

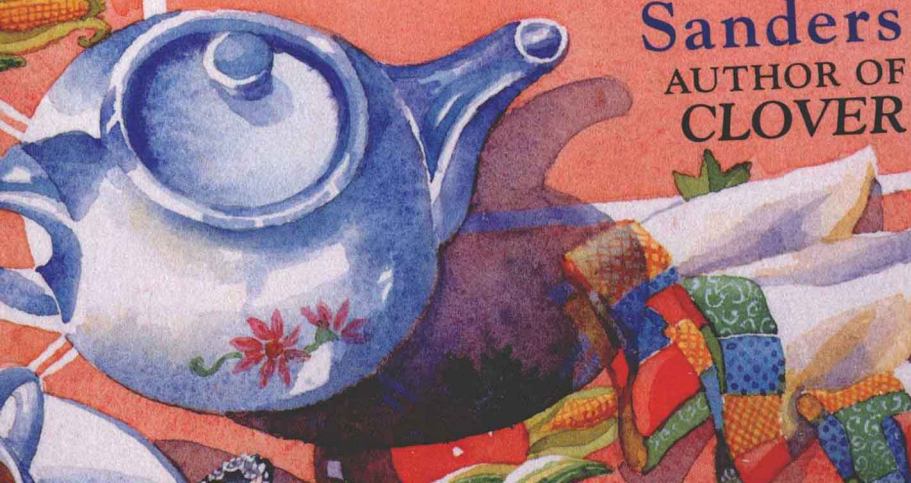
"Extraordinary...The pages can't be turned fast enough....Like a ripe summer peach, *Her Own Place* just keeps getting better and better until the last page leaves the reader longing for more."

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

Her Own Place

A NOVEL

Dori
Sanders
AUTHOR OF
CLOVER



DORI SANDERS

Her Own Place

a novel

Fawcett Columbine • New York

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“[A] GENTLE, LOVINGLY TOLD TALE.”

—*Hartford Courant*

“Mae Lee Barnes walks into your life like someone you’ve always known . . . A woman who dishes out love and laughter because those are the only two things not in short supply . . . *Her Own Place* is a book to read and enjoy.”

—*Greensboro News & Record*

“A life story that seems to hum along so simply it takes a while to notice that it resonates as powerfully as an old hymn. . . . Small, sharp truths and day-to-day details add up to a story that’s larger than life here—that’s the cipher of fine writing.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“In *Her Own Place*, [Sanders] writes easy, peaceful scenes of rural life . . . Sanders knows the rhythms of her characters by heart.”

—*The Virginian-Pilot/Ledger Star*

“*Her Own Place* has a rhythm that has the inevitability of the changing of the seasons or the flow of a mighty river . . . Ms. Sanders’ genius—and that is what it is—is that she is so sensitive to her characters . . . When [Mae Lee’s] children honor her, we rejoice. When she is wounded by unkindness, we hurt. . . . Her prose is rich with the joy and pain of humanity.”

—*The Smithfield Herald* (NC)

“Echoes the lives of so many post-World War II black women. . . . [Sanders] demonstrates a deft hand in sketching characters that are believable.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

"BEAUTIFUL AND BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED . . .

Sanders brings her story up to the present, along the way enabling readers to savor the changes in Mae Lee and the Southern world around her. That she endures so successfully is part of the triumph of Sanders' book with its finely proclaimed victory for good humor, spirituality, hard work and perseverance over the adversity that all readers will know and identify with."

—*The State* (Columbia, SC)

"[Sanders'] writing is as light and rich as a batch of biscuits fresh from the oven . . . [Her] earthy writing is reminiscent of the rediscovered black folklorist and writer Zora Neale Hurston."

—*Boston Sunday Herald*

"The book rolls gently along, with a sweet mix of humor and familiarity."

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Mae Lee's hard-earned wisdom, coupled with Sanders' warm writing, ensure that *Her Own Place* will find a place in readers' affections."

—*The Orlando Sentinel*

"Colorful and charming, a piece of literary folk art. . . . If Grandma Moses had worked with a word processor instead of paints, she would have produced a book like this."

