

14 Questions with Kelly Mustian

hoopla digital: Where did you find inspiration for *The Girls in the Stilt House*? Did you start with a particular character, scene, or passage?

Kelly Mustian: Landscape came first. I knew I wanted to set a story on the southernmost stretch of the Natchez Trace, an area that was integral to my own coming of age. And there was a long-held image in my head of an old brick tomb with a crack across the lid, a memory from a childhood trek through the woods. What better place for two young women with few resources to hide a body? I began writing with that scenario in mind, and the story took off from there.

hd: What research did you do to bring this time period to life?

KM: Fortunately, I was a child who pestered older family members for stories about their childhoods. My grandmother lived well into her nineties, and her long-ago reminiscences about everyday life during the 1920s resurfaced often as I wrote. In some ways, much of my own experience of life in Mississippi was not so far removed from the Mississippi of my grandmother's childhood. In that place, the past is always within reach, just over your shoulder.

As for traditional research, I went down a lot of rabbit holes. I sought out obscure books, talked with historians, emailed trappers, and traveled back to the Trace. I researched everything from rural midwifery to early carnival rides, to vintage hammers, to the sound one hears when a pile of straw catches fire.

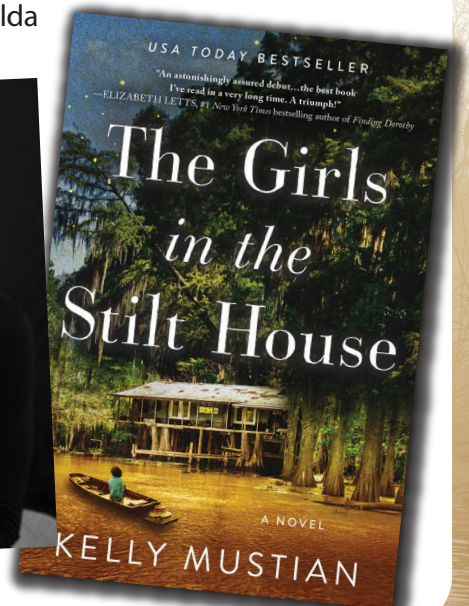
hd: The Trace has a personality of its own—and feels very important in this novel. Why did you choose it as a setting? Did your own experiences living in the area inspire or influence any of the descriptions in the book?

KM: The swamp in the story, though fictional, was loosely inspired by a bald cypress/water tupelo swamp on the Trace. That setting worked as a metaphor for the contrast between beauty and brutality inherent in Mississippi, and throughout the country, in the 1920s.

Many of the descriptive details in the novel were informed by my familiarity with that area, as with the sunken pathway Ada and Matilda encountered during their midnight wagon ride down the Old Trace early in the book:

The Trace narrowed, sunken here between dirt banks that rose on either side, reminding Ada of the parted waves of the Red Sea as the children of Israel passed through them, a story her mother had told her.

Like Ada, I made friends with the landscape of my childhood—the trees, the woods, the wildflowers, the night sky. One of the joys of writing this novel was revisiting those memories.



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hd: As you were writing the book, did the story unfold basically as you expected? Were there any surprises along the way or places where your research took you in a different direction from what you had initially envisioned?

KM: There were lots of surprises. I begin most fiction projects with a somewhat vague idea of where I'm going and how I'll get there—a pantsier rather than a plotter, as the saying goes. So what comes next is often unexpected.

hd: How did you come up with the way the story concluded for Matilda and Ada after everything they experienced?

KM: It was important to me to end the book on a poignant and hopeful note rather than tying up everything neatly and easily. So much stood between Ada and Matilda, both societally and personally, and I wanted an ending that acknowledged that reality rather than diminishing it.

hd: You mention that you wanted to be respectful and honest when telling Matilda's story. How do you approach the sensitive topic of the Black experience in this era? Conversations? Research?

KM: Conversations and research, absolutely. But also, my worldview was shaped by books I found at my local library when I was very young, during some particularly turbulent years of the civil rights movement. Books like an old copy of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, and later, memoirs like Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. These books helped me make sense of the world around me. A lifetime of listening to Black voices, often through literature, was foundational in the creation of this story. I struggled with the decision to write this book in the way I ultimately did, not wanting to overstep or to cause harm. In the end, I decided that I had something to offer in bearing witness.

hd: How do you strike a balance between the topics that are heavy and the ones that are poignant? Were there moments when you had to step back from writing and take a deep breath?

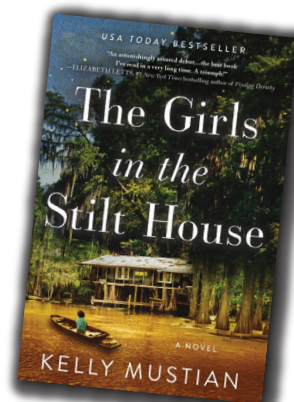
KM: There were many moments of stepping back. The poignant passages were born of the darker scenes, and there was a sense of cadence for me in that movement.

hd: Which character did you connect with more, Matilda or Ada? Which was the greater challenge to write?

KM: I think I connected with each of them in different ways. Matilda was more challenging to develop because I felt a sense of responsibility to do her justice while not overstepping, to bring her forward in the way she deserved without encroaching.

hd: You left the ending kind of open ended. Do you have an idea of where Matilda, Ada, and Annis ended up?

KM: I do. In fact, I wrote two quite different epilogues before deciding to end the story as it is now. Sometimes I tell reading groups what was in those epilogues, but I prefer hearing what readers have imagined about the future lives of those characters.





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hd: This is your debut novel. What made you decide to write a novel? How was the process different from your previous writings?

KM: Among writers, there is often a journey from first novel to debut novel. This was true in my case. I wrote two novels before *The Girls in the Stilt House*, one that came just short of being published and another that I shelved because I was unsatisfied with it. So chasing the novel dream is not new to me.

Working with a book-length word count, rather than that of shorter forms, allows more freedom to develop themes, experiment with structure, and build suspense. But it takes a lot longer to get to that last line!

hd: What do you hope readers will ultimately take away from this story?

KM: That we can build a better world and that a clear-sighted view of both the past and the present is crucial to doing so.

hd: What books are on your bedside table right now?

KM: I'm just finishing up *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, by Anthony Doerr, and what an astonishingly magnificent book that is. Closest at hand among my TBRs are *Small Things Like These*, by Claire Keegan; *Hell of a Book*, by Jason Mott; *Every Bone a Prayer*, by Ashley Brooms; *Whereabouts*, by Jhumpa Lahiri; and *Shoutin' in the Fire*, by Danté Stewart.

hd: What are you working on now?

KM: A Depression-era novel about two sisters who discover that they are not biologically related and the unsettling history that is uncovered when one sister secretly excavates the other's past.

hd: Do you have a suggested discussion guide question?

KM: Sure. This one is paraphrased from the Reading Group Guide in the back of *The Girls in the Stilt House*: How is the relationship between Ada and Matilda affected by Virgil's lingering presence?

Ready to discuss *The Girls in the Stilt House* with your book club? Find hoopla's exclusive discussion guide and meeting planner at theclub.hoopladigital.com. Then, let us know what you think on social using @hoopladigital and #hooplabookclub!

