

## **Karen White on *THE STRANGERS ON MONTAGU STREET* and Her Love Affair with Charleston...**



***Karen, your love of the south is evident in your books, including The Strangers on Montagu Street, the third of your Tradd Street novels, all of which are set in Charleston's famed historic downtown. Your family's southern heritage and Mississippi roots go back for generations. But is it true that you didn't live in the south until you were an adult? What parts of it had you visited before that?***

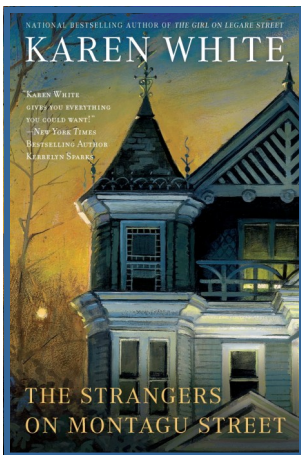
Although not technically "the South," I did live in Oklahoma and Texas the first four years of my life! However, I spent a good part of my summers visiting family in the Florida panhandle and Mississippi (and it doesn't get much more Southern than that!).

***When did you first visit the Lowcountry? What brought you there?***

My first visit to the Lowcountry was to Hilton Head, South Carolina. It was our first family vacation with the children and I picked Hilton Head simply because that's where everybody in our neck of the woods (Atlanta, Georgia) seemed to vacation. It was love at first sight.

***Did you spend time in Charleston during that first visit? Or Savannah, which you've said is another of your favorite places to visit?***

I think we drove through Charleston on that first visit (the kids were four and six and not a lot of fun on a walking tour) but returned after that several times. My husband and I visited Savannah (without the children) for a long weekend around that time which started me on a love affair with that city, too.



***When did Charleston start to feel like "your" city? Your research gives you so much knowledge of its past and its architecture but you also know cosmopolitan Charleston so very well—what are some of your favorite things to do when you're there?***

The first time I saw Charleston, it felt like "my" city—and I try to visit now as often as possible to make that come true! I'd like to start a letter writing campaign to convince my husband to move there. When I'm in Charleston, besides the divine shopping and eating, I love to just grab a bottle of water and walk, walk, walk. It is an amazing walking city and you get to see so much of its hidden beauty when you're on foot instead of whizzing by in a car.

***One of your readers is spending a day and a half in Charleston. Plan the itinerary.***

There's too much to do in a day and a half! Besides the shopping/dining/walking, I'd suggest a tour of homes (they do these every spring and fall through the historical society), a trip over the bridge to Mt. Pleasant to see the USS Yorktown (and enjoy the view of the Holy City on your trip back over the bridge), kayaking at Sullivan's Island, a guided ghost walk at night.

***It's said that frequently authors bring bits of themselves to the characters they create. So, please 'fess up. Inquiring minds want to know which of Melanie's traits correspond to your own. Loving to shop? A passion for shoes? Her sweet tooth? Her ability to eat whatever she wants and still stay slim? Her appreciation of ABBA's music? Her psychic ability? (Even a little???)***

So glad you didn't mention her anal-retentive personality. My official answer would be all of the above except for being able to eat anything I want and the psychic ability. I'd like to have the former but not so much the latter.

***Melanie can't resist buying Nola a traditional sweet grass basket at the City Market. How about you? Have you been able to resist? What makes them so special?***

What makes them so special is that they're all hand done, and that the creation of a single basket is an art, and an art that has been passed down by the women of each generation to the next. I have two breadbaskets, but am eager to add to my collection!

***The St. Cecilia Ball is mentioned several times in accounts of both the past and the present. For example, Julia wasn't allowed to make her debut at St. Cecilia's because she was seen wearing trousers in public. What is the significance of the St. Cecilia Ball in Charleston society?***

The St. Cecilia Society and ball is so secretive that it's hard to find any information or pictures! The society has limited its membership to the male descendants of earlier members—a move that has effectively closed the organization to anyone without deep roots in Charleston. It is the epitome of Old Charleston, and of course both the Middletons and Trenholms are members.



***Do you think readers will be surprised at how much more intense Melanie's confrontation with spirits is in The Strangers on Montagu Street than it was in The House on Tradd Street and The Girl on Legare Street? The spirit she confronts seems far more evil than the others she's dealt with—and the stakes even higher.***

To be honest, when I'm writing I can tell if something's funny or sad because I will laugh or cry. But I can't tell when something's scary! No spine tingling, shivering, goose bumps or looking behind me. Nada. So I had no idea any of the books were scary (or scarier than the other) until readers told me. If MONTAGU is more intense, it wasn't intentional.

***Have you always enjoyed ghost stories? What are some of your favorites?***

I grew up with my father reading me "true" ghost stories so of course those are the ones I gravitate to—and there are plenty of TV shows on now (*Ghostly Encounters* is one of my favorites) about people and their real life experiences. Fictional ghost stories aren't that appealing to me—probably because I know how to make stuff up, too.

When writing my first book, which took place during the Civil War, I met a lot of battle re-enactors and went to the 135th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. Now that's a place with lots of ghost stories, of wandering specters who don't know they're dead, of battle sounds and hoof beats from invisible soldiers and horses. As with most reputed haunted places, it was the scene of a traumatic event where so many people died before their time. It's almost logical that they would haunt such a place.

My favorite Charleston ghost story is the one about the man who was married in name only and never spent the night under the same roof with his wife out of spite. It is said that on a still night you can hear the sound of her carriage driving back to her lonely house.

Another favorite is the "Gray Man" of Pawleys Island. I wrote him into my book *The Color of Light*. Nobody knows his exact identity, but he's appeared to enough people over the years to have become a legend. They say if you see him, a hurricane is coming but that your property will be protected.

***Why do you think people enjoy stories about ghosts? Why do you?***

I think because when we're reading a scary book (or watching a scary movie), we're allowed to experience our worst nightmares—all in the comfort of a safe environment—and I'm no different. Would I like to actually be in a haunted place and personally experience a ghost? I don't think I'm alone in my answer: probably not!

***Then it's probably safe to say you like to keep your ghosts in the pages of your novels—the same place most people prefer to find them! Thank you, Karen, for your time.***

[www.karen-white.com](http://www.karen-white.com)

**THE STRANGERS ON MONTAGU STREET**  
Karen White  
An NAL Trade Paperback/Original/Fiction  
On Sale November 1, 2011/\$15.00 (\$17.50 Canada)  
978-0-451-23526-8 • 0-451-23526-6

**CONTACT: Joan Schulhafer, [joan@joanschulhafer.com](mailto:joan@joanschulhafer.com), 973-338-7428 or Heidi Richter,  
Senior Publicist, NAL/Penguin Group, [Heidi.Richter@us.penguin.com](mailto:Heidi.Richter@us.penguin.com)**