place that gave birth to the third oldest river in the world. A place that I love and call home.

I hope you enjoy *Grace, Grits and Ghosts: Southern Short Stories*. Please consider letting me know what you think by writing a review on Amazon and Goodreads. Or you can email me. I'm easy to find. Either way I'd love to hear from you.

--- Susan Gabriel

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What readers are saying about *Grace, Grits and Ghosts*...

"Delightful!... If you are from the South, you will recognize these women and if you are not from the South, you will gain a window to a facet of what it means to be Southern!" - Dillymom

"This is a wonderful collection of stories, so full of humor and heart. Poignant, hilarious, true to life. Susan Gabriel is one of my favorite authors." - Carolyn Tenn

“Ever since her compelling *The Secret Sense of Wildflower* Susan Gabriel has been one of my favorite authors and her skill as a writer and storyteller is emphasized again in this book. This wonderful collection of stories, each with very different angles, had me hooked from the first page. The characters run the gamut from darkly haunting and mysterious all the way to eccentrically hilarious and that is because they are all born from the same land - the haunting, mysterious, eccentric South.  
- S. Burnside

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