—*San Antonio Express-News*

"Sanders' words lift off the page in a coolly measured flow. It is like listening to the confidences of an old, unhurried friend rocking gently on the front porch . . . The imprint of a born storyteller."

—*Winston-Salem Journal*

"DELIGHTFUL . . .

Dori Sanders has written a powerful story that you'll want to read and read again."

—*Nashville Banner*

"With an amazingly honest handle on dialogue . . . and a charming unraveling of plot . . . Sanders presents the story of a Southern mother of five who resolves the issues of aging, motherhood and the changes in the world around her."

—*Detroit Free Press*

"The reader is invited to share in the joy of recollection. . . . [Sanders'] words take the reader to the land she knows so well, to where ferns and moss grow on moist creek banks, to where sun pours over cotton and peanut and soybean crops."

—*The Kansas City Star*

"Sanders is a master storyteller, and she spins this yarn both seamlessly and effortlessly. . . . With homey, but shimmering, imaginative metaphors, she portrays the small truths and little miracles of everyday life. . . . Mae Lee Barnes, a woman of indomitable spirit, will capture the reader's heart and touch the soul."

—*The Post & Courier* (Charleston, SC)

"Warm and winning . . . Told in simple prose with a country lilt, this novel works a homespun charm that grows steadily more powerful."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"A salute to the extraordinary in ordinary lives and a delightful reading experience."

—*Library Journal*

Also by Dori Sanders
Published by Fawcett Columbine

CLOVER

*To my friends and neighbors in York County, South Carolina,
and all over the country, who have encouraged me.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DORI SANDERS grew up near York, South Carolina, where she still lives. She and her family raise Georgia Bell and Elberta peaches on one of the oldest black-owned farms in York County. She attended York County public schools and later studied at community colleges in Maryland. In demand as a gifted public speaker, she reserves her time during the growing season for work on the family land and at Sanders' Peach Shed.

Part : I

: 1 :

The house was new, but an old person lived in it. There were all the visible signs. A young person would have followed the carefully balanced landscape plan of the builder, but these flowers and shrubs were carted in from the old place, planted like browning snapshots in a poorly arranged old photo album, a little ragged around the edges and straggly, like orphan plants with their support systems removed. The plants were very much like the owner of the house, a woman named Mae Lee Barnes. Her children, who had grown up surrounding her like plants in a carefully tended perennial bed, had removed themselves and left visible the now uneven edges of her life.

Mae Lee fingered the virgin brass doorknob on the heavy front door with set-in panels, thinking how grand it would have been for her children if they had been able to grow up in this new house. She smiled at the thought of her pretty daughters, dressed in their Sunday best, spending long summer afternoons on the front porch with their Sunday visitors.

But at least now, through their generosity in helping her build it, this new house would be there for them and their children.

She walked inside, leaned against the closed door, and gazed at the clutter. She felt crowded by the abundant display of things, a collection which seemed to belong to someone who had lived for a very long time. She had moved an old past into a new house. It made her feel older than her years, old in mind.

She felt a twinge of guilt. Spring was almost over and she had not cleaned a single room. She couldn't help thinking, What would my mama say? For years she'd carried out the same yearly rituals as her mother and generations of others before her. Spring cleaning, with all the winter garments and blankets hung outside for airing, then heavily seeded with mothballs, and in spite of it all, always sprinkled with moth-eaten holes by winter. These seasonal habits were performed with the exactness of migrating birds renewing their contract with the returning spring.

She looked at several Cardui calendars, each offering a different year. Old reading mixed with new. Black Draught, a favorite laxative for generations. Syrup of Black Draught for children "when child's play is not fun." Bold advertising splashes of Cardui formulas for women on "certain days" competed with ads for ointments to rub on for gardening pains.

She briefly studied the wall where the pictures of Jesus with a halo around his head, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy had hung, spaces now empty because Amberlee, one of her visiting "decorating" daughters, had taken them down. She had never been able to understand why her daughter

left the old-timey Cardui calendars hanging. Maybe she had known her mama could not do without her planting charts.

