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Natural Inspiration

Mindy Friddle
finds many parallels
in her dual passions,
writing and gardening.

By Leigh Savage



In every area of her multi-faceted life, novelist Mindy Friddle lives by the same open-minded mantra: “Just walk the path and see what will happen.”

She applied the philosophy in her diverse, all-organic garden recently, planting gourds among the perennials, vegetables and herbs. They quickly took over, clambering across the yard, swallowing up plant beds and even climbing her camellia. But Friddle didn’t mind this unforeseen outcome. It’s the process that appeals to her — trying things and watching as the results unfold.

Her observer’s mindset guided her through her years at Furman and then down a winding path in which she became a journalist, penned two successful novels, earned two master’s degrees, became a Master Gardener and founded The Writing Room, a program that offers workshops for aspiring writers.

“I don’t try to project,” says Friddle, a 1986 Furman graduate. “I’m just really open to whatever appeals to me.”

Nature holds infinite appeal for Friddle, and her passion for plants is evident in both of her novels: *The Garden Angel* (published in 2004 by St. Martin’s Press/Picador) and *Secret Keepers*, released in May 2009 by St. Martin’s.

Secret Keepers is the story of Emma Hanley, a devoted yet frustrated matriarch of a family full of closed-off emotions and unfulfilled potential. Nature — in particular a hidden garden tucked behind the family’s former home — is a major character in the book, in which secrets and buried dreams are unearthed.

Friddle says that nature “sustains” her and often serves as inspiration. In *Secret Keepers*, the family home, falling to ruins after years of glory, is called Amaranth. The opening page of Part I describes amaranth as an “annual with dense green or reddish clusters.” But the second definition captures the spirit of the story: “An imaginary flower that never fades.”

It was while writing *Secret Keepers* that Friddle became a Master Gardener, and the classes she took on horticulture and environmentally sound practices inspired her to expand her own garden and invigorated her interest in sustainability. She has long loved tending a garden and says she comes by it naturally — her grandfather was a horticulture teacher, and her mother (Kay Vinson Friddle ’68) is an “absolutely wonderful” gardener.

Over the years, Friddle says, she began to feel a growing kinship with the environment. She found ways to make an impact — she became a vegetarian and sought out locally grown produce. Another step: getting rid

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of her front lawn at her downtown Greenville home (she mulched over it) and replacing it with a native plants and perennials that require minimal watering. When necessary, she uses rainwater collected from gutter runoff.

Her shady backyard, certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a “backyard wildlife habitat,” is designed to attract insects, birds and other creatures. Native plants like Joe Pye weed, swamp sunflower and coneflower lure hummingbirds, cardinals and butterflies, and a small structure Friddle built is designed to attract bats. She’s also devoted a section of her refrigerator to mealworms, which she feeds to bluebirds.

As in her novels, she relishes setting the scene and then watching nature in action. “When the bluebirds feed their young in the spring, it’s just so beautiful,” she says.

Friddle notes several parallels between her two passions, writing and gardening.

Both, she says, require patience and an open mind. The early stages of writing creatively “are sort of like getting the soil ready for seed germination,” she says. “You have to amend the soil, and then the idea comes.”

When the idea for *The Garden Angel* occurred to her, Friddle says she was ready, in part, because of her years at Furman. Always a voracious reader, she majored in philosophy, wrote for the student newspaper and published a poem in the *Echo* literary magazine.

“The whole idea of a liberal arts education, taking classes in everything that interests you, that’s just the best education there is,” Friddle says. “And you graduate from Furman knowing how to write a killer essay.”

She remembers being challenged in her classes, “pulling a lot of all-nighters.” One of her favorite courses was an interdisciplinary study of international women writers taught by Ann Sharp (English), Jane Chew (German) and Elaine Nocks (psychology). “That was a very eye-opening and inspiring class, a class about ideas.”

She also took Southern literature with Willard Pate and relished the introduction to writers that are still some of her favorites today, among them William Faulkner, Alice Walker, Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor.

Friddle points out that Southern novels are changing as the South changes. “Everything is more blended now,” she says. “This used to be the part of the country that was more violent and warring, the part of the country that enslaved people.” But she sees the good as well — the ties to land and family, civility, neighborly warmth, and a love for storytelling.

After graduating from Furman, Friddle went to work for *The Weekly Observer* newspaper in Hemingway, S.C., and then the daily *Florence (S.C.) Morning News*. Her newspaper experiences helped her sharpen her observational and time-management skills, as she covered everything from town council meetings to school board gatherings and other community events.

“Journalism definitely gets you out in the world,” she says. Since you “become the observer and don’t insert yourself,” she says, it’s good practice for writing fiction.

