

OF THE SEGREGATED SOUTH

NOVELIST ANNA JEAN MAYHEW WRITES ABOUT A COMMUNITY IN TURMOIL

BY MARY AND CHARLES LOVE



Novelist Anna Jean (A.J.) Mayhew, originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, now lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina, with her Swiss-born husband. Her writing reflects her vivid

memories of growing up in the segregated South. Mayhew's first novel, *The Dry Grass of August*, won the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction. The novel was also a finalist for the 2012

Book Award from the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance.

Hot off the press this month is Mayhew's much-anticipated second novel, *Tomorrow's Bread*. Inspired by real events, the narrative takes place in 1961 when Brooklyn, an African-American neighborhood in Charlotte, N.C., is targeted by city leaders for bulldozing and gentrification. It's a poignant story of how its residents deal with the dramatic change that disrupts their lives.

You wrote your first novel, *The Dry Grass of August*, relatively late in your professional life. What inspired you to finally put pen to paper?

In the winter of 1985, I had a short story published in a science fiction anthology, *Writers of the Future*. When my father died that spring, it hit me that if he was mortal, so was I. Within two months I had quit my job, sold my condo in Charlotte and moved to a winterized tobacco barn south of Chapel Hill. For a year and a half, I worked on short stories, survived pneumonia in the desperately cold barn and began to take myself seriously as a writer. I moved to town and went to work as production editor on a medical journal at the School of

Medicine at UNC. In 1987, I joined the writing group I'm still in 32 years later. I began what I thought was a short story; 18 years later that story was the novel *The Dry Grass of August*.

What were you doing before you started writing in earnest?

I ran a court reporting agency for seven years and worked in opera management for five years, both in Charlotte. I took writing classes at Central Piedmont Community College and joined a group of writers, most of whom wrote science fiction. I edited stories for *Space Grits*, a fanzine we published, which featured Southern sci-fi writers. After moving to Chapel Hill, I found that what I most wanted to write about was Charlotte. I'd had to leave the city to do that.

What inspired your interest in civil rights?

I lived my formative years in de jure segregation, reared by racist parents, but to quote from *Killers of the Dream* by Lillian Smith, "That is a hard thing for a child to learn. I still admired my parents. ... Yet in my heart they were under suspicion." After I left home, several eye-opening experiences gave me an understanding of the evils of oppression, of Jim Crow laws, of the

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white dominance that endured long after segregation was outlawed. From that slow awakening and into my mid-life, when I began to write, my characters always suffered discrimination of one sort or another.

Your novels are full of dialogue. How did you develop such a sensitive ear?

I credit my days as a court reporter for my ear for dialogue. I took testimony, transcribed it and proofread the transcripts; thus, the voices of the witnesses went through my brain three times. I learned that people don't speak in complete sentences. That they talk in fragments. That they use their hands, their heads, their bodies to make a point.

What inspired your second novel, *Tomorrow's Bread*?

I visited Charlotte in 2008 for my 50th high school reunion and while there drove down East Trade Street and was surprised to see vacant land in what used to be the black, middle-class neighborhood of Brooklyn. Why hadn't the city developed the land, after appropriating it in urban renewal? What happened to the folks who lived there? Several years later I began the extensive research that led to the writing of *Tomorrow's Bread*.

Your book title is from the poem "Democracy" by Langston Hughes. Please explain.

I trust that Hughes was writing about something resembling urban renewal. The poem includes the lines: "I have as much right/As the other fellow has/To stand/On my two feet/And own the land." He goes on:

"I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course./
Tomorrow is another day./I do
not need my freedom when I'm
dead./I cannot live on tomor-
row's bread." I found the poem
quite by accident and became a
fan of Hughes.

**What advice do you have for
aspiring writers?**

Write and read. Get into a
group of writers who are better
than you. Heed their critique
and revise, revise, revise. Read
the kinds of books you want to
write. While a formal education
is a plus, don't let the lack of
one stop you. (I'm a high school
graduate with a few college
courses.) Draw on your life's
experience. I just finished *I Am
One of You Forever* by Fred
Chappell, and I am reading
*A Hard Rain: America in the
1960s, Our Decade of Hope,
Possibility, and Innocence Lost*
by Frye Gaillard.

How do you relax?

Needlework—I'm making
a patchwork duvet cover, and
while my hands are busy with
that, I'm thinking about my
characters. I sing in a women's
group; I swim several times a
week at our local pool. Scrab-
ble or backgammon, when I
can find a worthy opponent.
Reading and reading ... I have
novels on my bedside table and
nonfiction on my kitchen table.

**Can we look forward to an-
other book in the future?**

I honestly don't know. I've
half-started another novel set in
Charlotte. (In my heart, I can't
seem to leave my hometown.)

For more information, go to
annajeanmayhew.com.



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