

= Gail Godwin =

Gail Godwin (born June 18 , 1937) is an American novelist and short story writer . Godwin has written 14 novels , two short story collections , three non-fiction books , and ten libretti . Her primary literary accomplishments are her novels , which have included five best-sellers and three finalists for the National Book Award . Most of her books are realistic fiction novels that follow a character 's psychological and intellectual development , often based on themes taken from Godwin 's own life .

Godwin was born in Birmingham , Alabama , but raised mostly in Asheville , North Carolina by her mother and grandmother . She adopted her mother 's interest in writing at an early age and obtained a Bachelor 's degree in journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) . After graduating , she worked briefly as a reporter for The Miami Herald , then traveled to Europe and worked for the U.S. Travel Service run by the U.S. Embassy in London . She returned to the U.S. after six years . Godwin taught English at the University of Iowa , while earning her M.A. (1968) and PhD (1971) in English Literature .

While at the University of Iowa , Godwin 's dissertation became her first novel , *The Perfectionists* . By 1976 she had become a successful writer and author of three books . In particular , two books written by her in the 1980s , *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982) and *A Southern Family* (1987) , resulted in further acclaim and expanded the readership of her books . Following *The Finishing School* (1984) , readership of her books dramatically declined until 2006 , when *Queen of the Underworld* was published . *Flora* (2013) became one of her more commercially successful novels .

= = Early life and family = =

Gail Godwin was born on June 18 , 1937 in Birmingham , Alabama . Her parents , Kathleen Krahenbuhl and Mose Winston Godwin , were both from North Carolina , but visiting cousins in Alabama when Godwin was born . Godwin 's parents divorced two years later . After the breakup , Gail and her mother moved in with her grandparents in Durham , North Carolina . They moved again to Weaverville , NC and then to Asheville , NC . Her grandfather died in 1939 , so Godwin was raised by her mother and grandmother in Asheville , where they lived until 1948 .

Godwin 's grandmother filled the traditional role of a mother , cleaning , cooking and sewing , while her mother was the breadwinner . Godwin 's mother had a Bachelor 's and master 's degree from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill . She taught college-level English in the mornings , and worked as a reporter for a local paper , *Asheville Citizen-Times* , in the evenings . On the weekends she wrote love stories for magazines in New York . According to Godwin , growing up with two female guardians had an influence on her writing and her decision to become a writer . By age five she had started identifying with her mother 's occupation as a writer more so than her grandmother 's work . At nine years old Godwin wrote her first story , titled " Ollie McGonnigle " .

In 1948 Kathleen married Frank Cole , a World War II veteran , and moved the family to Virginia . Godwin was further inspired by her mother 's determination to continue writing after having a second child . According to Godwin , much of her time growing up was spent in the newsroom , where her mother worked . She also witnessed her mother 's plays and novels being rejected . Godwin 's autobiography creates the impression that much of her own writing was intended to accomplish the things her mother could not . As Cole 's salary increased and he was able to support the family , Godwin 's mother focused on being a wife and homemaker , eventually not writing at all .

In Godwin 's late teens , her stepfather was working as a salesman and the family moved often . Godwin attended several different high schools , including an all-girls Catholic school , St. Genevieve of the Pines . It was Godwin 's favorite teacher at St. Genevieve of the Pines who persuaded her to start keeping a personal diary . According to Godwin , she had a " church upbringing or convent school training . " She attended church at St. Mary 's and All Souls . She also wrote a short novel as a teenager .

Godwin had no relationship with her father , until the two reconnected at her high school

graduation . Godwin 's father then offered to pay for her college education . During her junior year in college , Godwin moved in with her father , who committed suicide later that year . Godwin 's uncle and a half brother later committed suicide as well . Her mother died in a car accident in 1989 .

Godwin attended Peace College in Raleigh , North Carolina from 1955 to 1957 . She then transferred to University of North Carolina (UNC) , where she attended from 1957 to 1959 , graduating with a bachelor 's degree in journalism . While in college she worked on *The Otherwise Virgins* , a novel her mother had written , but was unable to find a publisher for . In 1959 Knopf sent an agent to UNC to scout young writers . Godwin submitted a portion of her novel *Windy Peaks* for their consideration . The story was about the staff and guests at a resort hotel in the mountains . Her manuscript was rejected . Godwin also worked as a waitress at Mayview Manor at Blowing Rock , North Carolina during her sophomore and junior years .

