

In 1930, twenty-year-old Promise Mears Crawford finds herself trapped in an identity not of her making, betrothed to a man not of her choosing, and entwined in the aftermath of the first racial murder on her island haven of Martonsville, Georgia.

Sunday's Orphan

By Catherine Gentile

Order the book from the publisher [BookLocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11946.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Sunday's Orphan

SUNDAY'S ORPHAN

a novel

"...imaginative work that hits home."
—Jeremiah Conway, PhD

CATHERINE GENTILE

Praise for *Sunday's Orphan*

Catherine Gentile brings Jim Crow to vivid, heartbreaking life in this tale of a complicated, endearing woman caught between the cruelty of her time and the emerging secrets of her own identity. Compelling, timely, and beautifully written.

—Monica Wood, author of *One In a Million Boy*, *When We Were the Kennedys*, and *Ernie's Ark*

Sunday's Orphan by Catherine Gentile is just plain excellent. Through its acuity of expression, emotional and psychological insight, and the unfolding of characters, it allows us to enter an historical period—the Jim Crow South—that is critical to understand racism today. This is imaginative work that hits home.

—Jeremiah Conway, PhD Professor Emeritus, University of Southern Maine, author of *The Alchemy of Teaching; The Transformation of Lives*

The past is prologue, as Shakespeare once said, and Promise Mears Crawford, protagonist of *Sunday's Orphan*, finds new meaning in that phrase as a twenty-year old in 1930 racially divided Georgia. What begins as simple curiosity quickly turns into a driving pathos as her hidden family history unravels in tandem with her own increasingly complicated present life. Love, a need to belong, and a search for self-identity collide with the bitter reality of Jim Crow racism and a dark history that refuses to go away. Catherine Gentile takes us on a twisting journey where happy endings are at first hard to imagine, but where the human spirit ultimately prevails.

—Jack Trammell, PhD, Chair of Sociology, Criminal Justice, and Human Services Departments, Mount Saint Mary's University

Brace yourself! As soon as you open *Sunday's Orphan*, you will find yourself in a disturbing world—an apparent oasis of interracial harmony surrounded by the threat of the Jim Crow culture of 1930 Georgia. You'll feel the humid heat of the midday sun, smell the farm animals and the smokehouse, and hear the menacing sound of a newcomer whistling "Dixie". Keep going if you like the suspense of a page turner, care to unravel the intricate relationships of intriguing characters, and enjoy masterfully researched and well written prose. But read especially to feel for yourself the forces that shaped the heritage of today's African Americans, as their parents and grandparents emerged from slavery and tried to claim their right to freedom and equality.

- Phyllis Chinlund, MA, MSW, documentary filmmaker, author of *Looking Back from the Gate*.

ALSO BY CATHERINE GENTILE

FICTION

Small Lies, A Collection of Short Stories

The Quiet Roar of a Hummingbird

NON-FICTION

*The Caregiver's Journey:
Tools, Tips, and Provisions*

Copyright © 2021 Catherine Gentile

Print ISBN: 978-1-64718-573-2

Epub ISBN: 978-1-64718-574-9

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64718-575-6

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2021

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gentile, Catherine

Sunday's Orphan by Catherine Gentile

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020908729

DAY ONE

CHAPTER 1

*Death, thou intractable agent,
Just and eternal finale after a life of enduring lies,
You advance doggedly. You arrive too soon.*

Taylor Crawford, *My Life in Georgia*, 1929

Promise plunged her shovel into the sandy Georgia soil and splintered the last fence post her Uncle Taylor had hewn, marking the first page of her history since he had died. Etched in her memory was the layout of the property which embodied his life's work. To the north, Taylor's newly dug grave, situated, as he'd requested, alongside the graves of the slaves who had worked this plantation long before he came to own it; to the south, vegetable gardens; to the east, the Cornbread Footpath that meandered through the woods and past the inconspicuous structures housing the farm's workers and their families; and to the west, the pasture dotted with a small barn in which she sheltered animals recovering from a predatory assault. From where she stood within walking distance of Taylor's grave, she could see past the smokehouse and drought-stunted corn plants, over the bean and okra

fields to the lean-to beside the small barn. There stood the imposing figure of Fletch Hart, Uncle Taylor's twenty-four-year-old foreman who, after Taylor's passing, had reluctantly agreed to work for her. He looked up from his workbench, where he'd been repairing the latch on a birdcage and, for the first time in the twenty years they'd known one another, made no move to wave or call her name.

