

OLEANDERS IN JUNE

Galveston Island, 1900.

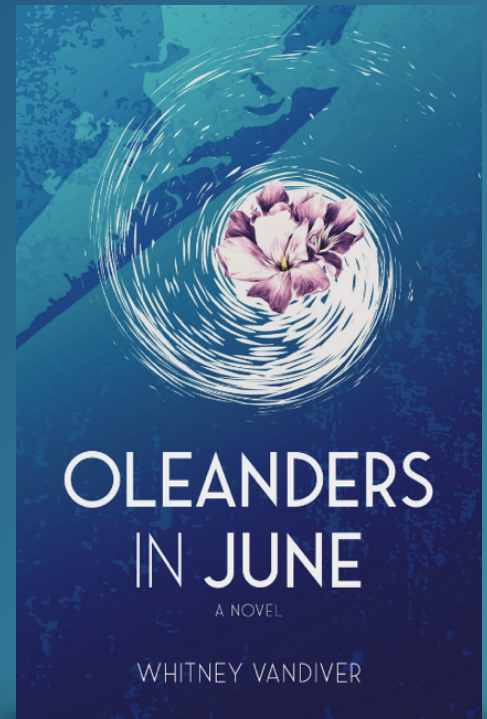
A year of training in the Signal Corp did nothing to prepare Alfred Ridgeway for his new post with the U.S. Weather Bureau on the edge of the Texas gulf. Raised on a farm in Indian Territory, Alfred finds the wealth and grandeur of Galveston Island overwhelming and lacking a place for a man of his status.

Despite his expectations, Alfred finds himself thrust into the strained relationship of renowned climatologist, Isaac Cline, and his assisting brother, Joseph. With rising tensions in the office, Alfred begins searching beyond the bureau for a new identity.

An intriguing newspaper ad connects Alfred with Hilary Carson, an eccentric naturalist with a love of birds, leading Alfred to find a niche on the island. When a chance encounter ignites the interest of a young woman, the budding romance with the extraordinary Florence Keller soothes his spirit and furthers his sense of belonging.

But as the summer heats up, the bureau cuts ties with a valuable source of information, leaving the Galveston Weather Office blind during the peak of hurricane season. When a telegram warns of a storm in the gulf, Alfred must choose between following protocol or trusting his instincts—and learn just how far he will go for the woman he loves.

Teeming with imagery and thickened with historical relevance, *Oleanders in June* is the compelling tale of an island's most pivotal moment and an emotionally captivating debut.



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Whitney Vandiver

An avid reader, Whitney Vandiver wrote her first story when she was 8 years-old and has grown up to be a bibliophile with more books than shelves. Inspired by Galveston's historical homes and the deadliest natural disaster to hit U.S. shores, she wrote *Oleanders in June* to capture the resilience of Galveston Island. She writes historical fiction and mysteries and resides in Pearland, Texas, with her spouse and cat.

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Oleanders in June: A Novel Highlights Galveston's Meteorological History & the Storm That Shaped an Island

The Great Storm of 1900 is a keystone in Galveston's history, but few books have explored how the politics of the era led to the island's vulnerability. *Oleanders in June*, a debut novel by Whitney Vandiver, delves into the societal and political issues that were at play on the island when the storm made landfall in early September 1900. Highlighting the influence of political controversy in the U.S. Weather Bureau, Vandiver offers readers a newcomer's account of the island's wealth and prestige through the eyes of a young meteorologist who joins the Galveston weather office and discovers that even the most experienced meteorologist can misunderstand his own circumstances.

"There were several misbeliefs at the time about how storms behaved," Vandiver explains. "This was compounded by the naïve idea that Galveston was protected as a barrier island and by its location in the Gulf of Mexico. The U.S. Weather Bureau had convinced itself that a storm of that magnitude devastating the island was a near impossibility."

Meteorology was in its adolescence at the turn of the century, buoyed by a theoretical understanding of how physics was influenced by seemingly random events, a situation that was made worse by a highly politicalized U.S. Weather Bureau. When an order was issued to cease weather-related communications with Cuba, all offices along the southern coast, including Galveston, were left with a blind spot for forecasting storms. If a hurricane made it across Cuba and entered the Gulf of Mexico, Galveston Island had practically no way of knowing it.