Mae Lee knew it bothered her daughters that she held on to so many things. Sometimes it bothered her as well. Sometimes she even chafed at being locked into playing out the role of her mama's life. Why do I feel I'm duty bound to keep holding on to so many things my mama left behind? she thought.

An image popped into her mind: a small child standing next to her mama as she lovingly cleaned the cherished things and reminded her little daughter, "Now you remember, child, this bowl belonged to your grandmother. They didn't have many pretty things like this and it was passed down to me for safekeeping."

Even more vivid was the memory of a long-unused, scuffed suitcase, not on display but tucked away in a corner of the closet in her bedroom, with the nightgowns still in it that her mama had taken to the hospital in her final days. The gowns had been in that suitcase over twenty years. She could not say why she was unable to dispose of them. In truth, when she had moved to the new house, the largest thing in the van had been the presence of her mama.

Mae Lee listened to music as she moved about her new house, opening windows. She had a new radio—two of them, counting the bedside clock radio her grandchildren gave her—yet she played the old wood-encased Philco. She kept it turned to a station that played the old hit tunes she liked so well, songs that edged out the new things in her life, even the new house. Her thoughts so often remained in the past. She felt dated, stuck in an old world.

A breeze moved through the house. At least the rooms would get aired out. Her mama would have approved of that.

She glanced at the clock. It was almost four in the afternoon. There was something she didn't want to miss on the "Oprah Winfrey Show." The picture on the television flashed on, then off. The cable was out again. Now everything else would be out too. For a few minutes she studied the snow on the TV set. Blurred grayish white spots intermingled with black, shimmering across the screen.

It seemed like every time there was something she especially wanted to see, the cable was out. She reached for the phone directory to call and complain, then changed her mind. She turned on her reliable old radio, leaned back in her favorite recliner, and let her thoughts just go on and flow into the past.

: 2 :

There was a time when she didn't have even a reliable radio. She remembered one day in particular. It was in 1941, December seventh, to be exact, shortly after her sixteenth birthday. When the sound of ringing iron bells filled the quiet Sunday air, her mama had struggled to get their old battery-powered radio to play, but the batteries were dead. Even though she'd tried wedging a copper penny in the end, nothing helped. On that day it seemed every bell in the rural countryside was ringing. Usually that meant something dreadful had happened.

Mae Lee had stood with her mama and daddy on the front porch of their house. They had stood there, their eyes searching the winding dirt road that led to the house for some clue to the disturbance. Her daddy knew only that whatever news it was, he should try to pass it on. He had started down the steps to ring their own heavy iron bell mounted on a sturdy cedar post next to the meat smokehouse when they spotted

Bennie Sims's old T-Model Ford car rounding the curve. Bennie braked to a screeching halt, but didn't turn the engine off. "We're at war, Sam," he shouted, "we're at war with the Japanese," and was off on his way to another farmhouse.

Sam Hudson bought new batteries for the radio, and every night after supper the radio was placed on the table. They would sit and listen, hanging on to every word about the war.

After the Pearl Harbor bombing, the United States also declared war on Germany. Fear gripped the nation. In the rural farming community "war" was on the tip of everyone's tongue. The menfolk, young and old, were pulled from homes and shipped off to camps, then moved overseas. Many of the women went to work in a munitions plant in nearby North Carolina.

Mae Lee and her girlfriends were finding it hard to concentrate during their senior year in high school. It seemed that all the boys in the eleventh grade were eighteen or over, and were either being drafted or enlisting. Jeff Barnes, the young man Mae Lee was hoping would start courting her, was going on nineteen. She'd had her eyes set on him long before the war started.

At a picnic the summer before, Jeff Barnes had held her hand for a long time, looking at her with his light caramel eyes, not even letting go when Ludie Gray, the most popular girl in Tally County, South Carolina, invited him to a box supper her mama was having. He still held on to her hand, and asked, "May I bring Mae Lee?" and she was on cloud nine for weeks.