Taylor had forewarned her that death rearranges our connections with our loved ones, deceased and living. How right he'd been. Ten weeks ago, she'd inherited his Mearswood Island Plantation, and with it the responsibility to uphold his system of paying the Negro families living here cash wages for working the fifty acres he'd lovingly called his "farm." *I've tethered no one to me or my land*, he'd penned in his treatise, "My Life in Georgia." *I refuse to subscribe to sharecropping, a system laced with elements that create a form of bondage akin to that of its evil twin, slavery.*

He'd bequeathed her the farm and the duty to care for the cadre of loyal workers who, over the years, had become his friends and hers. His insistence on tending to their needs had tarnished the more honorable side of its allure when, upon studying his finances, she'd discovered he'd neglected to set aside the cash needed to finance the inheritances he'd promised each of them.

Judging from the stiffness with which Fletch now approached, head erect and muscled shoulders aligned in starched formality, he was aware of the blow Taylor had dealt his future. Rather than the companionable way in which he usually announced a guest's arrival—"We have company"—he alerted her to the rider coming toward them with, "*You have a visitor.*"

Promise peered out from beneath the brim of her sunhat toward the visitor, her longtime friend and, now that she was

examining life in an altered light, her only white female friend. Suzanne Peall emerged from the woods on her strawberry roan, riding out from the shade into the unforgiving noonday sun. One hand swabbed her round face with a handkerchief and the other gripped the reins along with the handle of a birdcage which held a baby crow, one of the many rescues she had brought to Promise to heal.

She deposited the cage into Fletch's outstretched hands. Gently, without putting pressure on the bird's splinted wing, he removed it from the confines of the cage it had outgrown and settled it into the larger one he'd made.

Suzanne raised her short leg in a wide unladylike swing and alighted from Emily, the frisky mount Promise had taught her to take charge of. Had this been an ordinary day, Promise would have complimented her on her sturdy jodhpurs and scuffed brogans, for they represented another poke at her father's insistence that his only offspring conduct herself like a true Southern lady. But today, a defiant yet good-natured Suzanne appeared preoccupied.

"Thank goodness this baby bird gave me an excuse to come here," she blurted.

"Hello to you, too," said Promise, scrubbing her dirty hands on her overalls, then gracefully stooping to hug Suzanne. "Let me warn you, I'm poor company. Ask Fletch. I've hardly spoken to him today."

Suzanne's worried hazel eyes squinted up at Fletch, standing two inches taller than Promise's willowy five-foot-six. "Good to see you," she said as he guided his drawknife with strong, confident strokes along a fence post.

As though they were in town, where a Negro man avoided eye contact with a white woman, he averted his eyes. "Sorry to be unsociable, but I'm being careful."

"About what?" asked Promise.

Fletch ran his finger over his curved blade. “Taylor wielded an authority that kept the peace here in Martonsville. We have yet to see if the townsfolk who praised his attempts to unify the races will feel that way now that he’s gone. Who knows? They might follow the lead of other towns that have decided there’s nothing more entertaining than a community picnic followed by a lynching.”

“You have every right to be cautious, Fletch,” said Suzanne.

Hearing the indignation in her friend’s tone, Promise interrupted, “Don’t get Fletch wrong, Suzanne. If your father wasn’t such a good sheriff, Negro folks in these parts would fear for their lives, same as those in nearby towns. It’s just that being on the outskirts of town, we never saw much of your father. Uncle Taylor had no choice but to act as the law.” Her eyes welled.

“Shh, lower your voice,” Suzanne whispered, waving in quick nervous movements. “No offense taken. I was talking about Daffron Mears—he’s moved back to town. I heard him tell my father he’s on his way here. Not for a sympathy call. The man is looking for work.”

That moment, the agitated ruffling of a flock of birds caught Promise’s attention. As the farm’s sentries, the sharp-beaked disapproving crows, mobbed the sky, she followed the lean figure appearing and disappearing among the stands of loblolly pines that bordered her pasture. Flashes of his red clothing bobbed through the underbrush and around the pines. He appeared to have timed his movements, staging his appearance as though he were making a grand entrance to a play, complete with music—a wretched whistling that announced his presence. Sour and off-key, his rendition of “Dixie” made her feel nauseous.

“Doesn’t he know he’s not welcome here?”

Every inch of Fletch's five-foot-eight frame froze midway through fitting the split-rail fence to its post. He and Suzanne exchanged fretful glances.

"You don't know much about Daffron, do you Promise?" Suzanne asked.

Promise bristled. If there was one thing that had always irked her, it was being left out. Call it an orphan's fear of missing basic knowledge others took for granted, like who her mother might be. "I've heard a few things. So what, exactly, don't I know?"

"It's been twenty years since Daffron lived here, yet to hear people talk, you'd think he'd never left. You've got to be careful, Promise. Keep your distance from Fletch. Don't jostle or brush against him. Daddy says those are unforgivable offenses under Jim Crow law and that Daffron fancies himself its enforcer."

