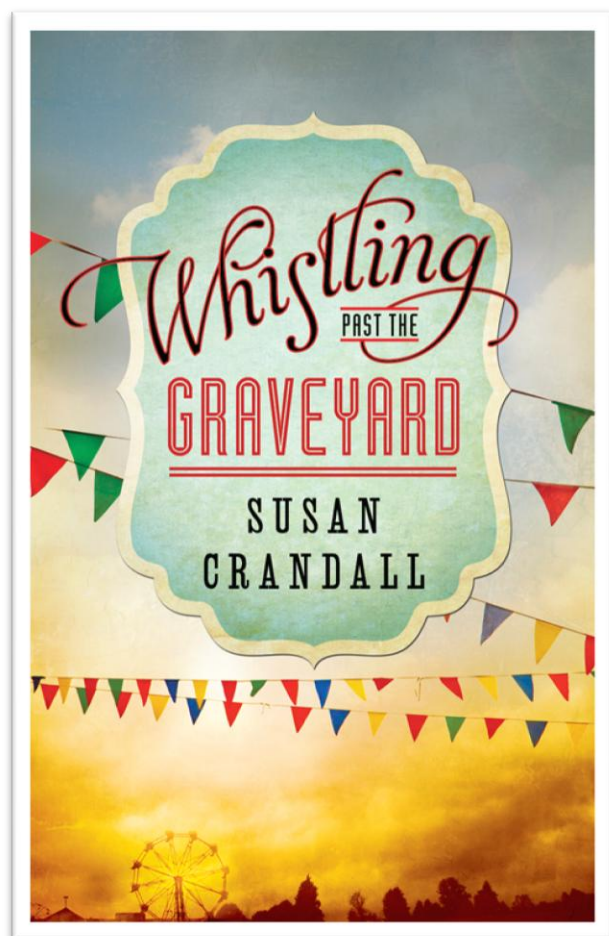


## Whistling Past the Graveyard Author Q&A:



- How long has this story been in your head? Did anything in particular inspire you to write it?

The seeds of this story, this character, had been working in the background for at least a year before I began this book. I was working on another project that was refusing to come together in any satisfactory way. You see, I've *never* left a project unfinished. Until now. Starla's story was becoming clearer to me than the muddled mess I was working on. I finally decided it was time to stop fighting with myself and set the muddled mess aside. The instant I started writing *Whistling Past the Graveyard* it felt right. *This* was the book I was supposed to be writing.

As for inspiration, I've always loved writing young characters. Teenagers played a part in many of my previous books. There's something liberating about writing from a youthful point of view, it's all emotion and action. And Starla, bless her heart (as they say in the South), is all of that. I myself was an old soul, an obedient, responsible child; in other words, *booooring*, not at all good fodder for a

story. But my little sister ... now there's a personality to fuel a character. Like Starla, as a child she did a lot of leaping before she looked; or looked and still couldn't help herself from taking the plunge. Strong willed and passionate. As I've gathered stories of my mother's childhood, I now know exactly where those traits came from. Studying these two influenced Starla's creation. Just so you know, Starla's character was only *inspired* by these feisty personalities; she's a complete work of fiction.

- You're a multi-faceted writer, with published works in a wide range of genres. How did those writing experiences coalesce into *Whistling Past the Graveyard*?

I've always been a very eclectic reader, which makes my writing interests broad as well. Each genre has its own nuances, its own rules, so to speak; with each book, I learned more about both the craft of creating a novel and my own writing strengths. With *Whistling Past the Graveyard*, I was able to utilize a wide range of accumulated skills to create a unique novel that is not genre-specific.

- At times in the novel, Starla definitely brings to mind Scout Finch. Are you a fan of *To Kill a Mockingbird*? How did other Southern stories impact the writing of this novel?

I'm a huge fan of classic Southern fiction. So many wonderful characters were born from Southern roots. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has always been at the top of that list, along with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Reading novels with rich, multi-dimensional Southern characters has, over the years, added to my well of understanding.

- Who was the easiest character for you to write? Who was the hardest?

Starla was by far the easiest character to write. It's rare that one of my characters starts out as fully formed as she did. Normally I understand them more clearly as I work, as their role in their own story develops. But Starla burst into my head with all of her attitude and swagger and underlying tenderness blazing away. Her voice was so strong and clear that sometimes it felt like she was, as Starla herself would say, "the boss of me."

As for the most difficult, I'd have to say it was Mamie. She's so conflicted, so stubborn, and so blind to anything but her own disappointment. And yet her motivation isn't entirely selfish; she does want Starla to fit into society for Starla's sake, as well as her own. It's a very delicate balance with a character like this; yes, she comes off as a villain, but still needed to be human enough that she has a shot at redemption. Plus, Starla is the one telling the story, and her view of Mamie is clearly one sided. I had to convey the undercurrents to Mamie's motivation without the benefit of Mamie's point of view. Of course then there was the problem of redemption. I needed to find a way to set her on a path that shows there is hope for her to repair her relationships without wrapping it all up in an unrealistic, tidy bow.

- The Southern landscape really comes alive in this. How did you research the setting? Have you ever gone on a Southern road trip?

Many, many Southern road trips! I enjoy traveling in the South, especially off the beaten path, small towns, local restaurants and the like. That's where you really get to know the heart of a place and its people. I've always said, great storytellers are above all, great observers. I'd set a previous novel in Mississippi. In preparation for that one, I had my straight-line-and-square-corners, always-plan-your-work-and-work-your-plan husband drive through Mississippi with no more plan than me holding a map and saying, "Let's try this road" and "I want to see this county seat." He was white-knuckled for quite a while, but he survived. By the time we took our road trip for *Whistling Past the Graveyard*, he'd been broken in and managed driving through Mississippi and Tennessee with no white knuckles at all.

- How do you think race relations have evolved since 1963? If you were writing this novel in present-day, what kind of obstacles would someone like Eula be facing?

I believe we've come a long way in measuring one another based on our individual character and not our race. I understand we're miles away from that pure goal, but trust that our humanity will continue to inch us closer. Each of us is responsible for what is in our own hearts. What happened in the past cannot be altered, but as with all history, it's our job to learn and grow from what came before and forge ahead with better intent.

Today Eula and Starla's trip would be eased by the absence of segregation, although I suppose racism could possibly still play a part. But Eula had so many more obstacles than race discrimination. She had limited education. She was poor. She was a woman nearly broken by loss and abuse. There are still many, many Eula's out there, looking for a way to find the strength to struggle against difficult odds. I hope that there will be a Starla for each of them, someone to help them find their own worth and the strength to save themselves.

- What's your next project?

I've chosen another era filled with monumental change, the 1920s. It's the story of three people displaced by circumstance: a teenage mid-western farm boy, a young woman of privilege whose family has lost their fortune, and a barnstorming WWI veteran pilot. Their relationships are volatile, complicated and sometimes destructive, but they band together as a performing group and makeshift family, traveling the country amazing audiences with death-defying acts. As with *Whistling Past the Graveyard*, it's a story with heart and heartbreak, a journey as these three people discover, and fight for, what means the most to them.

For More information about Susan Crandall and *Whistling Past the Graveyard*,  
visit

**[www.SusanCrandall.net](http://www.SusanCrandall.net)**