= = Early work = =

Godwin 's first job out of college was at *The Miami Herald* , where she worked as a journalist for one year . There she met and briefly married photographer and co @-@ worker , Douglas Kennedy . They were married in 1960 and divorced several months later in 1961 . According to Godwin , she " worked very hard " , but her stories were too " flamboyant " for the publication and she was fired . According to *Contemporary Literary Criticism* , she was incorporating too much human interest into the paper 's stories , which were supposed to be factual . After briefly living with her mother again , Godwin moved to London to distance herself from a failed marriage and job .

In London Godwin worked for the U.S. Travel Service run by the American embassy from 1961 to 1965 . Godwin said she was a " glorified receptionist , " who was able to read books in secret while at work . Her cousin , who was the mayor of Weaverville , North Carolina , helped to get her the job . While she was employed by the embassy , Godwin completed a novel entitled *Gull Key* . Like many of her early works , the book focuses on a female character figuring out if marriage and being a parent is the life she wants for herself . Several publishers rejected the novel and the manuscript was lost when Godwin sent the only copy to a publisher that went out of business without returning it .

While in England , Godwin took a course in creative writing at the City Literature Institute , where she met her second husband , psychiatrist Ian Marshall . They were married two months later . The marriage was brief and they were divorced in 1966 . After their breakup , Godwin returned to the United States . At age 29 , she took a job as fact @-@ checker in New York City for *The Saturday Evening Post* . She said the job was embarrassing , because she wanted to be a writer , as opposed to fact @-@ checking the work of others .

At this point , a distant uncle of Godwin 's died , leaving her an inheritance of \$ 5 @,@ 000 . She used the money to apply to the Iowa Writers Workshop and , after being accepted , to move from New York to Iowa City in 1967 . There Godwin met her teacher and future mentor Kurt Vonnegut . At Iowa , Godwin worked as an instructor while earning an M.A. and Ph.D. from the same university in 1968 and 1971 respectively . She began teaching Greek Drama , before earning a position teaching literature . By age 30 , Godwin had written three novels , but was unable to get any of them published .

= = Author = =

= = = Early published work = = =

According to *The Asheville Citizen @-@ Times* , Godwin 's first successful work was a 1969 short story in *Cosmopolitan* . Her first published novel was her dissertation written as graduate work at University of Iowa . It was published in 1970 and called *The Perfectionists* . The story was based loosely on Godwin 's second marriage . It was accepted by Harper & Row in December 1968 , while Godwin completing her graduate work . From 1971 on , Godwin earned a living through her work as

a writer and augmented her income by means of intermittent teaching positions .

After completing her graduate work in 1971 , Godwin spent two months at the Yaddo artist 's colony in Upstate New York in 1972 . There she wrote 100 pages of a novel called *The Villain* , which was never published . The work was scrapped , but ended up being part of the basis for *The Odd Woman* . According to author Jane Hill , it was while working on *The Odd Women* that Godwin transitioned from linear narratives to more complex structures where the plot interweaves past and present events .

It was at Yaddo that Godwin met composer Robert Starer and began a life partnership with him that lasted until his death in 2001 . They moved to Stone Ridge , New York in 1973 and later built a house in Woodstock , New York , where Godwin continued her work from home . In addition to her books and short stories , Godwin wrote libretti for ten of Starer 's musical compositions .

= = = Height of Godwin 's career = = =

By 1976 Godwin was a successful writer and novelist who had published three books : *The Perfectionists* , *Glass People* , and *The Odd Woman* . *The Odd Woman* was the longest and most widely recognized of the three . Several short stories by Godwin were published in prominent magazines like *Harper 's Esquire* , *Ms.* and the *Paris Review* , where she was often featured on the cover . Godwin was awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (1975 ? 76) and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1975 ? 76) .

