



Secrets of Southern Girls

Haley Harrigan

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Haley Harrigan's *Secrets of Southern Girls* opens with a confession: "It's not your fault she's dead. It's the same thing Julie has told herself, over and over, for ten years. But it's a lie, and she knows it." From that point on, Julie Portland's story falls apart as she finally faces a death that might not be the murder it seems.

It's been ten years since Julie Portland graduated high school and left Lawrence Mills, Mississippi, for New York City. It's also been ten years since she buried her best friend, Reba McLeod, but Reba won't rest easy. Already haunted by Reba's death, when Reba's old high-school boyfriend, August Elliott, tracks Julie down and insists she help him find Reba's missing diary, she relents—despite the fact that finding the diary requires them to return to the scene of the crime: home.

August's insistence might be driven by his need for closure, but, first, it breaks everything open. Julie's movement toward the truth is mirrored by a steady progression through Reba's journal entries. As Julie gets closer to the truth, she must confront her long-held assumptions about who Reba really was and who she needed Reba to be.

Harrigan is a great prose stylist who knows how to sustain the tension and tone required of a Southern Gothic novel. Her writing is evocative and atmospheric, whether the action takes place under the bright lights of Manhattan or in Mississippi's weedy heat. As the story shifts between Julie and August's search and entries from Reba's missing diary, past and present are bridged, and the shadow side of friendship, family, and memory emerges. Harrigan's world is, in Reba's own words, "like being immersed in a fairy tale. Its intricacy was maddening and stifling ... all disturbingly beautiful."

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (May/June 2017)

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