Promise pressed her hands to her sides and raised one forefinger to signal Fletch. Thankfully, he noticed that her forefinger took to circling her thumb knuckle. Judging by his reaction, her tanned freckled face must have blanched whiter than fresh-boiled potato, for while she believed Fletch had as much right as Suzanne to stand by her side, her finger jerked away from her thumb and wagged faster, this time for him to move away. With one imperceptible drop, he slipped his drawknife to the grass and pretended to search for it. Each sweep of his sinewy arm inched him farther from her side.

The necessity of Fletch's moving a respectful two arms' lengths from her while Daffron Mears made his way closer incensed her. Lowering the sack from one hand and fiddle case from the other, he paused to watch the spectacle of a red-tailed hawk abandon its perch at the forest's edge and circle over his head, then took up his whistling, this time louder and more off-key.

The injured baby crow punctuated the heavy air with its squawks. Promise lifted the cage and pressed it to her chest. When the bird had quieted, she set the cage down, scooped it from the pine straw, and fingered the soft spiked feathers jutting from its translucent skin. She cuddled the bird to her lips so Daffron couldn't see them move and said: "I'm not sure what I'm going to do, Fletch, but whatever happens, don't argue, just go along with me. We'll sort everything out later. I promise."

Born wearing a brush-stroke of a smile, he parted his perpetually upturned lips, then clamped them shut. With a sad shake of his head, a reminder that by some vagary of the law a Negro man is forbidden to utter a word in the presence of white women, he resumed his search. He didn't have to explain; the tension of being found alone with two white women rippled across his sculpted face.

Promise stroked the bird's still-downy chest while Suzanne repositioned the splint. Its heart beat faster than hers but not as hard. Small though it was, it seemed to understand since it was unable to fly, there was no place safer than its cage.

Suzanne's comely face tightened into a grimace. "I don't mean to intrude on whatever is going on between you two, but Fletch has a point. We won't know whether the townspeople will maintain the restraint they showed your uncle, or unleash their pet she-devil, home grown Southern bigotry."

Fletch nodded and absently tapped his drawknife against the toe of his brogans. Sawdust exploded from its teeth. "A Negro man unchaperoned with the farm's white mistress is a dangerous—" before he could finish, Promise interrupted.

"What are you two saying? This was never an issue before. Why is it a problem now? Uncle Taylor and I had

always worked together with you, Fletch. Everyone on the farm has offered to take on Uncle Taylor's chores, but I can't ask them to do more than they're already doing. Thaddeus is up in the field, harvesting what little corn the drought has left us. Cornelia's fifth pregnancy has left her more exhausted than ever, and I refuse to ask Mother Hart to work in this heat."

Promise pointed behind her at her dismantled fence. "Just when Fletch and I need to take over Taylor's work, a new character enters stage left and interferes. How am I supposed to run this place if Fletch and I need an escort?"

Meanwhile, Daffron meandered through the manure-laden pasture onto the wagon road. Two ruts connected by a mound beneath a canopy of gnarled oak limbs, the road was never intended for strolling. That didn't deter him. He simply adjusted his pace and kept walking. Soon, he stepped from the shade into the sun's white light, arms swaying, pebbles scattering beneath his heels, his wretched whistling the only thing he yielded to the heat of the day.

Behind the pasture in the barnyard, a baby goat abandoned its mother's teat and jumped onto the roof of the hutch, where the rooster chased it away. Cambridge trotted toward the other two horses in the center of the corral and huddled beside them, head up, ears perked, eyes following the stranger.

"You say he's looking for a job?" asked Promise.

Suzanne nodded. "He's in a heap of debt. Needs to earn money, fast."

Promise took a deep breath, the kind that bought her time to gather her thoughts into a cogent whole. "Is that the only reason he's here?"

Suzanne shrugged. "That's what I heard him say."

"Are you sure? Very, very sure?"

“Nothin’s dat simple, Miss Promise. The likes of dat man ain’t no candidate for a farm like dis. You gots too many of us colored folk livin’ long side you.” Fletch’s lips hardly moved.

Promise locked eyes with Suzanne as though she were talking to her. “I hate it when you use that po’ boy talk.”

“I gots no choice, Miss Promise.”

This from the man who could name every bone and describe every muscle in the human body, argue philosophy, history, and the influence Freud was having on our understanding of the human psyche. She turned her back to him, set the broken bird on its perch, and snapped the latch. “No matter what I decide, no matter how crazy it may seem— from now on, you’ve got to trust me.”

“I always have, Miss Promise, always will.”

