

Author weaves tale of sweetgrass basketmakers

BY JILL COLEY
The Post and Courier

Nicole Seitz remembers the moment inspiration struck for her first novel. She was six months pregnant, and her small daughter was in the back seat as she drove up U.S. Highway 17.

When she turned onto S.C. Highway 41, Essie Mae Jenkins sprang, nearly fully formed, into Seitz's imagination. The sweetgrass basket weaver began sharing the story of her life along Highway 17, and her colorful ancestry of Gullah and French New Orleans ancestry.

Seitz grabbed a receipt and a pen and started writing. The first phrase Jenkins told her was, "Weaving ain't nothing but putting plain things together and making 'em prettier than when they was alone."

Seitz didn't stop writing for months, until she finished a complete draft of "The Spirit of Sweetgrass." Her debut novel was released in March by Christian publisher Thomas Nelson.

She's a visual artist, too. An acrylic painting by Seitz titled "Wade in the Water" adorns the book's cover.

Lowcountry readers will recognize the roads, legends and landmarks of the book's setting. One narrative thread fol-

FYI

"The Spirit of Sweetgrass" by Nicole Seitz. Thomas Nelson. 290 pages. \$13.99. Visit www.nicoleseitz.com

lows the threat development poses to the sweetgrass basket weavers, and depicts solutions to preserve their way of life.

She wouldn't call it prophetic, but much of what Seitz envisioned came to pass in the last couple of years. Efforts to preserve the sweetgrass basket tradition are materializing.



Seitz

Mount Pleasant Councilwoman Thomasena Stokes-Marshall championed the future of the sweetgrass basket weavers. Her efforts led to the annual sweetgrass festival in June, a sweetgrass basket pavilion at the new Memorial Waterfront Park and the designation of Highway 17 as a sweetgrass basketmaking corridor.

Seitz met Stokes-Marshall after she finished the novel, and the two became fast friends. "We talked frankly about race,

religion and basketmaking," Seitz said.

A Hilton Head Island native, Seitz has lived side by side with Gullah culture all her life. But being a middle-class white woman, she still felt like an outsider, she said, so she consulted cultural experts.

When she began telling basket weavers about her story, she almost felt apologetic writing from the point of view of a 78-year-old black woman, she said.

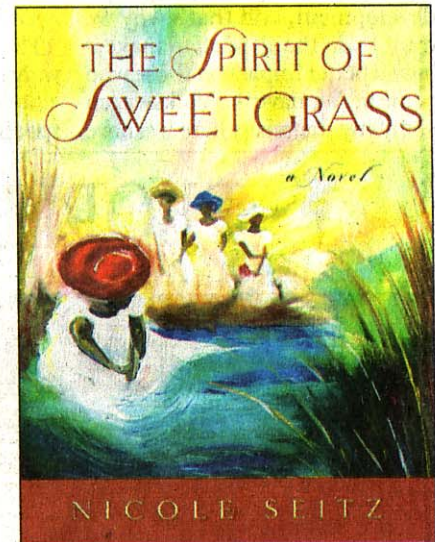
But when she told them of her inspiration along the road, the women did not think she was crazy. "They looked at me and said, 'Yeah, that's the Holy Spirit,'" Seitz said.

Jenkins is typical of her generation, Seitz said. She loves people, but she doesn't claim to have all the answers.

Seitz does not shy away from controversial issues. Homosexuality, abortion and interracial marriage are woven into Jenkins' reality.

A brave and playful writer, Seitz imagines a world populated with ghosts and voodoo spirits. She creates a vision of heaven, complete with bacon and conversations with Jesus.

She's already finished her next book, "Trouble the Water," which Thomas Nelson expects to release next year. The story is told from the points of view of



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The Spirit of Sweetgrass" by Mount Pleasant resident Nicole Seitz.

three females, whose lives intersect in a secluded Gullah community. Themes of healing, freedom and redemption drive the story, Seitz said.

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