

Author to visit blueberry festival

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Carolyn Rawls Booth knows Penderlea in a special way. A native of the Kelly community, Booth moved as a young child to Penderlea Homestead when her father became one of the lucky ones - the "Chosen Few" - to be selected for Hugh MacRae's ambitious development project.

MacRae planned to create a self-sufficient agriculturally-based community in the wilds of Pender County, in part as a response to the Great Depression. The Homesteads became mired in corruption, red tape and broken promises as the federal government took a larger and larger role in the management of the planned utopian society.

It was a time when local farm families were struggling with a bottomed-out economy, tapped-out land, and worn-out farmers seeking a better life outside of the flood-prone bottomlands of the Cape Fear and Black rivers.

Booth's third book in the "Between the Rivers" trilogy takes the reader to that dark, confused time, when the third and in some cases fourth generations of families who farmed the lower Cape Fear looked elsewhere - and spotted Penderlea.

"This was a special time," Booth said last fall, as the book was going to press. "It was a time of change, and it was too rich of a part of our local history not to use as a backdrop for the third book." Now a resident of Cary, Booth grew up in Kelly and on Penderlea Homesteads before her father again packed up the family and moved to Raleigh. She is scheduled to visit the Blueberry Festival in Burgaw this weekend.

The series started with *Between the Rivers*, the story of a Colly township woman named Maggie Lorena. Maggie's dreams come crashing to earth and she never really gets over the disappointment. Misadventures seem to follow Maggie (through all three books) and she gets so caught up in the misery that she rarely recognizes how she's been blessed. Her marriage to the ever-faithful, head-over-heels in love Tate Ryan, and the subsequent children show how the "modern" world of the early 20th century could only be held at bay for so long by the residents of rural Bladen and Pender counties.

Book Two of the trilogy, the acclaimed *Bandeaux Creek*, takes the reader through the turbulence of the 1920's, as Maggie's nephew Davey finds himself framed for a murder he did (and didn't commit). *Bandeaux Creek* also paints a classic picture of Wilmington at the onset of the stock market crash and the Great Depression, with haunting images of Pembroke Jone's formerly magnificent estate (now home to Landfall golf and country club). The details of White Lake's birth as a resort destination will also strike a chord with many readers, as will the descriptions of Lumina at Wrightsville Beach and the downtown Wilmington, and of course, the rural areas where Atkinson and Elizabethtown were considered as cosmopolitan as New York.

A *Chosen Few* introduces us to Len and Millie, cousins pushed together by circumstances and of course, the ever-meddlesome Maggie Lorena. Whereas her namesake (Aunt Mag Moore McFadyen) was the classic beloved aunt - full of wisdom and sage advice, but not above a little matchmaking, gossiping or inflicting a little deserved guilt - Maggie Lorena has become a shrew. Her bitterness, as well as her inability to

see how lucky she is to have as patient and loving a husband as Tate, just add to her depth as well as the pity one feels for her; of course, it is a pity mixed with contempt, since the reader often wishes Tate had just thrown up his hands and walked off one of the dozens of times it crossed his mind. Tate deserved better, but Tate loves Maggie, who in turn doesn't realize exactly how deeply she does love her husband of so many years.

But back to Len and Millie.

Len's conflict, Millie's passivity, and the couple's inability to communicate make for a grand, if tragic, tale. Maggie's meddling was enough to make one reader cry aloud, "Maggie Lorena must die!", but Len and Millie would have had plenty of challenges and conflict even without Maggie's spoon in the cast-iron cookpot.

Len's conflicts with family, his heritage, and the common sense instilled by his upbringing combine his unwillingness to grow up, and the allures of "city women" to make him a character both loveable and hateable. Millie is both lovable and pitiable, and when she finally gets some starch she becomes one of Booth's best characters yet.

A Chosen Few also ties up some loose ends from the earlier books - and to say more than that would give away the surprise. Let's just say that in the Tate Ryan family, loyalty is as reliable as the Cape Fear's flooding in springtime, at least most of the time.

While the story is about Len and Millie, as well as their extended families, *A Chosen Few* also paints a forthright picture of the Penderlea Homesteads and High MacRae. Booth manages to do what many historians fail to accomplish - she shows both MacRae and his pet project as they were, without overemphasizing either the failures or the successes of each.

Booth not only captures, but expertly recreates a painful time in the American South, and southeastern North Carolina in particular. This is no moonlight and magnolias version of history, but rather a truthful study in loyalty, personal torment, frustrated dreams and harsh realities set against a backdrop of the Great Depression. It was a time which changed our region just as surely as the Fordson tractor changed farming and Franklin Roosevelt changed government, and Booth gets it right.

A Chosen Few is an excellent ending to this series, and is a book well worth adding to the home library. Its characters are sometime earthy, sometimes saintly, and most times in between - in other words, true to life and as much a part of the Cape Fear culture as sugar-sand and baptisms at Singletary Lake.