Miss White proclaimed, “It has nothing to do with it!”

“That codified the idea for me that there was extreme racial prejudice and it was the result of great ignorance, stupidity, and fear,” Naslund says. “As a teacher she was saying to the class that segregation was wrong. I was electrified by her succinct enunciation of that idea.”

But the 15-year-old schoolgirl was in for a shock.

“I could hardly wait to talk to my friends in the hall in the few minutes between changing classes. I asked them, ‘Did you hear what Miss White said? Let’s talk about this. She’s right!’ They all stepped back; they all receded.”

The church bomb would explode six years later.

To research Four Spirits, Naslund went to Birmingham’s Civil Rights Institute, read books about the era, did “body research” by going to locations and absorbing impressions, went to the public library to read old newspapers and files.

“The library research,” she says, “uncovered so many atrocities.”

One horror was the Klan’s kidnapping and castration of a black man, Judge Aaron, soon after Shuttlesworth tried to integrate Phillips High. The scene found its way into her novel.

In doing her research, Naslund says she had to stop her work by 3 in the afternoon, “or I couldn’t sleep at night. I’d toss and turn and writhe.”

“When I say I didn’t know things like that were happening, who do I sound like? I sound like an ordinary German citizen when the Nazis were taking over and carting off the Jews.”

She explains, “When I was growing up in Birmingham in the early ’60s, I promised myself I would write a book about the civil rights movement, especially in Birmingham, because I was a witness and to some extent a participant.”

Three years ago, Naslund was in Sydney, Australia, promoting Ahab’s Wife and the announcement rocketed across the ocean that the suspects in the 1963 bombing were to be tried. (Ex-Klansmen Tommy Blanton in spring 2001, and Bobby Frank Cherry in spring 2002, would be convicted of murder.)

Naslund picked up a copy of the Sydney News.

“There was the picture of the four little girls, which I knew so well by heart. There I was half a world away, almost as far away from Birmingham as you could get, and I pick up the newspaper and it’s screaming from my subconscious.”

Outside Naslund’s study at her gracious home in Old Louisville, magnolia trees frame the bay window looking out to the street.

“Louisville is the Northern edge of the Southern magnolia,” she says, taking her place at her computer screen by the window.

Near her is a copy of W.B. Yeats’ poetry open on a divan, a painting of a lighthouse with water crashing over rocks, a bookshelf filled with books by friends and editions of her own.

On a chair is a tower of paper—copies of the manuscript of Four Spirits.

On the street, visible through her window, is a fountain where water cascades and gurgles, an ornate, 19th-century iron fountain of Venus Rising from the Sea.

Having once wished to live at the sea, especially after spending time on the Massachusetts island of Nantucket researching and writing parts of Ahab’s Wife, Naslund says the fountain is her “artificial sea.”

The fountain, she says, provides inspiration and solace, especially while she had been composing the emotionally charged Four Spirits.

Naslund is known to be a gifted teacher. She went on from Birmingham to obtain her master’s degree and doctorate in English from the University of Iowa. She has daily responsibilities with the titles distinguished teaching professor at the University of Louisville and program director of the master of fine arts in writing program at Spalding University.

She has family, colleagues, and friends to whom she also devotes her time.

Then there is the world of her imagination, one that turns fountains into oceans and can still feel the shiver of winter on a hot summer’s day. It brings to her window even the vista of Birmingham 40 years ago.

Four Spirits unfolds on the observation balcony at the feet of the famous Vulcan statue. A fictional college couple, Darl and Stella, have gone there on a date. Civil rights demonstrations in Kelly Ingram Park are taking place but the city appears deceptively peaceful on this May afternoon:

“Darl pointed to the rectangular finger of the Comer Building, 21 stories tall, Birmingham’s lonely skyscraper. Down in the valley, the sweep of buildings was scarred with a haze from the steel mills. After finding the Comer Building, they look west and north searching for the parks, Woodrow Wilson Park, adjacent to the beautiful library (only for whites) and a few blocks away, Kelly Ingram Park, for Negroes (no library). The demonstrations were launched toward City Hall from the Negro park. But trees, already in full leaf, blocked their view, even with binoculars, of the violent attack of Bull Connor’s police on the freedom demonstrators.”

The story continues with a reflection by the fictional Stella that resonates of the author’s own coming of age in a city whose struggle was hers, too.

“Suddenly Stella felt like a coward. If she wanted to see, she should have the nerve to go downtown. If she wanted to participate … But the idea frightened her too much.”

The four little girls killed by the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing.

SOUTHERN Features