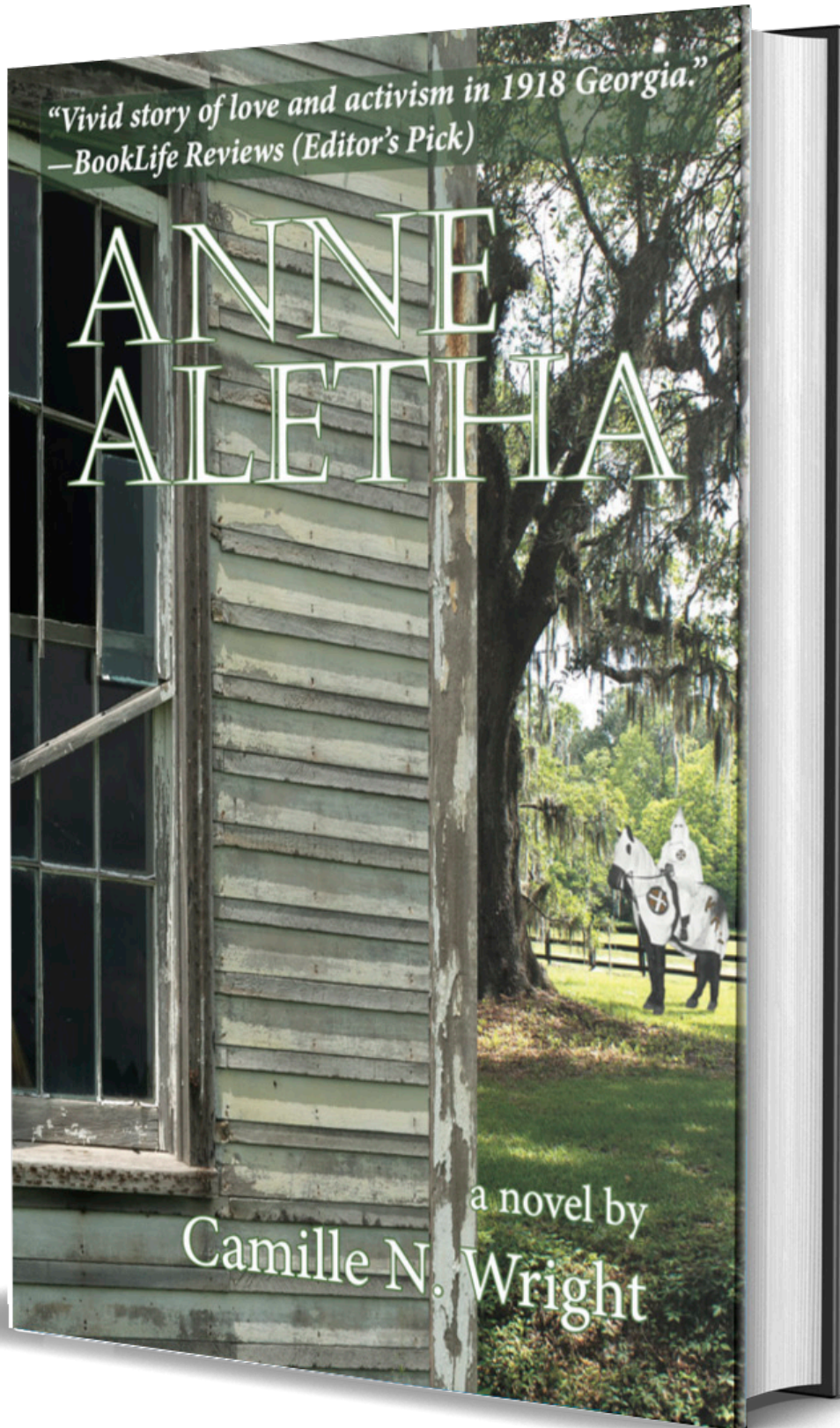
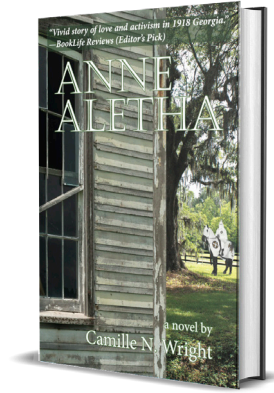


Reader's Guide for Anne Aletha



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Invitations to Atlanta-area daytime book clubs are welcome.
Contact the author at camillenwright@me.com.