Throughout her career , Godwin worked consistently with her agent , John Hawkins , but worked with several different publishing houses . Godwin 's early books were published by Knopf . After the editor for *The Perfectionists* , David Segal , died suddenly of a heart attack , Robert Gottlieb from Knopf became her editor for her next four books . Godwin credits Gottlieb for much of the success of her early works . Later on , when Godwin 's then @-@ recent books were less widely read , *USA Today* commented that this could be in part because she was no longer working with Gottlieb . After Knopf , Godwin contracted with Viking , who offered larger advances and more publicity for her books .

During the years 1982 to 1991 , Godwin produced another collection of short fiction and four more novels . According to *Publishers Weekly* , it was *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982) and *A Southern Family* (1987) that substantially expanded her readership . These novels remained on bestseller lists for an extended period of time . Godwin 's earlier works had sold an average of less than 8 @,@ 000 copies , while *A Mother and Two Daughters* sold more than 1 @.@ 5 million . It was the most popular of Godwin 's early works and the first time she had written a narrative from the point @-@ of @-@ view of multiple characters . In 1987 , Godwin was awarded the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for her work on *The Southern Family* .

By the early 2000s , five of Godwin 's books had made the *New York Times* Bestsellers List and three were finalists for the National Book Award .

= = = Recent works = = =

By 1999 Godwin had published ten novels . In 2001 , Godwin 's partner , Robert Starer , died and she began writing a fictional story based on their life called *Evenings at Five* that was published two years later . In November 2004 Godwin signed a contract with the publisher Ballantine Books for her next four books .

According to *Publishers Weekly* , Godwin had " achieved a huge degree of success " and still had many devoted readers , but by 1999 she was " no longer the draw she once was . " By 2006 *The Finishing School* (1984) was her last major , commercially successful book , which was followed by a drop in readership . According to Godwin , she was " one of the many authors to be caught in the tumult while [the publishing industry] thrashed about in search of a new business model . " The *Los Angeles Times* said her characters that were progressive working women in the 1970s and 1980s , were now considered " tame " in a modern context .

Kirkus Reviews said Godwin had " a couple of subpar efforts , " until publishing *Queen of the*

Underworld in 2006 . Flora (2013) became one of her better selling books . Godwin also authored an autobiography , Publishing that appeared in 2015 . The Los Angeles Times said her auto @-@ biography was a " preemptive strike " after she was approached by an independent biographer . As of 2015 , Godwin 's published works have included 14 novels , two collections of short stories , three non @-@ fiction works , and ten libretti .

= = = Academia and other work = = =

According to The Intellectual in Twentieth @-@ Century Southern Literature , Godwin was unusual in that she was a popular novelist that was also working in academia . Godwin taught at the University of Illinois Center for Advanced Studies from 1971 to 1972 . During her time as an author , she was also a lecturer at the Iowa Writers ' Workshop (1972 to 1973) , Vassar College (1977) , and Columbia University (1978 / 1981) . She acted as chair of the fiction panel for the National Book Awards in 1986 and 2008 . In 1989 , Godwin also founded a small publishing house called St. Hilda 's Press . It published religious texts not printed by more commercialized publishers . She later became a Distinguished Alumna of the University of North Carolina and the University of Iowa .

= = Themes = =

Most of Godwin 's works are based on themes or events taken from her own life . The characters , settings and narratives vary from novel @-@ to @-@ novel , but common topics have included family , the position of women in society and relationships , a woman 's artistic and career pursuits , and the role of religious faith . According to The Intellectual in Twentieth @-@ Century Southern Literature , Godwin 's characters " struggle intellectually to navigate the mazes of race , class , gender , family , faith and religion . " According to Contemporary Literary Criticism , " she writes about issues pertaining to women - male @-@ female roles , marriage , family , personal freedom , self @-@ concept , and self @-@ actualization . " Author Jane Hill said Godwin 's books are about co @-@ existing with authorities , the role of decision @-@ making in life , careers as an artist , and the consequences of thwarted ambition . Much of her emphasis is on the concept of the self and one 's struggles with society .