"The weather offices depended on each other and reports from ships coming in from gulf to give them advanced warning. By the time Galveston recognized the signs of an approaching hurricane, it was too late."

Unable to evacuate, residents fled the beaches as floodwaters rose, but the storm surge that submerged the island was inescapable once the hurricane arrived. The Great Storm of 1900 remains the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history with over 6,000 deaths attributed to the hurricane.

Oleanders in June spotlights the struggles of the U.S. Weather Bureau to navigate the choppy waters of weather forecasting in the shadow of an unpredictable ocean. Blending the luscious summer flavors of Galveston's wealth and mystique with a tender romance blossoming on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, *Oleanders in June* is a masterfully written novel that brings the island's greatest moment to life and leaves readers with an emotional experience they won't soon forget.

An Interview with Whitney Vandiver, Author of *Oleanders in June*

What is it about historical fiction that draws you to write in that genre?

As a reader, I am drawn to historical fiction because of its indulgence in setting. Everything about the story is drenched in the time period, whether it be a Victorian story or something in the 1980s, and I experience the same intrigue when I write fiction set in other time periods. There's something about taking a story and submerging it in another period or decade that creates a new layer of escapism and stimulation for me as a writer.

What challenges are there for writers who touch on sensitive or controversial topics?

The market can be touchy when it comes to certain topics, but we've seen how social influence can create support for authors and buoy certain books that are relevant to a movement. The greatest challenge that authors face when touching on a controversial topic is judgment for how they've written about a topic rather than simply how they've written. Being seen as taking the wrong side or stripping away the sugar to portray something in an unflattering light when the public is not ready for such a raw exposure can put an author in the spotlight in ways she didn't expect. Thankfully, society is maturing in how and why they read. Fiction can still be escapist and entertaining without giving up provocative subject matter or serious considerations of issues that are currently at play in the world. We're seeing this with emerging authors that represent new perspectives and are able to use that social catalyst to overcome the challenge of revealing humanity for what it is.

Historical fiction has its seasons, and we've been riding the World War II wave for a while. How does the genre stay fresh and relevant despite certain historical periods hitting their strides on the shelves?

What makes historical fiction stand out as a genre is its ability to show how certain issues are universal; they crop up in every society and every time period in some way or another. In that vein, the genre draws our attention to particular events and refocuses it in a new perspective—the plight of a war-orphaned child in post-World War II Italy for example. This new perspective and the authors' abilities to craft memorable stories within key historical moments is what keeps the genre strong. That identity within a time period intensifies the story rather than letting it become a rehashing of a worn-out cliché.

What drew you to center *Oleanders in June* in Galveston in 1900?

The turn of the century is an exciting time to explore in literature, and I was initially drawn to that period by Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which exposed me to societal views when the British and American worlds were on the cusp of a new era. When I learned of the Great Storm of 1900,

which quickly became an obsession for me, stories on which I could focus my writing began to form, and the dots connected themselves. The significance of the hurricane in Galveston Island's history cannot be understated, and that impact felt relevant to me as I was researching the storm and reading survivors' stories. Once the story started to pull itself together, focusing the book to intertwine not only Galveston's new-century lifestyle but the developing storm as it barreled toward the island felt right. It was a happy mingling of two passions for me.

Your fiction celebrates setting in a way that at times makes it part of your characters' personalities. Why is setting significant to you as a writer?

If I am immersed in a book I'm reading, it is often because I'm living in the setting. It can make or break a book for me, and I think that carries over into my writing. Oftentimes I start developing new stories as much in the setting as with the characters, and I struggle to nail down the direction my story is going until I understand the environment the characters are living in.

Suggested Interview Questions

Why was the Great Storm of 1900 such a historic storm?

What contributed to the severity of the Great Storm of 1900?

What did your research look like for *Oleanders in June*?

What inspired you to highlight the conflict between industrialization and native wildlife in *Oleanders in June*?

How do you know when to deviate from real-life events or people to craft the fictional part of a story?

Are there aspects of writing historical fiction that are inherently different than those involved with writing, say, contemporary fiction?

What inspires you to write outside of one genre?

Why did you decide to publish your novel independently rather than with a trade publisher?

What challenges exist for indie authors pursuing self-publishing as an alternative to traditional publishing?

What authors or books have influenced you as writer?

What projects are you working on next?