

INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR KAREN JONES

The Summer of Grace

1. What inspired you to write *The Summer of Grace*?

I love stories of transformation. In writing this book, I could tap into my own history, re-imagine it, and show the painful yet powerful blossoming of a young girl.

2. The novel is set in 1951 in the American South. What drew you to this particular time period?

I grew up in the 1950s American South, so writing this story felt like coming home. From crickets chirping on a hot Carolina night, to being kissed by the white-gloved church ladies, to running barefoot in the swamp, it is a setting that sings through my memories.

3. Grace is a young girl navigating a complicated world. What did you want readers to understand about growing up during this time in history?

Growing up in the 1950s South was an experience of dichotomy. Things said on the surface sounded right and proper but there were often swirling dark undercurrents of someone's own personal truth lurking beneath.

4. The book explores themes of family, courage, and belonging. Which of these themes felt most important to you while writing the story?

For me, the theme of belonging was most important. Feeling adrift and unanchored affects more of us than we let on. Finding where we fit is a universal quest and having Gracie realize that she belongs, deeply with these women eases the heart.

5. Were any of the characters or events in the novel inspired by real people or historical experiences?

The farm and many of the characters were inspired by my wonderful southern family. Cousin Jane was indeed my partner in crime, Granny Jane smoked her pipe daily, and Aunt Martha truly had the largest bosoms we had ever seen. As for "Man-Woman Thing" at a 1951 NC carnival? Totally true.

Here is the page on my website that shows pictures and gives explanations – even a pic of the quilt my NC grandmother made from my dress scraps. <https://kjwriter.com/inspirations/>

6. Readers have compared *The Summer of Grace* to books like *The Help* and *The Secret Life of Bees*. What do you think connects these stories for readers?

All satisfying books have one thing in common, a compelling story that often involves transformation. These books take this theme and narrow it down to the story of one character's small, fierce, transformation from victim to survivor using humor and grace.

7. What do you hope readers take away from Grace's journey?

It has always been my intention that this book brighten people's lives. Yes, it is a book about surviving a heart-wrenching situation, but it is also a book showing that personal transformation is possible and that one can find a place in the world among those who love you for exactly who you are.

8. What kind of conversations do you hope this book will spark among readers and book clubs?

I hope that book clubs will have open, honest, and thoughtful conversations about the realities of life in the Jim Crow south and also be able to share their own stories of personal transformations.

9. What was the most surprising thing you discovered while researching the historical setting of the novel?

That conjure women, while scoffed at and scorned, were used by more people than anyone knew. That path through the swamp to Miss Charity's certainly saw the footprints of many a "good church folks".

* I love it when readers ask, "**How long did it take you to write this book?**" It never fails to make me laugh. Should I include the years I thought about the story? How about the nights spent staring at the ceiling? And then there are the months I left the draft in the drawer, giving it time to "rest". Can I tell them about the first, second and third drafts,

and the years in between? Does the agony of submission count? If so, the rejections should be given three months each which includes ego recovery time. Perhaps I should count the time rewriting for my publisher. And then there are the weeks of copyediting, corrections, and draft revision.

The Summer of Grace began as a series of southern short stories I wrote back in the 1980s. I was living in Princeton, NJ and desperately homesick for the south. I volunteered at a local emergency room and, during the overnight down time, shared the stories with a young doctor. He loved reading them and encouraged me to write a book. Life intervened and I spent twenty years in television news as a journalist and on-air anchor/reporter. Daily broadcast news taught me to write fast, write well, and tell the story. I loved it and had little time for anything else. But during those years Miss Emily sometimes would show up and nod her head approvingly as I interviewed a celebrity, Marcell often visited me on the long drive home after the 11 p.m. newscast, Uncle Ben would stand over my shoulder as I banged out a story for deadline, and Jane ... Jane would occasionally stand to the side of the studio, arms folded across her chest, laughing as I was on-air. Should I count these years too?

Early retirement led me to teach writing camps, mentor young authors, participate in writing conferences, and write four other books. But always, the characters from those southern short stories kept me awake at night. Aunt Martha sometimes peeked over the footrail, Great Granny Jane sat beside me as I read the stories out loud to my classes, looking for affirmation and courage. And Sissy? Well Sissy would occasionally drift by her snarl knocking the wind right out of my sails. But perhaps it was simply the lullaby of Brown Hound's imaginary baying as she hunted in the sultry night swamp, that provided the push.

So, when readers ask, "How long did it take you to write the book?" I tell them ten. Little do they know I'm not talking about years, but characters. Characters who would not leave me alone. ***The Summer of Grace* took ten characters to write.**

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Media Resources Available

High-resolution cover image, author photos, and additional materials are available upon request or via the publisher's media page.