Discussion Questions

1. Anne Aletha stands up for her convictions. She stomps out of church when the Klan marches down the aisle of church, demands Elmore Jenkin's arrest after he assaults Willa Mae, and defends John Henry with a shotgun when a posse threatens to take him for questioning. What did you think of her actions?
2. Anne Aletha is outraged over the horrific lynchings, especially the young woman, Mary Turner. Neville Clements warns her against confronting the Klan. He tells her that this new Klan is presenting themselves as decent Christian men and duping an amazing number of people into thinking they are protecting the home front while America's young soldiers are fighting overseas. Do you think the townspeople did not speak out against the Klan because they condoned the Klan, feared its reprisal, or had family members in the Klan? Did the racial injustice and violence in the novel shock you?
3. The twin brothers divide Anne Aletha's heart. Patten stirs her passion and Neville her intellect. Anne Aletha is physically attracted to Patten, but Neville shares her interests and makes her feel special. What did you think of her choices regarding the brothers?
4. In 1918 we first meet Anne Aletha on the train wearing a yellow rose (yellow for suffrage, red if opposed). She supports the federal amendment that demands suffrage for all women, including African American women. At the time, women had very little power and could not even vote. Were you surprised that the amendment did not have widespread support even among women in 1918?
5. John Henry is the brightest pupil, white or black, that Anne Aletha has ever taught, and she hopes he will someday go to a black college in Atlanta. Ralph Attaway is the town gossip, and though Anne Aletha takes an immediate dislike to him, she later softens toward him. What roles did these two characters play in the novel?
6. As soon as Anne Aletha settles in Ray's Mill she is ostracized by many of the townspeople. What could she have done differently to gain acceptance?

7. Against Neville's advice, Anne Aletha decides to deed Alex and Nellie their tenant cottage with a little land, even after he reminds her that in Plato's *Republic* justice requires courage but also moderation and wisdom. Do you think this was the cause of the Klan's final retribution of torching the schoolhouse?
8. During the deadly Spanish Influenza, Anne Aletha fights against her own cowardice when she is asked to nurse the Sirmans boys. She feels she can't refuse, and remembers her Uncle Carter saying that courage is sometimes having no choice. Do you think her act of selflessness is what caused the town's final acceptance?
9. Frank's letters from France are based on real events and stories of the Great War. He writes Anne Aletha of the mud, stench, death, and fear. What insights did his letters give you about World War I?
10. The reader is introduced to a small Southern town in the early 1900s. We see all facets of the town: the beauty of the millpond, the ruined earth of the lumber mill, and the ugliness of racism. Though Anne Aletha is a work of fiction, the setting and historical events are real. Did the sense of place enrich the story for you?



A Conversation with the Author

Born and raised in the South, Camille Wright has deep roots in Georgia's red clay. Her story idea was conceived when as a small antiques dealer she acquired a trunk of Victorian love letters. Writing in the tradition of Ferrol Sams, Olive Ann Burns, Sue Monk Kidd, Robert Morgan, and other Southern authors, Wright draws on family history, diaries, and letters to create her fictional world.

What inspired *Anne Aletha* and how did the novel evolve?

I first dreamed of writing a novel almost 40 years ago in the early 1980s when my mother and I acquired a trunk of Victorian love letters for our small antique business. I've always been an avid reader, but never a writer. The letters became my first inspiration to write a story. I fell in love with the couple named Alex and Nellie, and initially I thought I would write their story. But I soon realized that their story was not mine to tell and that I wasn't ready to tell my own story. Later, when I knew what my story was, I fictionalized the couple, using their original names in my novel.

The second phase was a 10-year gestation period that greatly influenced the book I would someday write in which I took adult evening classes in philosophy, literature, and music. My aha moment occurred when I read Julia Oliver's *Goodbye to the Buttermilk Sky*. I loved the title, the cover, the Southern setting, and especially the strong sense of place. I finally knew the type of book I wanted to write.

The final phase took place in the early 1990s when I enrolled in evening writing classes. I decided to set my story in Ray's Mill, Georgia, in 1918, the birthplace of my beloved mother and the year in which she was born. The story began to develop from there.

