

## EDITOR'S CHOICE PRIZE FICTION

# South of Everything

BY AUDREY TAYLOR GONZALEZ • SHE WRITES PRESS

In her first novel, minister Audrey Taylor Gonzalez captures suburban Memphis in the period between World War II and the Civil Rights Movement, when, though circumstances challenged all, fairness and love were still principles that shaped young minds. The story draws from the author's own life, weaving in impressions of entrenched racism and the ability of the young and hopeful to overcome it, and of the magic that surrounds all people who navigate the world with open hearts.

With breathtaking description, the musicality of magical realism, and the winding nature of bygone Southern stories, *South of Everything* made an immediate impression upon the editors at *Foreword Reviews*. Awarding it the INDIEFAB Editor's Choice Prize for Fiction was an easy, happy choice, and our delight only continued when we had a chance to ask the author some questions about her work.

**What does the Memphis described in your book—a place where “God lost his geography,” and where magic is prevalent—have in common with the Memphis you grew up in, and the Memphis you live now?**

Missy's farm was just outside Memphis, in the rolling countryside, when horse, cattle, and cotton took up most of the place. The environment was real as described, seen through the eyes of a child. It was all Missy's for the playing. No one worried if you were a mile down the driveway. Nothing would happen. Sadly, it's not so today. Memphis is out of control, it is one of the most dangerous cities in the country, and it is divided by racism and high versus low society, rich versus poor, even though there is, supposedly, a church on every corner which should round up people with love. It is also the Deep South, the Delta, and we eat pork barbecue, biscuits, turnip greens, black-eyed peas, and cornbread no matter what your religion or status in life. It is home of 80 percent of the poverty in Tennessee, so Memphis is often considered a smudge on the southwest corner of the state, when it comes to governmental funding. Yet, we are givers and there are major efforts to take care of our own. But, there is no more of that innocence of Missy's childhood. And no one is safe to wander down a dirt road alone, even with a hound dog on your heels.

**From where did you draw inspiration for the more magical and mythical moments of your novel, such as the Lolololo tree and the sorcery around it, and Old Thomas's stories?**

The Lolololo tree and the mystical things just came from my faith, my soul, my creativity. I wrote the original novel in Uruguay thinking about my youth: the people who took care of me and taught me how to be independent, how to have manners and how to create a solid foundation for my beliefs, even if they were slightly askew and weird, but they were all based on God and Jesus. Old Thomas, Mammyrosy, Reddaddy—they are characters in *South of Everything*, but they are also real people who taught me how to love, Jesus-style. I was and never have been much of a reader. But I've always been a good listener. So Old Thomas told us stories when he drove my brother and I to and from school, which was about a half hour away since we lived in the country, and a lot of the stories made it into the book in one way or another.

**You are both a minister and a writer. What do these two career paths have in common, if anything?**

I'm a priest first, but I've also always been a writer. I started at Hollins College under renowned American literary scholar and critic Luis D Rubin Jr, and edited a satirical magazine called *Sour Grapes*. Then I became a journalist and wrote for the newspaper in Memphis when I traveled around Africa alone at age 21 because I wanted people in Africa to know we weren't all racist. That's always been in my head and heart. I believe in inspired writing—I often have no idea where it comes from. And this continues when I write sermons. I do write my sermons based on the readings of a particular Sunday. It is an amazing experience for me because I have no idea where the words and ideas come from other than from above. In the writing, I discover who I am and where the next road I am bound to go down in my spiritual life.

**Can you talk a little about the experience of working with She Writes Press to bring *South of Everything* to print?**

I had several agents and traditional publishers interested in my book, but I didn't want to make some of the changes they requested, because this book is based on my life and the people I loved in it and I didn't want to compromise on anything. So She Writes was a great choice for me because it allowed me to control the edit, book cover design, and the production process. Their distribution deal with Ingram also offsets some of the challenges of

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it being a hybrid press, which some media still don't recognize as a “bonafide” publisher. Save for production and distribution though, you're pretty much on your own as an author, but She Writes offers a strong community to support authors in their marketing efforts.