Most of the academic analysis of Godwin 's work focuses on challenges her characters have as women . According to Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South , a typical protagonist in Godwin 's novels is a young woman that " in search of herself , confronts obstacles caused by her family , her lovers , her husband , or her own inaction as she struggles to establish her independence and secure her identity through her work . " The main character may be personally flawed , then achieve self @-@ reflection or personal growth thanks to the support of their community or a mentor . Main characters often make poor choices , but become a better person , learn to make better decisions and build stronger bonds often as a result of intellectual pursuits . According to critic Anne Cheney , the protagonist may be " searching for happiness , academic or artistic achievement , love , respect , or , more generally , meaning in life . "

According to Warren French from the University of Wales , Godwin 's works are most often seen as having two primary themes : gender roles and southern settings . French said Godwin herself disapproves of being categorized , which she feels creates " externally imposed limitations " on the themes she covers . However scholars continue to attempt to put her work into a distinctive literary category . In her early works Godwin was seen as a " woman " writer , because her books appealed to a mostly female audience and because she is a woman . After publishing A Southern Family she began being identified as a southern writer . According to The Times (London) , Godwin has a " pesky resistance to categorisation " and she often changes themes even after being commercially successful with one . Academic Lihong Xie said Godwin could be identified with the literary tradition of the Bildungsroman , which focuses on the moral and psychological development of a character . Many other critics posit that a quest for meaning and self @-@ identification are Godwin 's primary themes .

Other themes in Godwin 's work have included escaping the cultural expectations of becoming a "

southern lady , " childhood abandonment , depression and suicide , racial discrimination , social class and succeeding without a male companion . Her work has spanned different literary categories , such as realism , fantasy and allegory .

= = = Early works = = =

All of Godwin 's books written from 1970 to 1990 are fictional stories based on themes taken from Godwin 's life . Her early works focus on women hoping for a relationship with a male companion , but at the same time wanting independence and freedom . The main protagonist is often restricted by family , tradition and patriarchy . Most of Godwin 's early works include a prominent mother @-@ daughter relationship as well .

Her first three books , *The Perfectionists* (1970) , *Glass People* (1972) and *The Odd Woman* (1974) , have protagonists who find that their relationship with a male companion restricts their personal and professional development . The first two books are each about a female character who feels trapped in an unhappy marriage . According to *Contemporary Southern Writers* , " unlike fairy tale romances , these novels present a realistic depiction of feminist concerns and struggles . " Lihong Xie comments that Godwin 's protagonists are southern women that " caught between the ideal of southern womanhood and contemporary feminism , struggle to form a personal identity ... "

Violet Clay (1978) and *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982) are each about an unmarried protagonist 's career in a creative profession . In *A Mother and Two Daughters* the main character resists the temptation to get married and chooses instead to focus on her work . *A Mother and Two Daughters* and *A Southern Family* (1987) each depend heavily on a southern setting and employ themes traditionally associated with social problems in the South . Some of their themes include racial discrimination , social @-@ economic class and the cultural differences between generations . Many characters struggle to reduce the gap between the rich and poor or try to break free from a dominant cultural tradition , with mixed success .

In Godwin 's early books , the female protagonists tend to be fearful , passive and repeat their mistakes . The protagonist is often depicted as a victim who has failed to achieve independence and is struggling to form a personal identity that could exist beyond that of their relationship with a male companion . In her next books , Godwin begins to introduce stronger and more independent central characters . *Violet Clay* (1978) for example , features a more assertive character than those in prior novels . According to Susan S. Kissel Adams from Northern Kentucky University , Godwin 's later characters :

" come to value inclusion and connection over exclusion and isolation in their lives . They seek ways to combine their private and their public selves , open and extend family structures , take political action , and fulfill their social responsibilities ... In their struggle against southern codes and family structures that retain a powerful hold even in the late twentieth century . Godwin 's daughters of the South grow from a state of dependency and arrested development : they begin to embark on mature , adult lives of their own . "

= = = Later works = = =

As in her earlier novels , Godwin 's work in the 1970s and ' 80s still centers mostly on difficulties female characters experienced as women . However , she departs from this theme in *The Finishing School* (1984) , which is about two women of different generations and the student @-@ mentor relationship between them , rather than their relationship with men . According to Lihong Xie , Godwin 's work during this period continues to be about " the female self " and a woman 's intimate relationships with husbands , fathers and God .