Ordinarily, this singsong tripped gently from his lips, but this afternoon his voice wavered. She longed to look him square on, study the intensity of his eyes, determine what the uncertainty in his voice was telling her. Instead, she thought about the message Uncle Taylor sent her from the Beyond: *Sear the intruder with your wits, then feign retreat. Let the ensuing confusion disarm him.*

The mishaps she’d endured when she’d struck out on her own over the years taught her to heed her uncle’s advice. She decided to capitalize on the scene of two young women spending time together, in hopes it would speak to Daffron of innocence and giggles. She glanced at her friend. Between Suzanne’s stricken expression and the pulsing of her own nerves, she longed for a swallow of the corn liquor Suzanne’s father hid in his pantry. Setting the stage for her ruse, she draped her arms over the fence by the gate and willed the long fingers on her toughened hands to rest easy. She tilted her head to signal her anticipation of a neighborly

exchange—a quick word or a mouthful of gossip. Nothing more.

“Afternoon, sir. Don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Reverend Crawford’s niece, Promise.”

He eased his sweat-stained fedora back on his head. Graying red curls huddled near his hairline would have had a friendly appeal had his hatband not left an angry crimson imprint. He looked her over. “Ah, so you’re the orphan baby he adopted. All grown up now, aren’t you? Daffron Mears here.”

“What all have you got here?” Ignoring Suzanne and Fletch, he pointed to the cage, then rested his eyes on Promise. “Good of you to save nature’s misfits, ma’am.” With the confident interest of a hunter stalking his prey, the woman who’d inherited the last fifty-acre parcel of what had been his family’s plantation, he watched for her reaction—a start, a twitch, the balling of her fists.

She refused to be goaded and, easing her way around the fence and edging toward him—so much so that he stepped backward—pretended to be perplexed. “Did you happen to see the no trespassing sign marking my property line, sir? Is it still upright?” She envisioned the weathered sign that everyday visitors ignored, and recalled Taylor’s insistence that it would one day prove useful.

Daffron lowered his fiddle case, slumped his burlap sack to his feet. “Yes, ma’am, far as I recall.”

“Then why didn’t you turn back?” She uprooted a tuft of coarse grass with her heel and kicked it in the direction he came from.

Daffron lowered his hat to his thigh. “Apologies, ma’am. Guess I was so busy thinking July’s the time of year a woman alone on a farm might need help taking up crops, I missed it. Anyway, here I am to offer my back in exchange for some

wages so's I can buy food for my family. Times being hard, work's not easy to come by." His gray eyes wandered toward Fletch and back, then narrowed with coyness. "Unless, of course, your work is spoken for."

Demonstrating a preference for a black man over a white, especially when it came to much-needed employment, was a life-threatening offense here on Martons Island. Were she to lie, Daffron would surely conclude she was favoring a colored over him. Worse yet, he might assume she wanted him gone for fear he'd find that she and Fletch shared another kind of rapport, one that Jim Crow forbade.

Daffron moved closer. She disliked him taking this liberty. She'd overheard Uncle Taylor telling stories of him whanging his way through other farms in other towns, brandishing fear, that most life-sustaining of human emotions. Though deep in her gut she wanted nothing more than to run, she stayed fast, her fingers tightened around an imaginary slingshot, the one Taylor claimed David had used to disarm Goliath.

Fierce thoughts bolted ahead of the logic she was known for, insisting she instill in him a fear of *her* for reasons she had yet to assemble. She wrinkled her nose at his sweet-sour chewing tobacco breath. Once he straightened the round of his shoulders, his faded red shirt hung without a ripple down his trunk, standing head to head with hers.

She read a distress she hadn't expected to see in his speckled gray eyes. Lodged deep within him, a reprehensible injury, the kind she'd observed in beaten horses the townspeople brought to her to care for. Healing broken creatures came naturally to her, although the four-legged variety generally caused others little harm. She wished the same were true of this creature.

Daffron sidled a toe closer. "I'm asking nice, ma'am. Don't force a man to beg."

Of the first lessons she taught a new animal, two fingers pointed in its direction meant "back up." She used a similar gesture with Daffron, except she flicked all her fingers at once. He stepped backward, although as he did he squinted pensively, noting her discomfort. Such a personal observation. So keenly made. She tucked her hands in her pockets and looked in those desolate eyes of his. "You're not sporting the usual cuts, callouses, or blisters found on a working man's hands, sir. That makes me think you don't much care for rough work."

"It's not a matter of caring, ma'am."

She dismissed his injured tone as another manipulation. "Farming takes a lot out of you. Animals require tending. Fences, mending. Tools, sharpening. Then there's hoeing, watering, weeding, picking, staking, replanting, and let's not forget," she smiled innocently at him, "watching for pests."

He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "Just when your bones threaten to collapse inside your skin, you've got to pack the produce for market. Anyone works here puts in long hours."

"Time I have, ma'am."

"There's hay to harvest and bale, stables to clean, all of which ruins the strongest backs."

"My back is plenty strong, ma'am."

"Fletch sells the manure for me," her voice was rising. "If you have any ideas about grabbing extra change for yourself..." From the corner of her eye, she caught the tremble of Fletch's hands, the creases and callouses on the fingers she knew so well, and him tucking them into the bib of his overalls. She blinked him out of her view. She had to.