**What projects—writing or otherwise—are you working on next?**

I love blogging when I travel to share my adventures with family and friends who maybe cannot go to all the exotic and strange places I've been to. Hopefully, I am aiming to produce a book *Living Dangerously After 68* to incorporate the travel blogs. There is also part two of *South of Everything* which will incorporate Missy Sara's life from about age 16 till 18 and will include her quests and tasks that take her to Africa. I also hope to write a book about working in prisons, particularly with juveniles, a passion of mine that started in Uruguay when I volunteered at the Maximum Security Men's Prisons. In Memphis I am very involved with seeking alternative initiatives for youth so they don't have to endure the trauma of being locked up in juvenile detention. I work in the prisons here and after five years founding and running Foster Care Review Boards, I became chaplain of Juvenile Court and, more wonderful, of the Memphis Police Department North Main Precinct. It's my world, it seems, a long ways from the innocence of childhood. I hope we can find solutions to why our youth engage in crime and violence, in other words, where was their childhood lacking in love and hope.

**What is the best advice you've ever received as a writer?**

Revise Revise Revise. Even after something is published, I'm still anxious to revise and correct errors. There are always errors. As a young inspired journalist back in the early '60ties, the managing editor was sort of gruff and I was the first woman on city desk. He yelled across the room in a loud voice, “If you don't learn to spell ‘diarrhea’ I'm going to demote you to copy girl.” I was never a good speller and now that I'm fluent in Spanish, I'm even worse at it. ♥

## South of Everything

Audrey Taylor Gonzalez

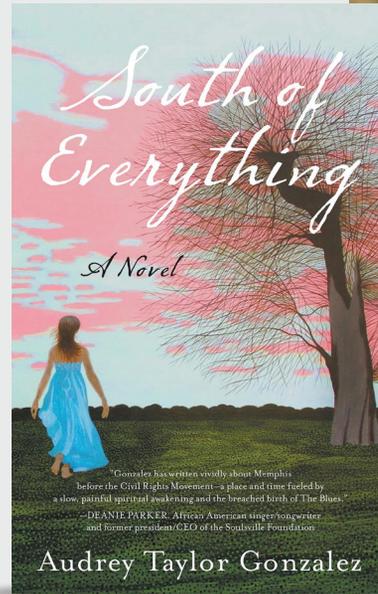
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Memphis minister Audrey Taylor Gonzalez's first novel, *South of Everything*, is a quintessentially Southern *Bildungsroman* that focuses on a young girl in postwar Tennessee as she navigates the spaces between black and white, the religious and the sacred, and youth and womanhood. Vibrant, sensual language and persistent spiritual surrealism make this project both seductive and wondrous.

Missy Sara lives on a sprawling farm that transitions from raising bulls to hosting show horses in the years before her confirmation in the Episcopalian church. Though she is encouraged to be a proper young lady, fingers unstained by the local barbecue and associating only with the "right" kind of people, no social chiding is able to stilt her sense of the magical. Instead, she finds her way via the stories of Old Thomas, a worker whose presence exudes divinity, and beneath the branches of the not always visible lolololo tree, its properties almost hallucinogenic, in the back of her family's property.

The dark events of the time period roil around Missy's family, taking a heavy toll on those she loves most: Old Thomas is nearly murdered by a racist mob; her childhood friend, B-Bubb, is party to a terrible accident that claims his sanity. Missy, though forced to adapt to the challenges of these events, always manages to find solace in the wonder that overlays her home: in birds that carry messages heavenward, or in the tangible kiss left by her grandfather as his spirit rose. Tales of animals that speak, epic journeys into wild lands, and the colorful remnants of the miracles she witnesses are as integral to Missy's maturation as are hard Memphis realities.

So, too, is an emerald-eyed young man, Mr. Washington, whose Plains wisdom and gentle ways send a spirit of rebellion through her veins,



awakening the first hints of individual need in her. As Missy makes her way into young adulthood, as lackadaisically as God's finger sketched out the geography of her hometown, Washington's presence proves to be the divining rod that leads her to her own true center.

Gonzalez's novel defies the notion that magic is something that ought to dissipate with time or maturity, or that fades when one is properly steeped in religion. As the novel progresses, there is no doubt that the smatterings of color and vibrant dashes of the holy that Missy experiences all around her are more than a mere trick of her imagination. The novel makes heirlooms of the "miracle marks" left by Missy's most transcendent experiences, and the prose flows unpredictably from one bit of magical realism to the next.

*South of Everything* is a coming-of-age story of uncommon beauty, shot through with Southern poetry and Memphis musicality, that is as eye-opening as it is sympathetic.