A STORY DEEP WITHIN HER:
Alumna Sena Jeter Naslund sets latest novel, Four Spirits, amid the civil rights strife of her native Birmingham

When Sena Jeter was 10 years old in Birmingham in 1953, she sat in her parents’ living room on a sweltering afternoon having an out-of-body experience.

“There was no air conditioning,” she recalls.

In her hands she clutched a magical object of the most ancient sort—a book. It was the novel, Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and the fictional setting was winter. Young Sena began to shiver.

“I realized I was trembling,” the grownup Sena, recalling the moment, says at her home in Louisville, where she writes and teaches. “I thought, ‘It’s these words that make me feel this way. I’d like to do that one day!’”

Fifty years later, with five books of fiction published and her sixth, Four Spirits, due in September, Sena Jeter Naslund—a gentle-voiced woman with dark hair and fair complexion—has made good on her childhood yearning.

Her 1999 novel, Ahab's Wife, a retelling of Melville’s classic through the eyes of the whaling captain’s wife, was a critical and commercial success, named by Time magazine as one of the five best novels of the year and honored as a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection.

Her new novel flows out of the civil rights era in Birmingham in 1963. Like Ahab's Wife, a hefty novel that swept up 19th-century American history, nautical lore, slavery, religion, and perilous sea voyages into its story, Four Spirits is panoramic.

Running more than 500 pages, it sets out to make Birmingham the subject and backdrop of a novel that brings to life, at Naslund’s count, 129 characters.

There are true-life figures such as the black civil rights firebrand, the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and those of Naslund’s invention such as Stella Silver, a young white woman coming of age in a traumatized hometown.

The novel takes its title from the morning of Sept. 15, 1963, when a Ku Klux Klan bomb blast tore through the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four girls: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley.

Naslund acknowledges the wealth of nonfiction that has explored the civil rights movement, most notably Diane McWhorter’s Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

But Naslund says there has yet to be a major novel to give life to that heartbreaking time. There is, she says, no War and Peace of the civil rights movement.

Naslund is too modest to claim her novel attains that lofty position. The critics, reading public, and posterity will make any such evaluation. But as a writer she has been growing toward an ever more expansive vision.

Alabama native Howell Raines, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and former executive editor of The New York Times, was Naslund’s classmate at Birmingham-Southern College.

“As long as I’ve known her—and before we formally met,