

## Jill Collins McCorkle '80

There were no false expectations.

Max Steele, Lee Smith, and Louis Rubin certainly recognized the talent in their creative writing student, Jill McCorkle. They learned that she had started writing at age seven with a story about the night that Santa didn't come—a story with a sad ending. They recognized a profound ear for dialogue. But they never said she could expect to be published. Fiction writing is so competitive.

It fell to Rubin again some years later to apply the muffler of realism. Algonquin Books had just published her two first novels together, bringing them out the same day, and tears welled in Jill's eyes as she read *The New York Times* review. *The Cheer Leader* showed that she was a born novelist, the review said, but *July 7th* proved that she was a mature one. Rubin told her that most novelists work a lifetime without reviews like that one. This, he warned, might be the peak.

Everybody might as well have relaxed. Before too long, the reviews were glowing again, for Jill's third novel, *Tending to Virginia*. And then for the fourth, *Ferris Beach*. And then for *Crash Diet*, a collection of eleven stories about eleven women. Second printings following first and sales of paperback rights followed second printings.

Jill arrived at Carolina in 1976 intent on majoring in physical education. She says she picked up that first creative writing course at the drop/add table because it looked like a slide. More likely, it was the interior voice of the writer speaking to the heart of the prospective gym teacher. Four years later, Carolina degree in hand, with honors in English, Jill went to Hollins College in Virginia for its respected writing program, earning a master's degree.

Then came the years of the double life. From eight to five, Jill was a secretary, much of the time at UNC's medical school. She chose the work because it would not encroach on her other life; writer. From five in the morning until time to go to work, and then in the evenings, and then on the weekends, Jill put together the lives of her characters: good girl Jo Spence, the cheerleader trying to find her way in a confusing world; poor Norlina, whose only date ever tells her in the middle of the evening that his grandfather has just died and he must leave for Kansas immediately; drunken Sam Swet, who stumbles mindlessly into the murder of the 7-11 clerk.

And then followed professional fulfillment to match her writing success; teaching writing at UNC, Tufts, and now Harvard.

Jill McCorkle brings her Lumberton rearing and her Chapel Hill training to her novels and stories. She brings honor to her University.

It is clear that we have not yet seen her peak.