Otherwise she couldn't harden herself to what instinct was driving her to do.

"I got no such ideas, ma'am. Truly. Besides, if you're worried about what your uncle would say—"

"Let's get back to *your* concern, sir. I believe you said you needed food for *your* family." And though this reputed enforcer set her insides to shaking, Uncle Taylor had taught her to stand up to a junkyard dog, especially that of the human variety. His first rule: Show no fear. "Lead with your boldest move, and you will disorient him. Cling to the maxim, 'Truth dwells within paradox,' and the advantage will be yours. View the problem from its inside-out—yes, you'll look like a fool—but, in the end, your wits will save you." It was as though Taylor was standing alongside her, prompting her to stay strong, thrilling and terrifying her at the same time.

Promise drew her overall-clad figure, said to be graceful yet rugged, up tall and spread her feet wide so as to take up more than her share of ground. Good posture and an aura of ownership were basic to entering a pact with the devil.

Suzanne's eyes widened. She reached to grab Promise as though she were a recalcitrant student but shifted to wrapping and unwrapping the reins around her hand. Banishing Promise to the corner of her whites-only schoolroom would not do for the friend who had saved her from the schoolyard bullies of their youth. As senseless as it was to confront Daffron, she couldn't stop herself from nodding in approval.

It was the impetus Promise needed.

"I'll pay no less than what's customary given the times—a meal a day and a share of the crops in exchange for a week's labor, that's the best I can do, no more."

Suzanne clamped her hand over her mouth.

Daffron rubbed his hands together and murmured, "All right," his satisfaction that of a man who'd discerned the final number in the combination of an unyielding lock. Arms at his sides, he seemed to relax for a moment. Then his eyes brightened. He jabbed one thumb in the direction of the smokehouse toward the trail that disappeared into the woods. "It's half a day's walk from here to my house on the other side of town. Mind if I camp back there?"

Fletch's chest rose in a stifled gasp. He stopped himself from speaking, yet Promise read his palms, opened and pleading. Three-hundred-yards at the other end of the trail, Fletch's mother was most likely in her garden, a basket of tender greens pressed to her hip.

"I have someplace closer," Promise blurted. Daffron didn't appear to notice the tone in which she delivered those words, nor her concern that such a living arrangement would frighten the families she cared about. Caught as she was in his inadvertent snare, she dared not put him off. Daffron followed as she pivoted in the opposite direction and pointed past the bend in the wagon road, beyond the last pair of oaks to the large whitewashed barn with the stained tin roof. "You can't see it from here, but there's a shed behind the barn. It's not much."

He leaned his elbow on the fence post Fletch had been repairing and grinned. "It'll do. And don't you fret, I'll do better than my best for you."

Promise's palm tingled with the urge to slap Daffron's elbow clean off her fence. "Store your things, then start picking beans," she said softly as Fletch shuffled off.

Daffron put his finger behind his ear and asked her to speak up. She repeated herself no louder than before. He stepped toward her. His gaze, leadened with hateful assumptions, locked on hers. He started to speak, but she cut

him off. “Best get to those beans. Suzanne and I will fetch your bedding.”

She turned to her friend. “Let’s go.”

“Best hurry, your daddy will be looking for you, Cousin Suzanne,” Daffron laughed.

Promise started; Suzanne had never mentioned this.

“Bet you didn’t know she was my cousin twice removed on my daddy’s side, did you Miss Promise? That’ll give you two a chunk to gossip over.”

“Can’t help who I’m related to.”

Moments ago, Suzanne had urged her to stand strong, but now, she resorted to the little girl voice she used with her father. Her friend was so upset, Promise could have taken a bite out of her humiliation. “Makes not a hair of difference,” she said, hugging Suzanne.

An hour earlier, as Promise had worked in her pasture, she’d started to untangle her grief. For a few satisfying moments, the puzzle pieces of her situation emerged, sure as the sky after a rainstorm. She’d thought she was about to come to terms with inheriting a financial mess from Taylor. As she started to restore order to her neglected farm, she had every intention of working out a plan that secured the future Fletch deserved. For a few glistening moments, she felt new as a spring leaf, hopeful and ready to open. Then came Daffron.

CHAPTER 2

*The horrible division between our races will be bridged
when men and women of courage
create one race in which to cradle us all.*

Taylor Crawford, *My Life in Georgia*, 1929

Promise scooped Emily's reins with one hand and Suzanne's arm with the other and steered her toward her cabin. Decay, the scent by which nature announced the removal of the intractable to make way for the new, wafted through the humid air.

"If Uncle Taylor had left the farm to Andrew Gills, I wouldn't be dealing with Daffron," she said, picturing Andrew, the handsome twenty-one-year-old newspaperman from Boston to whom Uncle Taylor had promised her in marriage. "But as Taylor grew more sickly, he kept changing his mind, waffling between Andrew and me, finally leaving the property to me, the person he referred to as 'his sole relation,' and an adopted one at that."

