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Bound for literary fame: How a bestselling author embraced a first-time Charleston author

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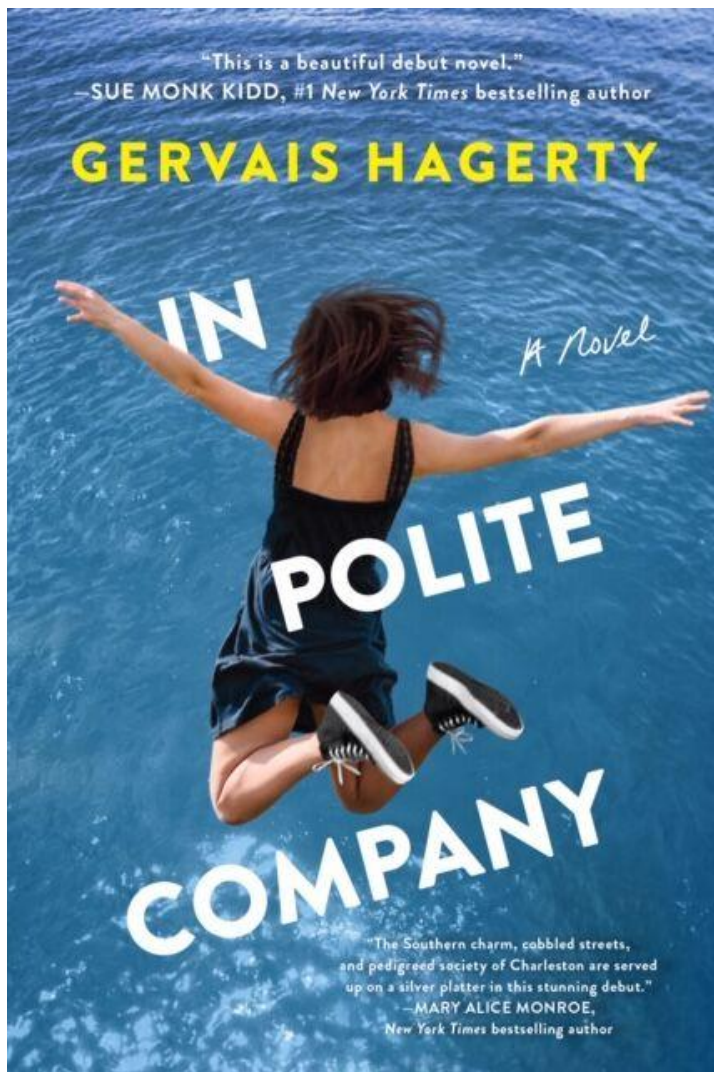


Bestselling author Mary Alice Monroe and first-time author Gervais Hagerty hold a book conversation in the art gallery of Wild Dunes Resort on Thursday, August 19, 2021, on Isle of Palms. Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff

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On the front cover of author Gervais Hagerty’s debut novel, “In Polite Company,” is a choice blurb.

It is the sort that can make or break a title’s trajectory on a bookseller’s shelf, whether it be of the bricks-and-mortar variety or otherwise.



For Gervais Hagerty's debut novel, "In Polite Company," author Mary Alice Monroe, who mentored the writer, supplied a blurb. William Morrow/provided

First is the rousing declaration: "The Southern charm, cobbled streets, and pedigreed society of Charleston are served up on a silver platter in this stunning debut."

Then there's the bestower of such praise. That would be Mary Alice Monroe. In the unlikely case you don't know that name, the cover covers that, too. She's a New York Times bestselling author.

That all-important time-tested publishing trumpet is not all that Monroe has done for Hagerty. She has become a dedicated mentor for the first-time writer, guiding her through everything from shaping characters to landing an agent.

What's in it for her? She just really enjoys it.

The making of a mentor

"She calls me her protégé," Hagerty said, seeming to marvel at the turn of events.

After first reading a draft of Hagerty's manuscript, Monroe came to embrace the role with the same savvy she applies to her own illustrious, 27-book writing career.

And, while she never seeks out these relationships, it's not her first mentoring gig and likely won't be her last.

"They happen organically, by chance," Monroe said.

For Monroe, it's just how she rolls.
That is, when she can spot the talent
and carve out the time.



Gervais Hagerty found a mentor in bestselling novelist Mary Alice Monroe. File/William Morrow/Provided



Bestselling author Mary Alice Monroe and first-time author Gervais Hagerty sign books at a book conversation in the art gallery of Wild Dunes Resort on Thursday, August 19, 2021, on Isle of Palms. Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff

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“I’ve always felt a strong sense of camaraderie,” she said.

Before the internet made connecting with writers a quick click away, Monroe was forming such groups with others keen to study the art of writing.

“We critiqued each other’s work with an eye to encouragement, not what was wrong,” she said, “I think that’s a common failing of a lot of people when they’re asked to critique a manuscript. They look for what’s wrong.”

