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A Magazine for Literature of the American South



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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN, AUTHOR OF "A PLACE THAT WAS HOME"

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Julia Nunnally Duncan

AM: Julia, it's great to have the opportunity to promote a regular contributor to *Southern Literary Review*. Tell us a little about your new collection of essays, *A Place That Was Home*.

JND: Thank you, Allen. I appreciate you introducing my new book to your readers.

A Place That Was Home is my first nonfiction book. For several years, I've been writing essays about my experiences here in Western North Carolina and was inspired to compile a book of personal essays after reading Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford*. My book traces my life from around 1960 to the present day—my childhood, teenage years, and adulthood.

AM: This book required some research, did it not? People don't always associate research with the personal essay.

JND: Yes, the research was necessary for several of the essays, such as "Charlie's Knife." To better understand the central character—my great-uncle Charlie Lynch—I had to research his World War I service, initially based on certain details of his uniform that I noticed in an old family photograph. With the help of various Internet sites, mainly Ancestry.com, I discovered facts about him that few people in my family ever knew. For me, this discovery was like finding buried treasure and was deeply gratifying.

For the essay "A Place That Was Home," I wanted to learn as much as possible about a 1929 textile workers' strike that occurred in my hometown Marion, North Carolina. My mother's family lived in a cotton mill village during this time, so she experienced this textile strike firsthand and has talked about it for years. However, I needed to know what instigated the strike and learn more about its deadly consequences.

In general, I want to be accurate in my historical details. Research ensures this accuracy.

AM: The book's title comes from the title of this essay. It's a wistful essay involving family. There's so much packed into that one word, "was."

JND: Yes, there is much packed in that word, and I appreciate your perceiving this.

I used the word "was" versus "is" because in the collection's final essay, "A Place That Was Home," my mother visits a community that has not been her home for decades. Yet this place that "was home" during her childhood is still so deeply ingrained in her memories and dear to her heart that it continues in some way be her true home. She's never really left it. I think the word "was" evokes the past and emphasizes its importance.

AM: Do you have a favorite essay in the book?



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JND: Probably "A Place That Was Home." This essay captures a past time and place in my hometown. It's also my way of preserving some entertaining moments from my mother's early life in a Great Depression-era cotton mill village, which had an interesting culture of its own.

AM: What's the most important thing for an aspiring essayist to learn?

JND: To realize that his or her experiences are indeed important and unusual enough to record. Every life is unique and each perspective different. Through recollecting and writing, I discovered that much drama and occasional strangeness have permeated my seemingly normal rural world.

AM: What's something you feel is unique or distinctive about your style?

JND: I do have a tendency to write about cemeteries, funeral homes, and quirky characters. These places and people have been part of my small town Southern life, and I find them compelling.

AM: Place and home. These concepts are important to you. What, in your opinion, do they mean?

JND: I think that place, for better or worse, dictates a lot of what we are—our mannerisms, our voices, our attitudes. Some people spend their lives trying to erase the mark that a place has left on them, but in my writing I want to preserve my own place—its language, its landscapes, its history. And home suggests sanctuary to me. At the end of the day, home is where we go back to. For some, it can be visited only in memory. But whatever home is to a person, its importance is profound.

AM: Thanks so much for answering these questions, Julia. Congratulations on the publication of this book.

JND: Thanks again, Allen. I hope your readers will want to check out *A Place That Was Home*, which is available at www.electropublishing.com.

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