

The Widow of the South Blends History & Fiction

An Interview with Best-Selling Author Robert Hicks

Robert Hicks' first novel, *The Widow of the South* (2005), was born out of his many years of work at Historic Carnton Plantation in Franklin, Tennessee and his passion for the preservation of the remaining fragments of the Civil War battlefield. In writing the novel, his hope was to bring national attention to this moment in our history, the impact that five bloody hours played in making us a nation, and in the preservation of the sites tied to the story. *The Widow of the South* was launched to overwhelming critical success, entering the *New York Times* Bestseller List after only one week.

Hicks said, "I would like to believe *The Widow of the South* reached such heights based on the quality of the writing and the strength of the story, but I guess I'll have to admit, in truth, it was because I have an amazing agent, an amazing editor and an amazing publishing and marketing team who believed in the potential of the book based on the strength of the story and the level of the writing."

In the end, though, you can market something all day long; there needs to be something there worthy of the pitch and hype. In an interview with *A! Magazine*, Hicks explained how it all began.

The Origins of *The Widow of the South*

The Carnton estate in Franklin, Tennessee likely would have remained a little-known footnote in Civil War history, had its aging directors not coaxed Robert Hicks, a Franklin resident, into serving on their board in 1987. The more Hicks learned about the home's former mistress, Carrie McGavock, the more he wanted to help lift Carnton out of the waste bin of history. They brought in top experts on period paint, furniture plans, wallpaper and mid-19th-century gardening to restore the home to its former glory.

"As we began the task of restoring Carnton, one of our most pressing questions was why one of the largest privately-owned military cemeteries in the U.S. lay spread out on two acres of Carnton's backyard," Hicks recalls. "We had stories — some contradictory — of how and why the cemetery had gotten there, but no one could explain the role the McGavocks played, or why the cemetery was on their property in the first place."

Descendants of the McGavock family opened their archives to the restoration team. Most of what remained had been packed into two bedrooms. "For four or five generations, bare, unfinished walls looked down on everything from paintings and furniture to trunks and clothing, to scrapbooks and piles of miscellaneous papers," Hicks says.

"I started to read. There were no diaries or letters, but the scrapbooks and papers began to suggest some answers, even while I found myself asking more questions. I found obituaries from all over the country about Carrie, a woman who had lived a somewhat secluded life on her farm — she didn't travel, didn't host large parties of prominent folk, and yet she was remembered. Remembered not just by her immediate family, but a nation. The obituaries clearly linked Carrie to the creation and maintenance of the cemetery, but no journals or diaries were left to explain her motivation — so, in the end, I felt that I had to sit down and explain for myself why she did what she did," he says. *The Widow of the South* is the result of those late-night broodings.

Hicks limbered up to write the novel not with Faulkner, but with Pasternak and Tolstoy. "My first step was to read every Russian novel. It seemed like Russian novels were always about the people — *Dr. Zhivago*, *War and Peace*. It was always about how these people were tossed about," he says. "What I strive for is about transformation — how people are transformed by each other, by circumstances, by loss or gain."

He spent seven years of reading, research, outlines and failed "starts" and two years of actual writing.

History as Fiction

Hicks enjoyed many a memorable evening "drinking brown whisky and telling lies" with Civil War historian and novelist Shelby Foote, who passed away in 2005. During their conversations, Hicks realized "it's really through storytellers and fiction that history is remembered, that Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler are two of the most famous characters in history, yet neither one of them ever lived. There were too many holes in Carrie McGavock's story, so I was free to do something higher, to write it as fiction, to tell a bigger story."

Yet the overwhelming majority of the story is true and accurate. Hicks sat down with military historians. For years he studied Southern material culture. He knows why every stick of furniture or piece of carpet in the Carnton house is there, as well as its relationship to the house, the family and the county.

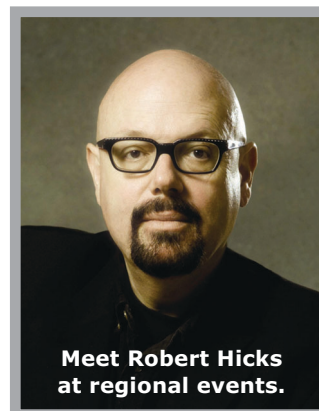
As for telling the story from different points of view — Carrie's or a soldier's — Hicks says, "I tell it from a human point of view," and he based some characters on real people in his own life. He dedicated the book to a friend who was a Marine, whose war experiences inspired *Fields of Fire*. He asked that friend a lot of questions about what it was like to be in battle. As a result, Hicks' descriptions of battle are excellent.

He wrote, "We stood there, listening to the sound of the air pulled apart by bullets... I realized that the cracking sound I'd been hearing was not the sound of balls hitting the gin house... The dead and dying were packed so tightly that men were charging right over them, shattering legs, arms, and ribs. It was the sound of bones snapping."

His Love of Books

Hicks' parents filled their home with books. He recalls, "when I was sick and stayed home from school, my dad would give me volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* to cuddle up in bed with, instead of a diet of TV. Books were held to be sacred and precious. Christmases and birthdays were always times of book-giving and book-receiving. One of the first books to have a lasting impact on me (beyond the Bible, which seems to have anchored every Southern home of my generation) was Richard Halliburton's *Complete Book of Marvels*. I still attribute my passion for travel and adventure to the nights I fell asleep reading of Halliburton's world-wide adventures."

Many of Hicks' lifelong favorites could be found on any seventh or eighth grade reading list of his time. C.S. Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *All The King's Men* taught him about the value of goodness and truth. *Moby Dick* and *Lord of the Flies* taught him to read.



Meet Robert Hicks
at regional events.