known of her—she’s been dedicated to the literary life in the most serious, committed way,” Raines says.

“I was always aware of her as someone who knew early on that writing was her métier. That’s not an unusual aspiration among undergraduates, but sticking to it as Sena has is a rare and wonderful thing.”

Young Sena grew up in the Norwood section of Birmingham, the daughter of Marvin Jeter, a physician, and Flora Lee Sims, a musician.

Her father’s people hailed from Helicon in Crenshaw County about halfway between Montgomery and Mobile. It was a place name out of a timeless tale.

“In Greek mythology,” Naslund says, “Helicon was the home of the Muses.”

She remembers her first childhood trip to her father’s home community for two principal reasons.

“My father took the whole family down to the rural area where he had grown up, the family place, Helicon. He wanted us to go there to meet old ‘Aunt’ Charlotte, who had been born into slavery and who had delivered him when he was a baby,” she says.

Marvin Jeter, who hunted in the woods as a boy, also wanted to familiarize his children with guns and let them take turns shooting at trees. Sena was included, despite being young and the only girl. (She has two brothers, Marvin, an archaeologist, and John, an engineer.) The Helicon trip would inspire the prologue to *Four Spirits*.

If her father introduced her to the Old South, it was her mother, a graduate of the Chicago Conservatory of Music, who brought art into her life. Flora Lee Sims played violin and piano. (Sena’s daughter, Flora Naslund, from a former marriage, is named for Flora Lee. Sena is married to John C. Morrison, an atomic physicist. The couple were visiting professors last spring at the University of Montevallo.)

“I heard classical music randomly all through the day,” says Naslund, who became a serious student of cello and often uses music in her stories. Two of the characters in *Four Spirits* are cellists; a third plays classical piano.

She describes herself as an “unusual” child, prone to fits of temper.

“It consoled me that Jo March, in *Little Women*, also had a very bad temper and had this struggle,” the author says. “She was a writer.”

Naslund became devoutly religious, setting her sights on becoming a medical missionary in Africa. She felt a “strong moral imperative” to communicate her religious beliefs to others, she says.

When she went to Birmingham-Southern College, “a very liberal, wonderful school,” she says, her “fundamentalism and fanaticism” melted away.

Among her classmates at Birmingham-Southern, in addition to Raines, was Charles Gaines, the novelist and screenwriter whose two early works, *Stay Hungry* and *Pumping Iron*, helped bring Arnold Schwarzenegger into national visibility in the movie versions.

From his home in Nova Scotia, Gaines says:

“I think one of the reasons Birmingham turned out a good many writers of our vintage was that the civil rights movement activity in the city of that time provided a sort of Joycean soul crucible that drove a lot of pens into action. If not in direct response to it at the time, at least in the indirect responses of thinking, on paper, about the nature of the place we were all from.”

Gaines also credits the English Department of Birmingham-Southern of that day with “making us feel, rightly or wrongly, that we could slay giants.”

The story was buried deep within her.

In 1957, while Naslund was a student at all-white Phillips High School in Birmingham, the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth attempted to enroll his children. Shuttlesworth was outside the school; Sena was inside but learned what happened.

“Shuttlesworth had called the police and told them he was coming, expecting protection, but they apparently had tipped off Klan buddies and the police were nowhere to be seen,” she says.

“A small group of white men were there with bicycle chains, and he was beaten. His wife was stabbed in the thigh. The attackers escaped.

“I was horrified that this had happened outside of my school and I felt guilty. I thought, ‘If I had known, would I have gone out the front door and told them to stop?’ That was clearly the moral imperative for anybody who found out.”

Sena turned to a beloved speech teacher, Miss White, to help her understand what had occurred.

Miss White leaned across her desk, pointed to the skin of her forearm, and said there were those who believed “the pigment, the color in your skin,” determined how smart you were and what you were like.