Suzanne's short legs and wide hips churned faster than they'd ever moved before, causing her face to drip with unladylike perspiration. She spoke in breathless spurts. "But your uncle was so rational. And unusual. Who else

encouraged us...to explore...the many aspects...of a problem? He was the one...who taught my students...to develop a logical argument.”

“I’m afraid death unraveled a number of things, including Taylor’s rationality. I told him I love having the Georgia soil under my feet, and that I didn’t want to move to Boston, especially to marry Andrew.” Promise stopped, closed her eyes, and sighed.

Suzanne squeezed Promise’s hand. “Taylor was lucky. Who else would go along with his schemes? I’m sure he knew you loved him more than a real daughter could.”

They climbed the creaky steps to the cabin porch, the massive cypress rounds forming the back wall, a testament to Taylor’s desire to create a structure that would outlast insects and intruders of the human variety. “As he was dying, he murmured, ‘That man, that man.’ When I heard Daffron whistling “Dixie,” I began to suspect he was ‘that man.’ At first I thought that made little sense until I recalled Taylor’s maxim, ‘Within paradox rests Truth.’”

“What truth can possibly come out of Daffron being here? I never understood what that maxim meant to Taylor, but I understand that you need to be more cautious about your routines. Don’t take anything you do or say for granted. Look at your life as though through Daffron’s eyes.” Suzanne pointed to the kitchen table. “I’ve been here when Fletch sat at your table, slathering butter on the biscuits his mother had just taken from the oven.”

Promise sighed. “That will have to stop,” she said, her auburn eyebrows tensing with realization. “He won’t be able to spend time on the front porch, reading. Our after-dinner conversations will be out, too.”

The screen door creaked as they entered the cabin. Promise searched the piano, the table in her sitting room,

wherever Fletch might have scattered his few possessions. She gathered his worn volume of Shakespeare and his anatomy book. On top of them, Taylor's list of chores, which she showed to Suzanne.

"This makes me feel as though he's still here." Penned in his exacting hand, three column headings: *Repair, Rebuild, Replace*. Under the last column, the fence rebuild chore and the date by which the post was to have been restored. Suzanne tilted her head as she always did when she waited to hear more.

"Taylor had little patience with decay, which he fit within the realms of material, spiritual, or racial. After Daffron's performance, Taylor would have recategorized the decayed fence from the material realm to that of 'racial.' But that's not what we're here for." She tapped her foot. "I sure hope I'll be able to..." She quickly removed Taylor's Treatise from a stack of Fletch's bookmarked volumes of Dante, Cicero, and Keats on the quilt chest.

"To what?" asked Suzanne

Without answering, Promise kissed the Treatise's cover and placed it at the far corner of the dinner table. She would return it to Taylor's desk another time, when her heart had stopped aching. She piled Fletch's belongings on the floor while Suzanne checked the fieldstone fireplace for his belongings.

On the mantle beside a clock, a small calendar with today's date, Monday, July fourteenth, 1930. Leaning against Taylor's Bible, Fletch's precious letter from Harvard medical school. Promise jumped to her feet, but before she could reach it, Suzanne had lifted the envelope and was holding it as though it were a hot cinder between her fingertips. Eyes glowing with excitement, she whirled toward Promise. "Is this what I think it is?"

“Put that down!” Promise snapped, immediately regretting having snatched the envelope from her well-meaning friend. “You have no idea what that letter has done to my life,” she pleaded, hoping Suzanne would understand. Still, the urge to rant swelled within her. Not wanting to hurt her further, Promise clamped her hand over her mouth. But it was too late; Suzanne’s gentle expression had vanished. In its place, a sickening dismay.

Promise gasped. “I am so sorry...” Her emotion had surged, drowning her powers of reasoning. She bit her lip. Uncle Taylor would have been furious. He’d taught her to gain superiority over problems by reasoning her way through them. Emotion be damned, he’d insisted.

But it was too late. Not one to argue, Suzanne did what she’d always done when she became upset—she ran. Promise followed her to the door, but Suzanne, moving like a frightened doe, had mounted Emily and was urging her toward the path into the woods.

She checked to see if Fletch or Daffron had seen Suzanne slam the screen door. Certain they were busy with the fence, she set the books on the floor, lifted the top of the chest and stared into its stained maw. Empty. She’d forgotten: Fletch’s mother, whom Taylor reverentially called “Mother Hart,” had removed all the bedding, leaving only ragged peels of lining. Promise’s hand trembled as she fingered the largest, most brittle curl, then crushed it in her fist. “You fool!” she muttered, lowering Fletch’s books into the trunk.

