

SOUTHERN ISCLOSURES

By Stephanie Piper

Linda Lightsey Rice, author of a successful first novel, *Southern Exposure*, tells how she writes, why she writes, what she's writing now.

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he South, it has been said, is another country. The South of UT writing instructor and author Linda Lightsey Rice is a country of myth and mystery, a place about which it is impossible to be neutral.

Born and reared in Columbia, South Carolina, Rice spent summers in the tiny town of Fairfax, where her grandmother lived. Fairfax was the model for Essex, the setting of *Southern Exposure*, Rice's first novel.

South Carolina, she says, has "an almost mythic quality. It's a head-strong place, full of tremendous contrast and conflict—which is why it has such a hold on people who grew up there."



ROBERT E. BUSH

RICE'S NOVELS ARE SET IN HER NATIVE SOUTH.

Stoney McFarland, the central character in *Southern Exposure* (Doubleday, 1991), returns to live in the town where he spent boyhood summers. When the safety of Essex

and its inhabitants is threatened, Stoney must come to terms with his past and with himself.

Rice's own past is a powerful presence in the book. The character of

Harriet, an elderly dowager who is both custodian of the town's morals and guardian of its secrets, is based on her grandmother.

"She was a tremendous influence in my life," Rice says.

"She came from a time when women were encouraged to be quiet and meek, and she was nothing like that. She observed the symbols and rituals of a patriarchal world, but she didn't believe in them. She functioned exactly as she pleased."

Rice's grandmother gave her gifts every writer needs: self confidence and a fund of family stories.

"A lot of the stories in *Southern Exposure* were her stories," Rice says.

The young writer's confidence was bolstered by a high school English teacher who made Rice aware of another gift.

"She told me I had a real gift for making words mean something and sound beautiful at the same time," Rice recalls. "That piece of information probably changed my life. I had always thought words could either mean something or sound beautiful. I didn't realize they could do both at the same time."

Her mother, also an English teacher, "encouraged me to read from the time I could walk. I'm grateful to my mother—she always gave me books that were too hard."

After college at Lenoir-Rhyne in North Carolina, Rice headed for New York and a job at Doubleday Publishing. The experience paid off much later, she notes.

"It didn't help at all when I came to publish my book—everyone I knew there was gone by then. But it was nice symmetry that Doubleday was my first publisher. I'd once been a glorified flunky for them."

Her stint as a "flunky" had taught her enough about the publishing business to make her an unusually savvy first-time author.

"*Southern Exposure* did well, and I'm convinced that it was because I

knew about publishing. I knew to contact the publicist and say, I'm available, send me on book tours. I had say-so about things like the cover and the jacket copy." The book was nominated for a PEN/Hemingway award for best first novel.

Her second book, *This Half-Mad Dance*, will appear this fall. Set in her native Columbia and New Orleans, Rice says it is "primarily a love story about the uses and abuses of memory and how the past replicates itself in the present."

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"It's considerably darker than *Southern Exposure*. The book was an artistic experiment for me. I'm a positive, upbeat person, and I wondered if I could sustain a character and voice that is dark and still compelling."

Rice is at work on another work of fiction, *The Thistle Man*. An excerpt from this third novel will appear in the 1996 *Homewords* anthology, published by the Tennessee Arts Commission.

The book is set in Tennessee, "in the mountains near Knoxville, in an unidentified place that looks a lot like Gatlinburg," Rice says. The principal character is a World War II veteran who is dealing with posttraumatic stress syndrome. The tone, she says, is lyrical—another artistic experiment.

"I've been doing a lot of experi-

menting with voices in my work, trying to find a voice that is solidly me."

Tennessee occupies a special place in her personal geography, Rice says. It is home to the mountains she loves, and it is the place where she made a life-changing decision.

"I had a fellowship at UT in the early 1980s and did all the course work for my Ph.D.," she says. "Then I reached a crossroads: did I want to be a college professor, or did I want to write fiction? I decided to put all my energy and time into fiction. I quit teaching altogether for four years."

It was a difficult time, Rice recalls, and a lonely one. "Writing is the most isolating of all art forms. I'm always envious of musicians who sit down and play music together."

But there were consolations. "I've always liked solitude," she says. "And I had the luxury of spending all day with my own ideas and dreams and creative process. You can't be unhappy doing that."

Her life now is a balance of solitary and active pursuits. She is spending the current academic year as an adjunct associate professor at the College of St. Catherine in Minneapolis. She also serves as mentor for the Inroads Writing Program at the Loft Center in Minneapolis, a program aimed at minority writers. She will return to Knoxville this summer and will teach a writing course at UTK.

Rice's goal as a teacher is "to give my students a sort of safe place for this dream they are afraid to take any place else—a safe place that has to challenge them to be worth their time and effort."

Her students are a constant source of amazement to her, she says.

"There are people who have secret worlds within that contain unbelievable stories. You never know when they are going to be able to tap into that. Given a basic ability to handle language, I'm amazed at what people can do when they are ready to do it." ■