When it comes to Hagerty, there are certainly affinities that could lend to the requisite chemistry for mentoring. Both look to Charleston as a signature setting — and both live in the area, with Monroe on Isle of Palms and Hagerty on the peninsula, where she grew up. They both are committed advocates for the environment. They both find meaning in bolstering other women.

True, there was an added incentive for Monroe to crack open her manuscript. Hagerty's father, Richard Hagerty, an artist and retired physician, had mentored her own daughter, first when she mulled the prospect of being a doctor and again when she elected instead to become an artist.

“When his daughter asked me, of course I was so delighted to be able to say thank you to him by helping Gervais. What goes around comes around,” she said.



South Carolina's Mary Alice Monroe is the New York Times bestselling author of 27 books, including her latest novel, "The Summer of Lost and Found." Provided

According to his daughter, Richard Hagerty also benefited from having a powerful mentor himself in his own art career. That was Laura Bragg, the celebrated first female director of the Charleston Museum.

But all the iced tea in Charleston could not compel Monroe to champion a young author if there wasn't talent in the mix. When there isn't, Monroe finds ways to compliment the writer and send them on their way.

This time she spotted the ability, felt the affinity. Still, the novelists' styles and voices are plenty distinct.

Monroe writes in third-person, elegantly, seamlessly weaving layered stories, gathering generations of women and the men who encircle them. She rolls out details with the ease and subtlety of a seasoned storyteller, creating a timeless patina on her Southern world.

In her latest "Beach House" series book, "The Summer of Lost and Found," she homes in on multigenerational women "who loved the beach, sea turtles and each other with an abiding devotion." Her language is lush and flowing: eyes glide, gazes sweep.

Hagerty, on the other hand, forges ahead in full-on first-person. This is by way of the main character of "In Polite Company," Simons Smythe, a young woman from an established Charleston family (not unlike the author) who teeters anticly between the centuries-old mores of her tribe and a burgeoning need for independence.

The writer keeps that conundrum merrily rolling along with crisp, staccato sentences and impressive verb deployment (leaves skitter, light blanches, Simons scampers), charging gamely onward with self-deprecating edge and quick-fire comedic turns.

"She has a voice. She has a personality and a sense of details," Monroe said, adding that Hagerty also hewed to the old adage of writing what she knows, and was able to deliver a story smacking of authenticity.



First-time author Gervais Hagerty signs books at a book conversation in the art gallery of Wild Dunes Resort on Thursday, August 19, 2021, on Isle of Palms. Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff

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Making her debut

According to Hagerty, here's how it went: Monroe invited her over to discuss the work after she had finished reading it.

"I was so nervous," Hagerty said, noting it was well into that conversation before she gleaned from Monroe that it had potential.

Monroe expertly nosed around under the hood, tinkering with structure, a strong suit of hers. She coaxed out a crucial backstory to a main character, the grandmother Laudie, producing a key visual trope in a Capezio dance shoe that served to unlock her complexity and poignancy.

Monroe then dispatched the writer with those recommendations, offering to review them thereafter.

Hagerty sponged them up, beelining back to the writing desk and delivering revisions in short measure.

In doing so, she'd unwittingly cleared the second hurdle.

“The second thing I look for is the response of the person — if they get defensive, if they sulk away,” Monroe said, adding Hagerty took her advice and ran with it.

Monroe has since delivered the blurb, along with business advice. She has introduced her at events. She readily set aside time for this story, explaining that mentoring is a subject about which she is passionate.

And, yes, there was kismet, too. Last year, Monroe invited over Hagerty and another rising author, Signe Pike, the author of the “Lost Queen” series of medieval Scottish novels.

As they gathered, Monroe's agent rang, on the hunt for the next Southern writer. According to Hagerty, Monroe pronounced, “It's Gervais.” While Hagerty ended up signing with another agent, the ball picked up breakneck speed.



Bestselling author Mary Alice Monroe's book is on display at a book conversation in the art gallery of Wild Dunes Resort on Thursday, August 19, 2021, on Isle of Palms. Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff

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“She struck lightning,” said Monroe, who has spent plenty of time encouraging less quickly picked-up writers during the standard rounds of rejections. Hagerty, on the other hand, passed go and collected the oh-so-ony name of HarperCollins as her publisher.

The wise, old crone

Monroe said she learned early on from one of her own mentors, Nora Roberts, who gave her some of her first blurbs, that an established author can be supportive of an up-and-coming young author. A strong editor can be a mentor, too, one that takes “more than just a professional interest in the work but a personal one, as well.”

It is a motif that plays out in Monroe's novels, too, the fairytale model of the wise, old crone. In many of the "Beach House" books, the character Lovie Rutledge quietly guided. In recent books the role is filled by the character Cara.