She first considered writing a novel during her newspaper days but says, “It seemed like a far-off dream. How would I even think about writing a novel?”

Inspiration eventually came from an unlikely place. While home with her daughter, Saga, who was around 2 at the time, Friddle was folding laundry and watching “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” The guests included writers talking about how they got their starts, and they mentioned books they had read about the craft. Friddle jotted down such titles as *How to Write a Novel* by John Braine and *The Writing Life* by Annie Dillard. After reading them, she decided she might as well take the plunge.

Around the same time, the idea of a specific character occurred to her: Cutter, a complicated young woman with unbreakable ties to her home and her heritage. Cutter propelled the story of *The Garden Angel*, which Friddle worked on in fits and starts for eight years as she balanced family time with jobs as a technical editor and then in corporate communications.

Those busy years were challenging, but her love for telling stories drove her to continue. Just as plants grow and reveal themselves, sometimes in surprising ways, characters and stories also must reveal themselves organically, she says. “There might be a minor character who keeps popping up. It’ll make me think that this character wants a bigger role. And I’m open to that.”

George Singleton ’80, author of four collections of short stories and two novels, met Friddle in the early 1990s when she was hard at work trying to figure out how to become a novelist. “She had, obviously, what [Furman] creative writing professor Gil Allen called the disease,” Singleton says. “What was going to



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stop her from success? Zero. She understood inherently that if one continues working diligently, one would end up publishing a novel.”

After years of on-and-off effort, her big break came in 2000 when the opening chapter of *The Garden Angel* was one of 12 stories selected by the South Carolina Arts Commission as a winner in the S.C. Fiction Project. Each writer received \$500. That success inspired Friddle to attend a writer’s conference, and she soon procured an agent.

Friddle worked closely with the agent to revise her draft before publishing *The Garden Angel* in 2004. The novel earned critical acclaim for its unique characters, offbeat humor and vivid sense of place. National Public Radio named it a “Summer Reading Pick,” and Barnes & Noble chose it for its “Discover Great New Writers” promotion.

“Mindy has been able to write narratives that successfully straddle what might be called ‘high-falutin’ literary fiction’ with story lines that appeal to everyone,” says Singleton, who teaches at the South Carolina Governor’s School for the

Arts and Humanities in Greenville. “Both *The Garden Angel* and *Secret Keepers* revolve around protagonists aswirl in certain dysfunctional families . . . trying to figure out their best bets according to the hands they got dealt.”

Through writing her novels, Friddle says she learned that, beyond a passion for writing, novelists need, as an editor once told her, “talent, luck and pluck. And pluck is the most important. It’s tenacity. Hanging in there, letting rejection roll off you and focusing on the writing in front of you.”

It’s a lesson she wanted to share with aspiring writers, so she approached the Emrys Foundation, a Greenville group that encourages women and minorities in the arts, about starting a writing program.

“I felt there was a real untapped literary community here in Greenville,” she says. After looking at model programs around the country, she founded The Writing Room in 2006 with the backing of Emrys. Now in its eighth session, The Writing Room offers workshops for people who always wanted to write a novel but weren’t



Friddle's favorites

Mindy Friddle weighs in on some of the books and authors that inspire and transport her:

Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy. "I reread it last summer, and it's just one of those novels that you crawl up into and just live. I read it in July and was so glad to be reading about Moscow and St. Petersburg and vodka. It was so hot and I felt air-conditioned as I read. I love Tolstoy."

Housekeeping by Marilynne Robinson. "She also wrote *Home* and before that *Gilead*, but *Housekeeping* is my favorite. It's just a beautiful book."

William Faulkner. *The Sound and the Fury* is Friddle's No. 1 pick, but *Absalom, Absalom!* also had an early and profound effect: "When I first read it I was a senior in high school, and I felt like I was thrown in a vat of Vaseline. Everything was blurry and beautiful, and I loved it."

Other influences and recommendations: *Norwood* by Charles Portis, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers, *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich, *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, *Ironweed* by William Kennedy, *The White Hotel* by D.M. Thomas.

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sure how. Friddle, who directs the program, hopes to create a scholarship fund that will allow people facing economic hardships to attend.

In her classes, Friddle encourages her students to crank out 1,000 words a day with absolutely no judgment and no editing. Now working through the second draft of her third novel, she knows that future drafts will offer ample opportunity for editing and revision. The first draft is the time for unfettered creativity.

"You can't let the editor in at this point," she says. "It shuts people down. And it doesn't even have to look like it makes sense. It's threads in a tapestry, all over the place, and it's really coming from this deep fount of something very intuitive. It's a portal. And I say, keep the portal open." [F]

Read Mindy Friddle's "Novel Thoughts" at <http://mindyfriddle.blogspot.com>, where you'll find links to other sites of note.

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