

ARMCHAIR TRAVELS

BY BETTY SHARP



Sometimes the only vacation available is an imaginary one. The budget's low weather's uncooperative, time off isn't going to happen. But you can transport yourself with a good book and get away, if only for a while. I don't know how many writers live in the Hill Country, but there may be as many books set in the Hill Country as there are bluebonnets. That could be an exaggeration. What isn't an exaggeration is that there are hundreds of choices with Hill Country background: ghost stories, adventures, biographies, autobiographies, histories, true tales or tall tales. I've mentioned some of my favorites in previous columns.

Hill Country romances are easy to find because they all have "cowboy" in the title. The rugged rancher-veterinarian-songwriter drives his crewcab into town and runs into—sometimes literally—the local beauty. She's a decorator-pastry chef-dog trainer. Sparks fly. Treachery or misfortune keep them apart until by luck they end up in a muddy corral together, grooming a rescued horse for the upcoming cutting (reining, halter, barrel) competition. You know what's going to happen next. These lightweight romances are lots of fun, especially with a glass of Texas wine in hand.

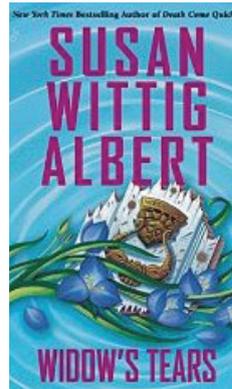
Although I'll admit to reading romances, it's Hill Country mysteries that are my favorite. I love the China Bayles series by Susan Wittig Albert, who lives near Austin. China Bayles lives in nearby fictional Pecan Springs.

Disgusted with her career as a lawyer, China leaves Houston for the Hill Country. In between tripping over dead bodies, she grows herbs organically, sells them in her shop, Thyme and Seasons, and opens a tea room with her best buddy, Ruby Wilcox.

Each mystery has interesting characters, romance, surprising twists, and occasional commentary on contemporary issues, such as Austin sprawl. Botanical history is intertwined with fantastic recipes featuring

fresh herbs. Characters often end up in real Hill Country restaurants, or ones you wish were real. After reading awhile, you'll be ready to go out and eat or cook, if you have the energy.

Ms. Albert veers southeast of the Hill Country in her latest China Bayles mystery, *Widow's Tears*. Read it on a dark and stormy night. Leaving China in charge of their Pecan Spring businesses, Ruby Wilcox drives to Fayette County, stopping at Royers Café in Round Top. She buys a buttermilk pie with chocolate chips, pecans and coconut for her friend, Claire. Who wouldn't want to try that pie? Ruby hopes the pie will cheer up Claire, who has inherited a dilapidated, haunted Victorian mansion. Is there any other kind of inherited Victorian mansion? Ruby inherited her grandmothers' psychic ability, so Claire hopes Ruby can communicate with her resident ghost.



Widow's Tears is more than a cozy mystery, however. Intermingled with Claire's problems is the gripping story of a mother and her children caught in the September 1900 Galveston hurricane. Most Texans know of this horrific event but in *Widow's Tears* you'll live it. You feel fear, hear wind, smell filthy mud. You see gray waters oozing into the house as the mother moves her children upstairs, hoping her husband returns. You'll take a deep breath when you get to retreat north to Fayette and Travis Counties. I guarantee you'll feel like you have been away.