

SCOTT MANNING
& ASSOCIATES

FOR SEPTEMBER RELEASE

Contact: Abigail Welhouse
646-585-2183
abigail@scottmanningpr.com

Scott Manning
646-661-6665
scott@scottmanningpr.com

**THAT WOMAN FROM
MISSISSIPPI**
By Norma Watkins

Praise for The Last Resort

"This is a tale, first, of an enchanted childhood, then a murky drama of marriage and adultery, all played out against a background of bitter American struggle. I found it splendid in every way."
—Carolyn See, *The Washington Post*

In Norma Watkins's first memoir, *The Last Resort: Taking the Mississippi Cure*, she describes her unusual childhood at Allison's Wells, a resort and spa run by her aunt in Canton, Mississippi where white people visited in attempts to cure their ailments. Her father left to fight in World War II, and young Watkins, her mother, and sister moved to the hotel, where she began to question a system where black people could cook the food, but couldn't sit with white people to eat it. Watkins was curious and questioning, listening at doors for the answers that adults wouldn't tell her—like what it meant to have an affair.

Now, in her second memoir **THAT WOMAN FROM MISSISSIPPI** (Nautilus Publishing | September 1, 2017 | \$ 17.95 trade paperback original), Watkins tells the story of how she came to rebel against her repressed upbringing as a Southern lady by leaving her family and Jackson, Mississippi to pursue education and a career in teaching and writing.

521 Fifth Avenue, Suite 2600 | 20 Main Street, Box 417
New York, NY 10175 | Hancock, NH 03449
646.517.2825 fax. 212.922.0535 | 603.525.4767 fax. 3023
email: scott@scottmanningpr.com

When her father returned from the war, he became a personal attorney to racist, anti-integration governor Ross Barnett, to defend Jim Crow laws. He also joined two local white hate groups, the Citizens Council, which Watkins describes as "a gentlemanly Ku Klux Klan that tracked and punished any black person who got out of line" and the Sovereignty Commission, "a huge spy operation, keeping files on anyone, black or white, who spoke against separation of the races." Meanwhile, Norma became increasingly sure that segregation was morally wrong, and that the country must become racially integrated. Her father laughed at her, telling her she would grow out of her "naive idealism" and "come to see the world for what it is."

Watkins enrolled at the University of Mississippi, and as a sophomore met Korean War veteran Fred Craig. She married him at age nineteen in an attempt to gain independence from her family.

"Mississippi was a man's world in the '40s and '50s," writes Watkins. "Married women couldn't buy or sell property, open a charge account without their husband's permission, or serve on a jury. Married women couldn't teach or sign a contract. White females ranked higher than black people, but we were kept in our place by rules and flattery, bestowed with allowances and borrowed honor. If you married an important man, you became moon to his sun, glowing in reflected light. We weren't allowed to be president of the bank, but we could do the moon's work: lead the Junior League, run the Altar Guild."

But Watkins didn't find the freedom that she sought in marriage. Instead, she found the routine of being a well-behaved housewife stifling: "pretending to be the good wife, good student, good mother, church worker, volunteer." Meanwhile, marriage with Fred presented other problems.

"By twenty-seven, I had given birth to four children without experiencing a single orgasm," Watkins writes. "Fred told me things would get better, but when they didn't, he told me I was frigid."

Then Watkins met Bruce Rogow, a Jewish civil rights lawyer, at a dinner party. He was part of what she calls "a swashbuckling crew of civil rights lawyers, taking on the misery of Mississippi's troubles and working to save us from our bigoted selves." He listened to her opinions, liked the same books that she did, and encouraged her dream of becoming an English professor. Their relationship became romantic and sexual, prompting Watkins to realize that she was never "frigid" after all. She admired his defense of black people in court, chipping away at the same Jim Crow laws that her father worked to uphold.

In June 1966, James Meredith became the first black student to graduate from the University of Mississippi, accompanied by federal marshals for protection. When he was first admitted to the college in 1962, white protesters responded with riots and killings. After finishing college, Meredith began the March Against Fear, planning to walk 220 miles from Memphis to Jackson to support black voting rights. On the second day, a white gunman shot him. Civil Rights leaders

like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael came together to finish the march, which grew to 15,000 people and resulted in 4,000 African-Americans registering to vote.

"The marchers were scheduled to arrive on Sunday afternoon, June 26," Watkins writes. "I wanted to be there."

But when she arrived to find a crowd of jeering white protesters holding racist signs, a policeman asked what side she supported and she panicked. She drove home, feeling trapped in a state "that did not rage when three missing civil rights workers were dug out of the landfill, assassinated for the crime of coming here."

