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Buried secrets can't hide

Granddaughter's quest reveals a forgotten tragedy in 1930s Savannah

By GINA WEBB
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When mystery-writer-turned-historical-fiction writer Sally Gunn's first mystery sold, she produced nine more, each one centering on the same detective, all set off the coast of Cape Cod. The formula worked, over and over. "But 10 years later," she said, "I found myself asking, wasn't there another kind of story I needed to tell?"

With "The Lost Hours," Atlanta author Karen White continues to move away from the romance novels that have been her bread and butter for nearly 10 years. After White's first book won the Washington Romance Writer's MARLENE contest in 1998, other Southern-style romances followed. Racking up awards along the way and penning a book a year, she repeatedly mined familiar territory: family secrets, skeletons in the closet, a plucky heroine recovering from a tough break.

But White, too, had another story to tell, and in 2007, she published "The Memory of Water," a novel that dealt with two sisters raised by a bipolar mother. It marked a departure from the series and romance novels White had written up until then, and it was wildly popular with book clubs all over the country.

In this, her 10th novel, White calls once more on a repertoire of gothic, spooky elements: a letter hidden in a secret drawer, an envelope containing an old key, a gold charm bearing a mysterious Latin quote, a yellowed newspaper clipping, an unexplained suicide. But she also uses a long-ago battle for civil rights in the Klan territory of Savannah as the foundation for the story of three friends who long ago severed their ties and silently agreed to bury their secrets. Were it not for the near-fatal fall from a horse that robbed Earlene "Piper" Mills of her Olympic career, those secrets



FICTION

"The Lost Hours" by Karen White; NAL Trade; \$15; 343 pages

would have stayed buried.

As the novel begins, six years have passed since Piper's accident. She subsists on Coca-Cola and frozen dinners, avoids horses, and wallows in self-pity at all the fame and fortune she had to give up. She has a painful limp, and her old equestrian friends rarely come around anymore. But her self-absorbed routine changes when the family lawyer visits, bearer of a wakeup call in the form of a key, a charm, and some scrapbook pages that belonged to her grandmother, Annabelle.

A competitive, passionate horsewoman, Piper always found it hard to relate to her grandmother, whose life by comparison to her own seemed colorless and empty. But now, her curiosity's piqued by the possibility that colorless might have been a synonym for hidden. Galvanized by her own helplessness — and for the first time empathizing with her grandmother's passivity — Piper is driven to sleuth around her grandparents' home in hopes of learning more about "the sad old woman" of her childhood.

The main facts aren't hard for her to assemble: Three devoted friends — Annabelle, Lillian and Josephine — separated for good in the late 1930s; all that's left of their once-permanent bond is a scrapbook, its pages ripped out and divided among them, and three gold charms belonging to a long-lost necklace. The most telling evidence lies within an old box Piper once helped her grandfather bury in the backyard without peeking inside — a neat metaphor for Piper's lack of interest in what was inside her grandmother's heart — a yellowed newspaper clipping that hints at a far more significant story of loss and paralysis. But when Piper turns to Annabelle for explanations, she runs into a brick wall: Suffering from Alzheimer's and confined to a nursing home, Annabelle barely remembers her granddaughter, let alone what happened with her childhood friends. When her grandmother dies, Piper turns to Lillian, who turns out to be a modern-day Scheherazade with her own reasons for spooling out the narrative and

avoiding the truth.

Each chapter reveals — or adds — a piece of the elaborate puzzle that proves Annabelle and her best friends not only lived passionate lives but also ones that her granddaughter can barely imagine. White zigzags back and forth between the 1930s and the present day, weaving a complex history of desegregation and the fallout caused by the NAACP's early activism in hostile territory. Caught up in the hopes and violence of the period were three young women in possession of talent, promise and courage, whose loyalties led them straight into the jaws of a tragic dilemma that would so tightly shutter their dreams of the future that none of them ever spoke to each other again.

Piper, also one who has abandoned her dreams out of fear, doesn't at first realize that her own recovery may depend on a better understanding of her grandmother's "lost hours." But like guessing Rumpelstiltskin's name, the retelling of her grandmother's story is the only way out of the spell, and her search for the truth grows more urgent as she recognizes that the only ones who know it are dead or not long for this world.

Though "The Lost Hours" reads as an intricately plotted mystery, the primary focus here is on women and their relationships, specifically, those of the long-ago girls who nourished ambitions and dreams of independence, only to see much of it fall prey to the racism and bigotry of the times. In Piper's case, uncovering these long-ago "stories" will ultimately determine whether disappointment and even tragedy will rule her world. White makes a good case for why new generations should sustain ties with the old — and why certain stories have to be told, no matter how long it takes.