

Belle's Letters

**Contemporary Stories
by Alabama Women**

**Edited by
Don Noble & Jennifer Horne**

How's England, Missy?

Kerry Madden

"How's England Missy" is a chapter from my novel, Hop the Pond, about three generations of women—grandmother, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. I spent my junior year at Manchester University in England and became enamored with Boy George and George Eliot and all things British around the time of the World's Fair in Knoxville. Although neither of my grandmothers ever visited me, I imagined qualities of both to create Granny Mame. I see this novel as a kind of Trip to Bountiful meets Wuthering Heights meets a twisted My Fair Lady. Fifteen years ago, I wrote it with only the girl's voice and it came close at publishing houses, but the YA editors said it was "too adult" and the literary fiction editors said it was "too YA." I'm very glad it was never published then, because I've been able to recreate my long dead grandmothers and send them on a trip they didn't even know they wanted along with a fascination of the Bronte Parsonage. There are also three men's voices weaved into the narrative as flash fiction, and they include Granny Mame's brother, son, and grandson. Addiction ran in the Bronte family as it does in the Hazlett family, which is another theme in the novel. The chapters go back and forth between East Tennessee and Manchester, England as Granny Mame makes the decision to see something besides East Tennessee before she dies, although the family tries to thwart her trip at every turn. I think it's really a story of a journey that stretches from the Smoky Mountains to the moors of Yorkshire.

September 30, 1981

Dear Shelly-Grace,

How's England, missy? Have you found a Catholic Church? What's the name of it? This is the first letter I've ever sent to a foreign country. Wonder how long it will take to get there?

Well, I got your letter, and I'm tell you this right now, Lady Jane. Don't move out of the dorm into a "flat." That's crazy! Stay with the Americans where you have a meal plan, and I'm not fooling around. Don't forget who you are—an American Exchange Student, thanks to me and your daddy so generously footing the bill.

And what is this about you drinking hard cider? You'd better be

minding your manners, sugarpig. And I'm NOT calling you by your "new name" of "George." I don't care if George Eliot or Boy George hung the moon and stars. Your name is Shelly Grace. Who are they anyway? Never heard of either one.

Good news, honey! I like my new job doing accounts at "Cherry Bear Books & Things." Easier than working for your father—I needed a break from the exterminating mess, and I don't mind driving over to Knoxville from Maryville. It's a cute little store off Kingston Pike not too far from the "Pick & Grin" where you and Dean took those ill-fated guitar lessons many eons ago. The owner, Mary Alice, sells way more fancy potpourri than books and also keeps highfaluting teddy bears in stock that cost upward of fifty dollars. Folks scoop out that potpourri mess like ice cream flakes and weigh it on an old fashioned ice-cream scale in fancy paper bags with ribbons. Can you imagine? And they buy those damn teddy bears on their credit cards. Blows the mind. "Scarlet O'Beara" and "Chef Bearnaise" and "Rhett Beartler." Nonsense! Don't you dare get a credit card, missy!

But you'll love this. The bestseller here is: AN ENGLISH WOMAN'S GARDEN. There is another hot ticket item called AN ENGLISH WOMAN'S COTTAGE. Thought you'd like those, but I'm not buying them or anything else in this overpriced bookstore even though I get a ten percent discount. Maybe I'll write one and call it A MARYVILLE WOMAN'S SHOESTRING. HA!

In Jesus' Holy Name,

Momma

P.S. Old Deuteronomy and Grizabella miss you, honey. Our dear pot-bellied pigs know when things aren't right in the home, and you are missed by the two and four-legged creatures around here. And why are you talking funny in your letters? It's like you are writing with an accent. It's me. Momma. And no ma'am, I don't "fancy" sending you any money or quids or whatever you call it.

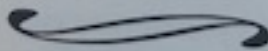
Maybe I'll start talking British too. How would you like that, MADAME? Don't get all hoity-toity just 'cause you live with Brits. In my day, it was boys who went off, and the daughters who stuck close to home. A mother needs her daughter close by—as for her son, especially when

he's raising all kinds of hell—not so much. You'll only know when you have children yourself and they go off and leave you.

I think Granny Mame and Aunt Bernadette are taking old Uncle Gudger's death pretty well. It's almost a relief. Is that a terrible thing to say? I know he was their only brother, but he wore everybody out except when he didn't, bless his heart. We'll have the memorial when you get home. Pray for Gudger's pitiful soul wandering around purgatory. Sometimes prayer is all we got. Your daddy goes to church everyday to pray for us all, since it's pretty clear your brother might be following the outlaw path of Uncle Gudger to a T. Do I need to say it again that I need my daughter close to me in this time of strife? If that's wrong sue me. You could come home in the spring and get you a job at the World's Fair. It opens in April and it's the biggest thing to hit town! "Knoxville's Energy International Exposition." They'll have all kinds of jobs for students. They're already playing a song on the radio: "The 1982 World's Fair—You've got to be there!" Catchy.

P.S. AGAIN: I almost forgot: Whatever you do, DON'T CALL HOME COLLECT! International rates give me heartburn, and I already have enough to contend with when the hot flashes hit. It's like my hair's on fire and the sweating, Lord have mercy. When they hit at work, I duck behind a shelf of books and suck on ice. Sometimes I'll just slip an ice cube right down the back of my shirt. Talk about relief. It's not pretty.

Anyway, once again, Shelly Grace Hazlett, do not be asking me or your daddy for more money. Do you think we're made of money? England was your grand idea, don't forget! Live with it, Lady Jane! Oh yes, Tennessee plays Alabama on Friday. Go Vols! Everybody's gearing up for the big game. Wouldn't it be a miracle if we could beat that sorry Alabama for once? Lordy. Can you get the football scores in England? I can start sending you the sports page if you want. Miss you, sugarpig! Granny Mame wants to know if you've been to the Bronte Parsonage yet? Write me back. Bye!



Kerry Madden-Lunsford is the author of the Maggie Valley Trilogy, which includes Gentle's Holler (2005), Louisiana's Song (2007) and Jessie's Mountain (2008). Her first novel, Offsides, was a New York Public Library Pick for the Teen Age and has been released on Kindle by Foreverland Press. Up Close: Harper Lee, Booklist's Ten Top Biographies of 2009 for Youth and a Kirkus Pick for 2009, was re-released in 2015. Her first picture book, Nothing Fancy About Kathryn and Charlie, was illustrated by her daughter, Lucy, and published by Mockingbird Publishers, is about the friendship between Alabama storyteller Kathryn Tucker Windham and folk artist Charlie Lucas. Her newest picture book, Ernestine's Milky Way, will be published by Random House Children's Books in 2018. She has written stories for the Los Angeles Times, LA Weekly, Five Points, Shenandoah, Salon, Redux, and the Washington Post. She appeared in her first indie film, "Little Feet" as a bag lady, directed by Alex Rockwell. Kerry will begin directing the Creative Writing Program at the University of Alabama Birmingham this fall and has been the editor of PoemMemoirStory at UAB. The mother of three, she divides her time between Birmingham and Los Angeles.