

**Excerpt from *Fifth Born II: The Hundredth Turtle:*
Mississippi Cabin, First Christmas**

Zelda Lockhart is the author of award winning novels *Fifth Born* and *Cold Running Creek*. Ms. Lockhart holds the honor of the 2010 Piedmont Laureate for Literature in North Carolina, and June 2010 witnessed the release her third novel, *Fifth Born II: The Hundredth Turtle*. Her other works of fiction, poetry and essays can be found in a variety of anthologies, journals and magazines. Ms. Lockhart lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina and continues to lecture and facilitate a variety of workshops that empower adults and children to self-define through writing. She welcomes visits to her website: www.zeldalockhart.com.

When Odessa Blackburn is first left in Mississippi to negotiate a new life with her ostracized mother Ella Mae, the strains of family propaganda, puberty, and life away from her siblings make for compounded heartache. Odessa and Ella Mae must negotiate toward patience and a new way of loving without violence. Soon mother and daughter build a bridge out of their broken lives over which Odessa's oldest brother Lamont crosses. The novel blossoms into the story of these young adult siblings. Though the two are estranged early in childhood by the lies and myths born of family pain, they become emotionally reliant on each other for a sense of family. Following Lamont's death from AIDS related illnesses, Odessa is faced with her own grieving, and with fulfilling Lamont's request for connection with their estranged siblings. The novel's arc takes the reader over the complicated waters of family division due to incest and homophobia. Against a contrasted backdrop of pastoral bluesy tones of Mississippi and jazzy asphalt and graffiti rifts of

Harlem, these difficult subjects are traversed melodically and lyrically. The reader is offered both the triumphant depiction of an adult survivor who overcomes obstacles set against her at birth and participation in her courageous journey home.

Other people made straight lines with what they had to say, but when Ella Mae did talk—she took bits and pieces from here and there, this memory and that thing said, until after a long while I saw it all turn into something. Sentences weaved together like rags until I saw a rug that looked like sunset; but to see it required stillness for some unforeseen amount of time. I sighed and let her voice be the only one while I thought about putting more wood in the stove and opening the door to see if the morning chill had turned to a balmy stillness, or if we were in for a cold, crisp day. The light at the windows and the stiffness of my grits said we'd already been sitting there for at least an hour. I occupied myself with cutting into the hard grits with my spoon until her words shaped into images, but I was not yet able to make sense of her story. Part of me wondered what she was talking about, but somewhere in my brain I understood the confusion of waiting too long to tell about the sins in your heart until no one would believe you because of the passage of time.

Somewhere in that place I understood her cryptic speech.

She looked out the kitchen window, where white clouds raced across light blue. "I do still dream, though, and she just be laughin with me in that thin airy way she laughed that winter. I don't know if I want the real life of now to turn that into anything else."

I tried to piece together some images from her rag words. I could see a robe, a red rope tied around it, and I heard a laugh that I conjured from the millions of laughs I'd heard; but the "her" was still without form.

I waded through the quiet that Ella Mae said was necessary sometimes, tiptoed past her to turn on the light in the big room. The fire was practically out in the woodstove. I laid two logs, laid kindling between them, lit it, laid two more logs crossways, and looked over at the rug that lay limp on the floor, parts of my dead-baby-blanket stitched there. There were prominent white people in Starkville who had Ella Mae's rugs in their houses, and their soft, pale feet waltzed on baby blanket blue and mysterious red ribbon.

"Merry Christmas," I said in the space of silence, the sweetness of breath just before words. "Merry Christmas," I said again, placing this Christmas in its own reality, like pasting the evidence of photos into albums. The smell of cedar that usually lingered just beyond the woodshed was fragrant in the red, exposed flesh of a piece of wood in the stack. I laid my hands on the split, dried piece of tree that Ella Mae and I hauled weeks ago. Our sweat had changed us from stranger to familiar, and it was somewhere reflected here in the pulp. I took the smaller pieces into the kitchen, opened the vents on the cookstove, removed one of the plates with the iron handle, and realized that I wanted it this way; wanted the smell of smoked wood in my clothes, the warmth of heat by fire in the bones, the predictability of calm, something that a St. Louis Christmas could not provide. I replaced the lid on the cookstove as morning turned still and peaceful, with the silence of the sun leaning across the floor now. Round yon virgin, mother and child, I sang in my thoughts and returned to the eyes at the table that worried over the piecemeal story.

The smell of everything inside the house was awakened, years of hickory smoke in walls, new smell of new daughter, homemade lavender soap, mixed with a scent that had lain dormant; the smell of some other person, of some spice that was familiar on the back of my tongue, familiar spice that lay just beneath the powder of dry tree bark.

I breaded two rabbit legs with flour, salt, and pepper, knowing soon she would do the silent dance of laying the legs in hot oil. I wiped my fingers off and sat back down at the picnic table. My history book was still splayed open. I resigned myself to chores and reading, letting go of the expectation of time or of getting a beginning or ending to Ella Mae's story. I existed on the other side of her memories that finally resumed in words.

"I wasn't brave," she said, looking down at the rope between her fingers. "Lamont and Richard are so brave."

I watched her through my glasses; she glanced at me over the bridge of her glasses that were dirtied with flour, and I looked at my history book and prepared to listen as the pepper dust lodged in the back of my throat.

"Get ya coat on," Ella Mae said. "Just leave all that." She waved at the breaded rabbit legs. "We'll be back before anything can creep out to eat it."

I opened my mouth to question her, but she was already up, getting her coat off the hook, and then she sat at the end of the bench and stuck her feet in boots. Almost left behind, I followed her command, quickly slipping my socked feet into the coolness of my boots, hat, scarf, and one arm in my CPO jacket, the dressy New York thrift-store coat impractical and left behind.

We drove through cold, dry air, leafless trees, blue sky. I didn't have the heart to