Then came a chance to escape. When Bruce got a new civil rights legal job in Miami, he invited Watkins to come with him, help him with his legal work, and pursue her career as a teacher and writer. She saw the other housewives around her, including her mother and sister, contending with alcoholism, depression, and the pressure to keep up appearances. She struggled with leaving four children behind, but decided she needed to leave in order to save her own life and speak up about her beliefs.

"This was Mississippi, where a wife did not leave her husband and children," writes Watkins. "Husbands left their wives, and we blamed the wife. She must have done something wrong, gotten fat and stopped caring. No one blamed the husband. We shook our heads over the shame of it, and held tighter to our own. Every person who knew me, and plenty who didn't, would have an opinion of what I was doing."

Watkins started graduate school, and slowly began to confide in new friends about leaving her children back in Mississippi. She struggled with guilt, and Fred offered to pay for her to go to therapy. She later realized that he planned to use this against her to argue for full custody of the children, in order to position her as mentally unsound. Her relationship with the children was limited to phone calls and short visits until the oldest son, Clay, then thirteen, butted heads with his father about cutting his hair and decided to move in with her and Bruce.

Watkins married Bruce, and began teaching in a program for adults returning to school. But she and Bruce started to argue to the point of physical violence, and she discovered that on the nights that she taught her classes, Bruce was having an affair with a law student named Jackie. They divorced, and for the first time in her adult life, Watkins was on her own.

"In 1966, I ran away from one man, looking for freedom with another, unable to see the irony in that," Watkins writes. "When I left Mississippi, the Episcopal priest told me I would suffer from guilt for the rest of my life. He has not been wrong, but guilt can generate constructive change, and pain has a way of revealing what is important."

Sometimes she imagines an alternate universe where she stayed in Mississippi, fought for civil

rights there, and never left her family.

"To a southerner, home is where you were born, no matter if you leave the next day," Watkins writes. "I have been gone for five decades, but Mississippi remains the home of my memories and the heart of my stories."

About the author:

Norma Watkins, author of *That Woman from Mississippi* (Nautilus Publishing, September 2017) grew up in Mississippi, where she studied writing with Eudora Welty. She left in the mid-1960s, during the civil rights struggles. Her 2011 memoir, *The Last Resort: Taking the Mississippi Cure* (Nautilus Publishing paperback reprint, 2017), tells the story of those years.

Watkins has a Ph.D. in English from Union Graduate School and an MFA in Creative Writing from Florida International University. She is Professor Emerita at Miami Dade College where she held an endowed chair. Presently, she teaches Creative Writing for Mendocino College on the northern coast of California.

www.normawatkins.com

[Twitter.com/normascribble](https://twitter.com/normascribble)

[Facebook.com/NormaWatkinsWriter](https://www.facebook.com/NormaWatkinsWriter)

[Instagram.com/NormaWatkinsWriter](https://www.instagram.com/NormaWatkinsWriter)

More Praise for *The Last Resort*:

"Norma Watkins, a rare, brave, and entrancing human being, has written a uniquely Mississippi story about coming to terms with family, state, and tumultuous times—and discovering herself in the process. It is a great read, pure and simple."

—Hodding Carter III

"Norma Watkins takes her readers through one woman's journey toward understanding herself and the Mississippi in which she grew up. It is a soul-searching work, one with which many women will identify."

—Kay Mills

"What a book! What a woman! And what a life she has led. . . touching upon all the major issues of our time. I was riveted from start to finish. Brave, honest, and open, Norma Watkins is a born writer through and through. *The Last Resort* is an absolute must-read for all southern women—and men, too—as she shines a light into some of the darkest, most secret and sacred areas of our culture. This is one of the best memoirs I have ever read."

—Lee Smith

"*The Last Resort* reminded me of why I started reading in the first place—to be enchanted, to be

carried away from my world and dropped into a world more vivid and incandescent. Norma Watkins casts her spell with exquisite sentences and unerring evocative details. She is a writer of inordinate compassion and formidable intelligence. This unsparing and unsentimental memoir documents a woman's struggle for independence over the course of her lifetime and took great moral courage and ferocious honesty to write. And let me add that this book is so much more than personal memoir. It is an eye on history. Norma Watkins puts us there at the white hot center of the struggle for racial equality in Jackson, Mississippi, in the turbulent fifties and sixties."

—John Dufresne

THAT WOMAN FROM MISSISSIPPI

Publication Date: 9/1/2017

978-1-936946-95-2 | \$17.95 | Trade Paperback Original

The Nautilus Publishing Company

426 S. Lamar Blvd., Suite 16

Oxford, MS 38655

www.nautiluspublishing.com/

facebook.com/NautilusPublishingCo/

twitter.com/nautiluspubco