Godwin 's books begin to incorporate religious themes starting with *Father Melancholy 's Daughter* (1991) . The novel is told from the perspective of multiple characters , each of whom have a different perspective on religion . *Father Melancholy 's Daughter* was followed by several books that centered on the Episcopal church and Christian practices . In these novels female and male characters have a more equal influence on the events and plot than in prior novels . Godwin 's books neither

evangelize nor mock the practices of the Episcopal Church , but rather treat it as a routine aspect of life , or as a subject of intellectual interest . During these years Godwin 's books continued to show father figures who have died or are absent . By 1996 two of her books had fathers that died and five had stepfathers that are depicted as intruding on the mother @-@ daughter relationship .

According to Narrative Magazine , Godwin transitions from female protagonists who are " looking for ways to get out of traps and confinements " to those who make " interesting or dangerous life choices . " Some of Godwin 's later works depict successful , but unconventional marriages . In *The Good Husband* (1994) both partners accept the wife 's career as having a priority over the husband 's . *The Good Husband* is also a return to the theme of marriage that is typical of some of Godwin 's earlier works . According to Contemporary Southern Writers , *The Good Husband* " explores the dying experience . " Godwin also published several non @-@ fiction works based on her own life during this period .

Godwin 's short story collections *Dream Children* and *Mr. Bedford and the Muses* focus on themes similar to those in her novels , but also incorporate dreams and myth . They tend to be less auto @-@ biographical than her novels . According to philosopher Anna @-@ Teresa Tymieniecka , Godwin 's approach to dream @-@ worlds is radical , because the dream is incorporated into the characters ' real @-@ world experiences . Her characters compare their real and dream worlds to each other in order to " negotiate their sense of destiny . " She said *Dream Children* challenges the distinction between reality and dream experiences , where the dream does not " violate one 's theory of reality . "

USA Today said that the subjects covered in *Unfinished Desires* (2010) include " Mean girls . Lesbian kisses . Learning disabilities . Domestic violence . Alcoholism . [and] Roman Catholic nuns . " According to *The Times* (London) , *Flora* (2013) " encompasses most of the themes that have preoccupied [Godwin] throughout her career . " It takes place in the South in the mid @-@ 1940s in the mountains , where a widowed schoolmaster raises his ten @-@ year @-@ old daughter . In a 2015 interview , Godwin says that her work has become less " angry " . She said her early works showed a frustration with not being heard , and that her later books focuses on her enemies . Now she 's working to understand " the villains ' villains . "

= = Reception = =

By 1980 Godwin 's writing had become the subject of essays , book chapters and other literary analysis from academic critics . According to *The Washington Post* , " Gail Godwin has been accused of not being able to decide whether she 's a popular or a literary writer , but she 's certainly accrued enough bestsellers and literary honors to claim both identities . " Much of the scholarly attention on her works comes from those critics with an interest in southern or feminist authors . According to *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South* , Godwin 's books have been " widely and favorably reviewed " . *Contemporary American Women Fiction Writers* states that " although some reviews of her work have been mixed ... her books are accomplished works of fiction , if not masterpieces . "

Contemporary Literary Criticism said " most of her books are characterized as well @-@ written , well executed , readable , witty , and having vivid , believable characters . Godwin is typically praised for having convincing plots , witty , intelligent characters and that she has strong narrative skill . She has been criticized , in particular in response to *The Good Husband* , for excessive symbolism . According to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* , Godwin is " thoughtful and philosophical " , but she is often critiqued for authoring fiction that is so closely representative of her own life .

The Odd Woman , *The Finishing School* and *Southern Family* received overall positive reviews , while *Violet Clay* and *The Good Husband* received more negative reviews . According to *The Boston Globe* , *Flora* was one of Godwin 's best books .

= = List of works = =

This list of works has been taken mostly from Gail Godwin 's entry in the Dictionary of Literary Biography .

= = Personal life = =

Gail Godwin lives in a large house in the mountains in Woodstock , New York . She does most of her writing in her study at home . As of 1999 , she was swimming every day . She has a southern accent . Godwin is an Episcopalian .