

Looking in the Mirror

— AN ESSAY BY —

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From the moment my first child was born, everything was different: the way the world sounded, the quality of light, the endless possibilities of both hope and danger. The first time I held her I knew I would try to be the best person I could be in ways that I never had before. I would do everything in my power to protect her. There was no limit to how far I would go.

That was the moment my new novel, *Southernmost*, was born, too, although I would not know that for a couple of decades. Over the next twenty years, while learning how to be a parent, I would also learn more about myself. I'd feel the life-altering power of loving someone else more than yourself. I'd know the vengeful anger that rose toward someone who hurt my child. Most of all I'd discover that the primary emotion involved with being a parent is powerlessness, of ultimately realizing that there is only so much you can protect your child from, no matter how hard you try. I always knew I'd do anything for my child, but most of the time parents are stuck in a purgatory of having no control at all.

So, it is always a great shock for me to hear of people who make the choice to reject their children who come out to them. I cannot wrap my mind around that notion. My parents certainly struggled with my being gay, but they never turned their backs on me. On paper, you'd think they would. They're working-class rural Southerners who have attended a Pentecostal Holiness (read: fundamentalist) church my whole life. Yet they allow my husband and me to cook Thanksgiving dinner for them, they love us both, and they acknowledge us as a couple.

Around the time I started writing *Southernmost*, the debate about marriage equality became a part of the everyday national conversation, and I saw my own community and family divided. Even though I am from the kind of

place they always use on the news to represent homophobia, racism, or misogyny, there was a discussion there, too. Not simply a door slammed in the face of the issue. People like my parents were trying to reconcile the religious dogma they had been taught all their lives with the fact that they loved their children. Other folks were not ever going to budge.

After marriage equality passed, there was a lot of talk about the way the country was divided. Rural Southerners were almost always painted as vehemently against marriage equality—and progress on most social issues. For many Americans, the South is the Other, but in my experience, the South is a mirror, a microcosm of the rest of the country. While things may sometimes seem more pronounced or blatant here—and that's certainly been the case in the way people have voted here lately—the fact is that the South is a whole lot like the rest of the country. Injustice and intolerance exist here, and everywhere. The South is changing, but resisting those changes with all its last, dying gasps, just as the rest of the country is. The South has a plethora of problems—the legacy of racism chief among them—but when people blame all the racism, homophobia, and sexism on one part of the country, it lets the rest of the nation off the hook.

I wanted to write a novel that stared into that mirror with intention. By looking at this microcosm of America called the South with such focus, we can more clearly see our whole nation in a moment when we are in dire need of understanding one another. That can be best done through a human story.

After years of writing, my characters—Asher Sharp and his son, Justin, and all the other characters in *Southernmost*—became so real that they helped me to better understand my place and my time. Asher and Justin travel across the South in search of sanctuary and hoping to find Asher's gay brother, whom Asher had rejected ten years earlier. Their trouble is fueled by the evolving South, and, by extension, the changing nation. Asher is trying his best to be true to his beliefs, but also to the people he loves. He makes a lot of mistakes along the way, as we all do. But parenting is about learning, about evolving, about realizing our mistakes and using them to become better parents—and better people. Which is, hopefully, what we are all attempting.