

The Road to Change

by J. Rentilly

There is a summer in each of our memories that bends our lives, turns it into new and unexpected directions, pushes into the light a glimpse of what the rest of our everything may look like. For some of us, these are seasons of love or risk, trauma or adventure, finding our voice or joining a fight. For Denise Nicholas, the summer of 1964—the so-called Freedom Summer—was all of these things. In her extraordinary debut novel, *Freshwater Road* (Agate), Nicholas tells the story of 19-year-old Celeste Tyree, who confronts violent racism and desperate poverty in a small Mississippi town against the background of a controversial voter registration project that left a trail of violence and aggression in its wake. The narrative hues closely to Nicholas's own indelible experiences as an activist in the era's tumultuous civil rights struggles.

In the summer of 1964, amidst a seemingly unstoppable reign of Ku Klux Klan terror, many southern blacks coalesced to thrust further into the national spotlight the need for equal rights. The movement, which included unprecedented voter registration pushes, activist theater, and public protest, was driven by youth, many of whom congregated in Mississippi, a veritable foxhole of racial bias. Nicholas, fresh from college, arrived in the state the very day three young black activists were abducted and killed, their slayings finally this year laid at the feet of reputed ex-Klansman Edgar Ray Killen. Undeterred, the theater major joined like-minded peers in Free Southern Theater, a progressive, socially conscious theater group, whose performances were routinely disrupted by gunfire and bomb threats, police raids, and unprovoked violence. After one performance, a police officer held a gun to Nicholas's head and threatened to pull the trigger.

"I wasn't in Mississippi very long before I realized that these were dangerous times, that danger was lurking at every turn. I was constantly afraid. Every time the president today says the word *terror*, I remember the Klan, the lynchings, the bodies burned. I remember the churches torched to the ground, the houses burned to the ground, people beaten and killed, just for trying to register to vote. People terrorized in their own country. It's not new," says Nicholas. "In my novel, I hope I captured the sense of terror that existed at that time."

In the aftermath of 1964, and due in large part to the efforts of activists like Nicholas, the Voting Rights Act was passed, dramatically altering the nation's political landscape. Nicholas was free to pursue her intended career, acting in film and television. Indeed, most of us are already familiar with the 61-year-old beauty, having witnessed her work in TV series like *Room 222* and *In the Heat of the Night*, though she claims she was "rarely able to break through to the good parts—because of race, because of age, because of my nose, because



photo by Mary Ann Hejlich

Denise Nicholas
returns to a time
four decades past
to chronicle the story
of a movement and
the people who
made it happen.

of a litany of stupid stuff that had nothing to do with anything of importance." Nicholas, however, cherishes her time working with the late Carroll O'Connor on *Heat*. A producer on the series, O'Connor encouraged her to pitch story ideas for the series, then bought them, helped Nicholas through the writing process, and saw the episodes to air. "The episodes that I wrote are pitiful little things now when I look back, but it was terribly exciting to do that work," says Nicholas. "It taught me a lot."

After wrapping the TV series in 1994, Nicholas—fully consumed by a fire for storytelling—studied creative writing at USC and in a private workshop offered by *White Oleander* author Janet Fitch. "For five years, I trudged to Janet's workshop with my little pages that grew and grew and grew," she says. But the real breakthrough for Nicholas came in turning to ash many writing habits she developed as a young woman, during Freedom Summer. "Over the years, I'd journal and journal and journal," says Nicholas. "Finally, when I buckled down to write *Freshwater Road*, I made a fire in the fireplace and burned all my journals. They were like weights on my brain. I had to be free."

Drawing on her memories of that torrid Mississippi summer, the events personal and societal of the era, occasionally returning to the state for research and refreshment, Nicholas spent five years writing *Freshwater Road*, rising every morning at 5 a.m. and writing for "three or four hours, at the most." It was a cathartic experience for the first-time author, the exorcism of a story lived and necessarily told.

"I think most of Denise's life and all of her work has been deeply informed by what she saw in the summer of 1964," says Victoria Clayton, a writer Nicholas met in Fitch's workshop. "I suppose it's sort of like, once you see something you can't un-see it. You're forced to look at life through those more knowing eyes. Denise automatically knows the core issues of being a human being and her life and work always go right to that part of life."

As her first book sees publication and as she gears up for a national book tour, Nicholas is as committed as ever to seeking social change, believing that forward progress is reliant on remembering past horrors, something that in impassioned prose, full-blooded characters, and rich feeling, *Freshwater Road* does. "I wanted to lift that summer up, the summer of 1964," says Nicholas. "I wanted to snatch it back from those who would demean the extraordinary time it was by calling everyone a bunch of hippies or wild-eyed druggies. That's an ignorant, ill-informed appraisal of the period. These were political days, civil rights days, anti-war days, women's rights day—smart days, alert and alive days. I think if you demean that history, you've totally missed the chance to heal and grow. Hopefully, *Freshwater Road* will give people a good rendering of that time and remind people of what we've been through and how far we still have to go."

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