And, in life as in fiction, the writer has fashioned herself into a wise, old crone. "I proudly am."

So when it comes to shepherding aspiring writers, what's in it for Monroe?



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"It gives me joy to help fledgling authors take flight. It really does," she said. She also enjoys flexing her gift for editing, which "Matrix"-like enables her to see how everything comes together.

"I can't explain how I know it," she said.

IF YOU GO

What: Hagerty will appear at the Charleston Country Public Library's Main Library in conversation with Charleston County Public Library Director of Innovation Natalie Hauff.

When: Sept. 2 at 5:30 p.m.

Where: Main Library, 68 Calhoun St. in downtown Charleston.

For more information: Please contact 843-805-6930.

With a young author, Monroe can often spot the structure problems that then affect pacing or the ability to bring a climactic moment to its full tilt.

“That’s something I can see. And once a young author sees it for herself, she’s got it for life.”

She recently encouraged her longtime assistant, Angela May, to co-author a book for middle grade readers, “The Islanders.” Set on Dewees Island, its resident wise, old crone is a grandmother, Honey, who guides her grandson Jake and his two friends in rescuing turtles. It is now on the New York Times bestseller list, with another in the series underway.

Still, Monroe is careful with the number of authors she can assist at any time.

“I have to say no, just because I’m always struggling to find time to write my own novels,” she said.

When she does agree, she has to hold her breath, hoping it will be good. If she spies the talent, then she’s in.

In “The Summer of Lost and Found,” the struggling Linnea Rutledge is given a boost by her aunt, Cara, with the keys to her family home on Isle of Palms.

It’s a tough world for women, Cara said. “With so many blessings, we pay it forward.”

Or maybe it was the voice of a certain, so-deemed wise, old crone, spinning an uplifting tale with remarkable women and words.

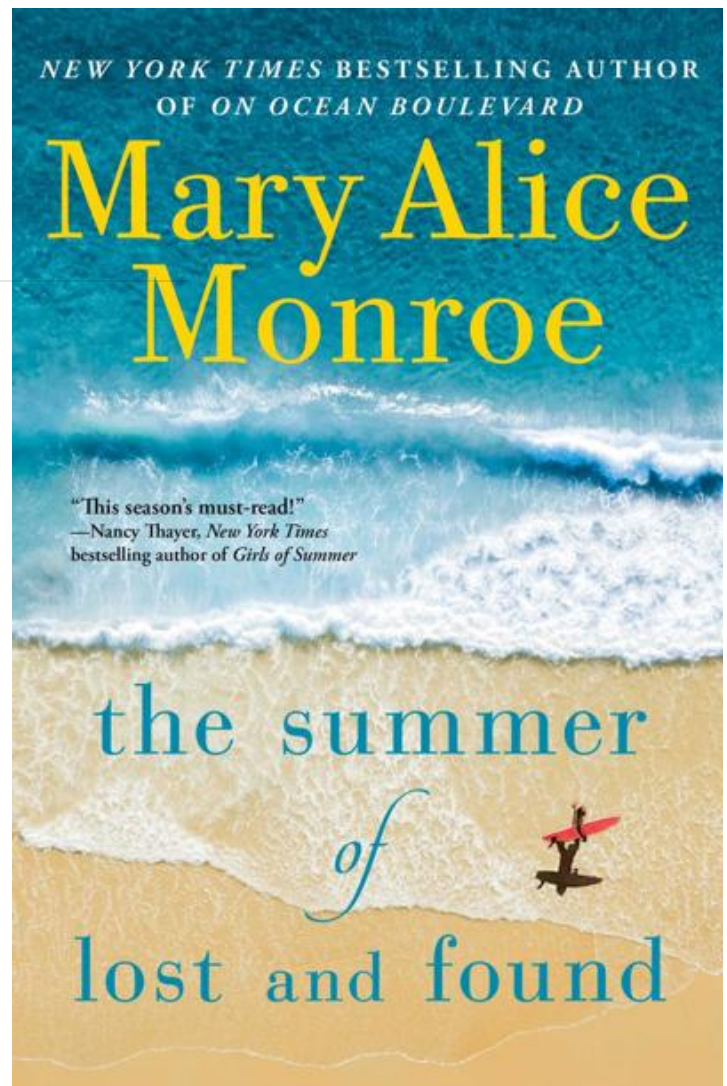
Follow Maura Hogan on Twitter at @msmaurahogan.

MORE INFORMATION

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What I'm doing on my July Fourth staycation



The latest in author Mary Alice Monroe's Beach House series, "The Summer of Lost and Found" hit the shelves in time for summer reads. Gallery Books/Provided

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Maura Hogan is the arts critic at The Post and Courier. She has previously written about arts, culture and lifestyle for The New York Times, Gourmet, Garden & Gun, among other publications.