

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## Leslie Walker Williams' debut novel mines the South's rich storytelling vein

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The South continues to provide one of the richest regional veins for fiction in America.

Leslie Walker Williams demonstrates the power of Southern stories in her debut novel, "The Prudent Mariner" (University of Tennessee Press, 298 pages, \$29.95). Williams has crafted a resonant drama that examines many of the touchstones of Southern fiction, including guilt, complicity and aftershocks of a tragic event decades later.

In the novel, a fabricated tale of romance between a white woman and a black man leads to his lynching, which is recorded by a photographer. More than 50 years later, a 9-year-old's discovery of postcards from that murder starts to unravel a long-hidden family truth when her widowed grandmother, now suffering from Alzheimer's, moves in with the family.

Williams, a native of Savannah, Ga., said: "There were a couple of specific events that fed this novel many years before I started to write it. After I graduated from college (Williams College in Massachusetts), I worked for an African-American English professor. I did archival research on lynchings, looking at both African-American and white newspapers.

"At around the same time, my grandmother had Alzheimer's and I found many notes that my grandfather had written about her decline, about the inappropriate or hilarious things she said and did. ... Then in the late 1990s, at the Detroit Museum of African American History, I saw photographs and postcards of lynchings, and things started to come together as a book."

Williams -- who lives in Vancouver, B.C., where her husband is a professor -- is the second Northwest writer in a row to win the coveted Peter Taylor Fiction Prize, named for a revered Southern writer. Last year's winner was John J. McLaughlin of Seattle for "Run in the Fam'ly."

*Leslie Walker Williams discusses "The Prudent Mariner" at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at The Elliott Bay Book Co., 101 S. Main St.; 206-624-6600.*

-- John Marshall

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