She thought of Fletch, hand resting on the sink, where he often stood, drinking a cup of water and smiling. Draped over the doorknob, the purple bandana she’d sewn for him. She stuffed it in her bedroom out of sight. Given the vow she’d made to Taylor to keep the families on his farm safe, she hid the only thing small enough to fit in her bureau drawer.

Ten weeks earlier, Fletch and his adopted brother, Trivett, had carried Taylor's body out for burial. She'd not opened his bedroom door since. To her surprise, the sour, phlegmy odors of his deterioration had faded. The remaining scents weren't those of death's herbed oils, but those she'd loved of his life: the leather binding on his books; the musty stacks of crumpled paper composing his endless treatise; the plays she had written for his entertainment and his pipe packed with once-fragrant tobacco as though he'd intended to return. But at seventy-six, he'd chosen to share the inner workings of his affairs with his adopted orphan girl and had unceremoniously dumped his life's work into her hands. He'd abandoned her for good. *Within paradox dwells Truth*. Had he considered her that capable? If he'd been here today, would he have glowed with pride?

"I miss you more than I imagined," she whispered, running her hand over his desktop, gently tugging it open. Slat by slat, it rolled upward, its familiar clatter a chorus that sang of his former presence. For a welcome moment, she basked in that comfort. Opening the first tiny drawer, the scent of India ink rose; from the second, the metallic odor of blue-black nibs. As she rummaged through the next few drawers, she pictured Fletch a short while ago, palms open. *Don't abandon me*, they'd pleaded. "I haven't," she said, although, had she been Fletch, alone now with Daffron, she would certainly have felt that way.

The more she worried, the faster she pawed. The tiny compartments went up one side of the desk and down the other. Staring at their railroad-like lines, she couldn't recall what she was looking for. By the time she remembered Daffron needed bedding, she no longer cared what he slept on. She grabbed a torn sheet from her mend pile and hurried out the kitchen door through which Taylor, Fletch, and now

Suzanne had left her. None were blood relations, but they were family. *Within paradox dwells Truth.* A family she loved.

The pathway rounded up behind the smokehouse, past the vegetable gardens, to the shed where Daffron was to stay. She passed between it and the goat shelter and into the barn. Outside, Daffron stood with his back to her, watching Fletch.

A few feet away, Fletch dragged the handles of his drawknife in rigid hacking movements along a fence post. The confident glow of the man who at eighteen had become Taylor's foreman had evaporated. Vigilance now strained his intelligent face. Sweat sucked his sleeveless shirt to his back. He reeked of a scent she'd never known him to give off. She wanted to go to him but stopped. Don't draw attention to him, she told herself. Being Negro is reason enough for those inclined to hate, but a Negro whose father was white...her breath caught in her throat. Don't give in to what you feel, she reminded herself. Stay calm, pretend you're in the corral, and Daffron is nothing but a nuisance of a stallion.

She stepped into the barnyard. Fortified by the high walls of the barn and goat shelter, her voice boomed louder than she intended: "Not much activity from a wanderer in need of a day's wages."

Daffron cocked his head in mock surprise. "Just about to head toward my quarters, Miss Promise." He scooped up his things and whistled "Dixie" haltingly, as though confounded by the complexity of the tune.

"Best put those tools away, Fletch. You need to deliver that manure. And this time, don't let that viper on the other side of town cheat me." She glanced at Fletch's broad forehead, lines of shock issuing from his eyebrows to his widower's peak, and hoped he'd understand her feigned harshness was directed at Daffron.

“Yes, ma’am. Fletch gonna be back first thing tomorrow with your money, Miss Promise.” Good, he was playing along. Her relief skidded to a stop when he failed to flicker his eyelids, the secret gesture that meant he was in on whatever game she’d started. He slipped his hat over his glistening forehead, his jaw bearing down on his back teeth. If she reached out, she could dab the round of his cheek. She was that close and that far away.

Forcing herself not to stare as he shuffled off in humiliation through a steaming pile of horse dung, she tightened her arms around the bedding and went after Daffron, who was headed for the shed. This would be the first and last time Fletch would ever need to use such a self-abasing gesture. She would make sure of that. For now, his bogus act of subjection would protect him. This was how it would be. But only for a week.

The noisy summer afternoon had given way to an ominous silence.

Where were her dogs and why hadn’t she noticed their absence? She scanned the periphery of the farm, where the cultivated soil deferred to brambled woods. Jasper and Tiv usually alerted her to the presence of intruders. Bluetick coonhounds, they conducted their own chases, yipping as they tracked their prey. Rough-edged grass crackled beneath her footsteps; she missed the commotion that meant her hounds were safe. A chill wormed through her.

