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Roots that Run Deep

Patricia Foster. *Written in the Sky: Lessons of a Southern Daughter*.
The University of Alabama Press, 2023.

Who we are is entangled deeply in where we come from. In spring 2023, Fairmont State University hosted Artist-in-Residence Patricia Foster as she taught six eager young women the art of memoir. She encouraged the students to reflect on their past, and to be bold in examining who they are, where they come from, and what it took to grow out of the expectations placed upon them. Our roots cannot be erased, but they can be untangled. In Foster's newest book, *Written in the Sky: Lessons of a Southern Daughter*, she writes about the lingering legacies of the South's social divides among race, class, and white privilege in personal essays that uncover deeper truths during a highly divided time.

Throughout the collection, Foster weaves her past intricately with the flaws of southern history. Who Foster was, and the woman she aims to become, is a journey she reflects upon as she recognizes her own flaws. Brought up in a home that forced perfection in every little detail, Foster broke out of that mold by creating her own path to self-discovery. In "A Dark, Unruly Space," Foster visits Africatown where she stumbles across a saddening reality; it is a broken place, a museum of graves with those ignored by history, and as Foster ties Africatown to her tense relationship with her mother, she realizes that there is a part of Southern history built on the traditions of rewards and constraints that gave her mother stability in terms of dealing with the structure of race and class. However, Foster illustrates her own journey by stating:

In many ways, I was groomed to join that middle-class southern life, to claim and value it as my story. And yet its maze of social and political stratifications, so defined by wealth and whiteness and a deep loyalty to tradition, so infused with politeness, ceremony, and rank, lay like a shadow around me. I didn't understand it. I didn't fit; I didn't know how to fit. And it was only when I realized I didn't want to fit that I packed my bags and left. Left what my mother had wanted for me.

The South's history is tangled with lost stories, unmended

wounds, and heartbreaking realities. Black people faced unimaginable injustices, and Foster aims to bridge the discussion of growing up in a place where the history of radical thinking lay in the midst of traditional ideals grounded in unrelenting prejudices. Foster recognizes her own struggle with being culturally buried in whiteness, where her credentials were found solely in her writer's intellectual and emotional curiosity, and a conflicted southern identity. In "Native Daughter," Foster connects herself to Virginia Foster Durr, a white southern activist that fought for racial reconciliation. Foster writes:

One reason Virginia is important to me is that, though years apart, we've swum in the same soup of resentment. Resentment over the marginalized, fetishized status of southern girls: girls taught to be pretty and pleasant and accommodating and, God forbid, to cause no trouble. If you're a talker, well, entertain, but don't dominate or critique or interrupt, and don't expect to run the show. At least, out front. I'm talking about generations of white women born and raised throughout the twentieth century, women applauded for being loyal and subordinate as if submission is a virtue.

Who are we and what do we want to be? In a world full of hate, division, and turmoil, are we able to be like Virginia Foster Durr and recognize that there are privileges based on what we look like and where we come from? Tradition is embedded in southern culture. Foster discusses the negative interactions of opening her family's eyes to a different world, from art to racial injustice. And she opens the conversation that many of us are not willing to face: "maybe [we] either have the gene for fighting racial injustice or [we] don't." Some people will develop a curiosity to dig deeper into the injustices they have become blind too, and that some will refuse.

A daughter. A sister. A writer. A woman enthralled by the idea of digging deeper into what it means to live with pain, encountering revelations and connections, and still being tethered to her roots. Just like Foster's past, the south holds good moments, and bad. There were still those that fought for radical change, broke free of bondage and destructive belief systems, but faced setbacks from people who continued to promote segregation, hatred, and injustice. Some people will go to their grave with hatred engraved in their hearts, and some will encounter a small moment of recognition. As Foster says, "[W]e often need another woman's boldness to startle us to attention." Foster acknowledged several bold women on her journey of self-awareness regarding the south's historical truths, and along her journey, she found

her own boldness. She brought this passion to Fairmont State and awakened six young women in her memoir class to write about their own stories with passion, confidence, and purpose. Foster encouraged each one of us to be unafraid to confront our past, as painful and broken as it might be, and to write, to bring light to who we are, where we come from, and to push forward to who we want to be.