In a BookLife review of *Anne Aletha*, the reviewer said that *Anne Aletha* is a "magnetic and almost too-wonderful protagonist." Did you base her on anyone in particular?

Yes, I loosely fictionalized a great aunt as my protagonist. My great aunt Elitha was one of 16 children who grew up in Odum, Georgia, on a 1,200-acre farm on the banks of the Altamaha River in the early 1900s. For years I thought my mother and aunt were calling her "Anne Aletha" instead of Aunt Elitha. Elitha had a Normal School diploma, played the piano, taught black tenant farmer children on her back porch, and lived to be a hundred.

When you started to write the book, did you have an outline of the story?

I did not have an outline. The story and the writing evolved very slowly over the years. Interestingly, I wrote the middle first, and I never knew the ending until I saw it unfold on the page. The only scene in my mind when I began the story was Mrs. Clements sick with diphtheria. (In college I had been a nursing student for a year before changing majors. One of the things I learned was how to change the sheets with a patient in the bed!) My writing teacher suggested I start with that scene. I also knew what Anne Aletha wanted: her independence. But she had to find a way to keep the farm. So I wrote my middle first, my beginning second, and my ending third.

The novel evokes a strong sense of place both in its South Georgia setting and the period and climate of 1918. What type of historical research did you do?

I researched the 1918 newspapers on microfilm at the Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center. (This was before personal computers made it easy to do research online.) I read newspaper articles about the Great War, the re-emerging Ku Klux Klan, and the Spanish Influenza. In addition, my elderly next-door neighbor regaled me with his stories of fighting in World War I in the trenches of France, and my great Aunt Gussie, the baby of the 16 siblings in Odum, Georgia, enthralled me with family stories of sunrise weddings, rafting timber down the Altamaha River, and foot washings in the primitive Baptist church.

In the Author's Note, you tell the readers that you write to better understand yourself and the world in which you live. Anne Aletha wants to start a school for all children, white or black, rich or poor, and the novel explores the themes of racial injustice and courage. What made you want to write about these topics?

I grew up in the 1950s in a segregated South shamed by Jim Crow laws. When I discovered the horrific lynching of Mary Turner that took place just a few miles from Anne Aletha's farm in 1918, I knew the Klan would be the central conflict of my story. Racism is still a relevant topic today, and I wanted to explore its history.

What role has reading played in your life?

Reading for pleasure has played a dominant role in my life beginning with the Nancy Drew mysteries as an adolescent. Like many introverts, books are my friends. They enrich my life. I travel with them, I learn from them, and I am never alone.

You spent early childhood summers in Ray's Mill, Georgia (now Ray City). Could you tell us something about your experiences?

My memories of the few summers I spent with my grandparents, Joe and Effie Clements, in the 1950s have lasted a lifetime. Those early impressions of rural life in a small Southern town are a part of almost every scene in the novel. Sadly, today only the millpond remains. My grandparents' Victorian clapboard house with its wraparound porches, the Clements Lumber Mill, and New Ramah Primitive Baptist Church out on Cat Creek have all burned or been torn down. But although the Ray's Mill of my childhood is gone, the memories live on in Anne Aletha.

In 1918 amid World War I, the Spanish Influenza, and a reemerging Ku Klux Klan, Anne Aletha, a young unconventional schoolteacher, inherits her uncle's cash-strapped farm in Ray's Mill, Georgia. Her plans to open a school for all children and her courage to challenge the racial injustice she witnesses plunge herself and those she loves into the violence of the Klan.

Anne Aletha evokes the fortitude of *Jane Eyre* and the moral conscience of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, inviting the reader to reflect on the legacy of civil rights and women's suffrage—and the road that still remains to be traveled.

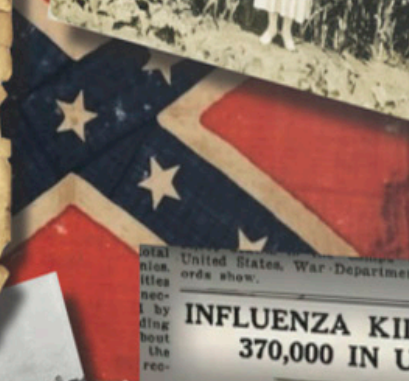
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ISBN 978-1-64066-081-6
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