When she reached the overgrown mulberry bush beside the shed, Daffron was opening the warped door. A musty odor assailed them. A furry brown spider had spun a lace curtain over the one filthy window. Motionless, yet in plain sight, it waited at the web’s edge for its prey. Beneath the windowsill, a rolled mattress rested at the foot of the bed. Bits of hay and black mouse nuggets littered the shelf on the adjacent wall.

Grit on the floorboards crunched beneath Daffron's feet. His creaking filled the room with a menacing noise.

He unrolled the mattress, clouding the air with dust. Absorbed on settling into his new surroundings, he appeared to have forgotten Promise. He pulled his shirt up around his lean middle and swiped the shelf clean. He then removed a photograph of a little girl from his pocket, ran his finger over the child's serious face—she wore the kind of stare that followed you no matter where you moved—and positioned it just so on the shelf.

He placed his oversized sack on the mattress, worked two fingers into the drawstring, and eased it open. Out came a pair of trousers, a collarless white shirt, socks, and drawers. He positioned this tidy bundle on the shelf, aligning it with the edge. He worked with the fastidiousness of a blue jay which, having devoured the robin's speckled-blue eggs, proceeded to make her nest his own. All that remained in the sack was a small protrusion in the bottom right corner. Unremarkably square, Promise guessed he'd brought a tin of tobacco or some similar male comfort.

Daffron squatted beside the bed, lifted the sack's opening, and peered in as if he were a child in search of a much-anticipated gift. He nudged his way inward up to his shoulder and re-emerged, hands cupped, then leaned on his haunches and looked up at her in the doorway. A peculiar smile, wistful and telling, smoothed his scarred chin. For the first time since he'd arrived, he seemed boyish and safe.

Promise let the bedding slide to the floor. "Is it alive?" she asked, surprised by her playfulness.

"In a way." His clamshelled hands opened to reveal a small, carved box.

She clapped her fingers to her mouth. The box's size, its whittled markings, even the miniature wrought-iron hinges

Sunday's Orphan

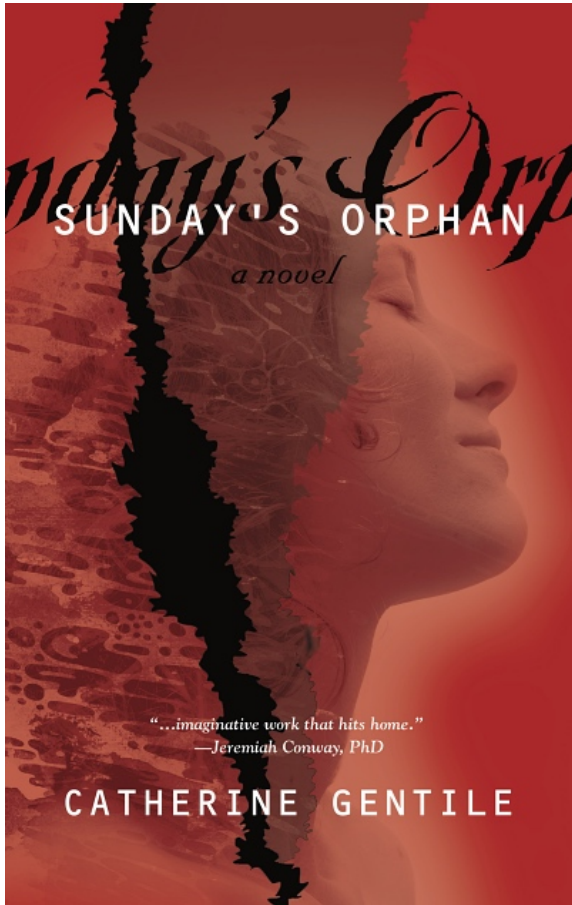
were identical to the one her mother had left for her. Although faint, its flowery scent was too powerful to deny. His lips parted in a toothy sneer, as though to say now that he'd penetrated Promise's tough exterior, the rest would be simple.

About the Author



Photo by Leslie MacVane.

Catherine Gentile's fiction received the Dana Award for Short Fiction. In 2020, her collection of short stories, *Small Lies* was published. Her debut novel, *The Quiet Roar of a Hummingbird*, achieved Finalist Status in the Eric Hoffer Novel Award for Excellence in Independent Publishing. Her nonfiction covers a variety of topics and has appeared in *Writers' Market*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Down East*, and *Maine Magazine*. She currently edits and publishes a monthly ezine entitled *Together With Alzheimer's*, which has subscribers throughout the United States. A native of Hartford, Connecticut, Catherine lives with her husband and muse on a small island off the coast of Maine. You are invited to explore her website: www.catherinegentile.com.



In 1930, twenty-year-old Promise Mears Crawford finds herself trapped in an identity not of her making, betrothed to a man not of her choosing, and entwined in the aftermath of the first racial murder on her island haven of Martonsville, Georgia.

Sunday's Orphan

By Catherine Gentile

Order the book from the publisher [BookLocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11946.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**