

A Conversation with Mary Alice Monroe

Written by Wendy Nilsen Pollitzer

Monday, 03 June 2013 16:34 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 June 2013 18:27



*Recently, Mary Alice Monroe invited me to her home to discuss her newest trilogy, *The Lowcountry Summer*. Here's Mary Alice, with Buster Brown and Magnolia, in her garden on the Isle of Palms; she is a personal literary inspiration and mentor.*



- Wendy Nilsen Pollitzer

A few years ago, I read a book that changed the cadence of my life. *The Beach House*, by Mary Alice Monroe, inspired me like nothing I had ever read. In just three short days, I read the story about Caretta Rutledge and her ill mother, and it brought me to tears and to action.

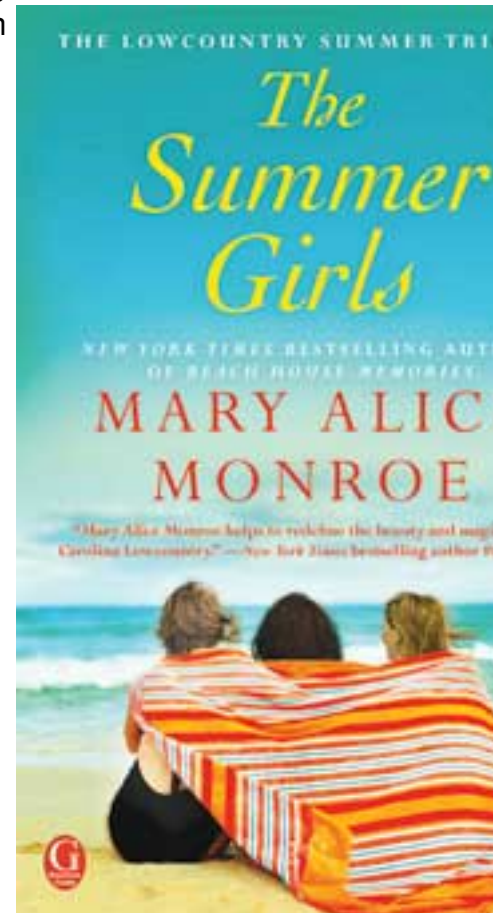
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The novel incorporates woven themes of love, sacrifice and forgiveness. It defines the beauty of the South Carolina Lowcountry while symbolically relating life's most precious lessons to Monroe's true passion for coastal conservancy.

When I read *The Beach House*, I felt connected to Caretta's story, not only because Monroe described so many parallels to my own life, but also because she initiated an interest in the protection of the South Carolina state reptile, the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*). I lived at Coffin point at the time, only a five-minute drive from Hunting Island State Park. I inquired about The Loggerhead Sea Turtle Protection Program, which



was led by the Interpretive Program Manager and organized by the Friends of Hunting Island. Before I knew it, I was on the Tuesday team with my new friends, Lolita Huckaby and Abby Morris. Each week, we watched breathtaking sunrises while shrimp boats dotted the horizon and peacefully strolled the high water line in search of turtle tracks. That summer was magical, and I owed my newfound appreciation for the endemic marine species to Mary Alice Monroe.

That's what is so special about Monroe's writing. She pens from real experience, and her love of a resource is contagious. Her many years of volunteer work gives her inspiration, and her novels deliver messages of coastal concern while developing characters, themes and dialogue to best represent the setting of the South Carolina coast and the state of mind of its residents.

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Her multi-layered love stories not only incorporate Monroe's conservation ethic, they also maintain Southern customs and valued life lessons. Almost all of her novels feature a generational narrative between a wise, older woman and a younger lost soul and the cherished institution of tradition.

As many females in the South understand, we are raised to be strong women, "but we can't forget our pearls," laughs Monroe. She continues, "Expectations change as values change, so tradition grounds our Southern values."

In addition to the well-researched natural aspects of her stories, Monroe's characters underline various psychological traits, all descriptive of the multi-faceted family. Whether her novels include topics of alcoholism, lack of confidence or terminal illness, the depth of her characters define strength and weakness; and their development in the plot is meticulously thought out and woven strategically to maintain environmental, historical and spiritual integrity.

And this talent can be attributed to Monroe's years of dedicated volunteer work with SCDNR's Loggerhead Sea Turtle Protection program and the South Carolina Aquarium.

"It's the activity that changed my life. Volunteering gave me something to believe in, and the reward is tenfold," smiles Monroe.

And for every book Monroe writes, she does so from an authentic perspective. She's had to do the

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