More than a decade after *Midnight* exposed the skeletons in Savannah’s closet, *The South* goes in search of one of the book’s most elusive characters.

**SEARCHING FOR**

WROUGHT BY ROB OLDMAN

I push another sticky clump of cobwebs out of my face and step deeper into the thick brush that envelopes the dark bayou of Beaufort County. This is a mission. I’m not hacking my way through this rattlesnake-infested riot of vegetation for the fun of it: I am seeking the grave of the Dr. Buzzard—perhaps the most famous root doctor to ever throw down a hex.

Why am I looking for the hidden burial ground of a long-dead juju man? Because in a roundabout way, I am searching for “Minerva”—the feisty old voodoo priestess made internationally famous in John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. In that book, Minerva is painted to be the common law wife of the late, great Dr. Buzzard, so it only seems proper that I pay the good doctor a visit. Now all I have to do is find his damn grave.

★★★★

“Find Minerva,” says my editor over what would be my last crisp-linen lunch for a while.

“Who’s Minerva?” I ask, blushing with naiveté.

“She’s the voodoo lady in Midnight that puts the hex on people for Jim Williams during his murder trials.”

“But is she real?” There are detractors who claim that much of *Midnight*’s action was perhaps embellished by Berendt’s agile imagination...

“Who knows?” she says with a sigh. “Go find out.”

The assignment sounds simple enough; all I have to do is find the old woman and get her to talk. I think

**MINERVA**
Witchy Woman: This photo by Jeff Riedel, is one of the only known photographs of Minerva. It appeared in a 2004 special edition of Life Magazine, which revised several Midnight characters.

PHOTO BY JEFF RIEDEL
COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES
Throughout this journey, the person I wish I could talk to most—like a trusted friend I’ve never actually met—is Berendt himself. All along, I’ve told myself I’ll resist trying to contact him until—like a trusted friend—I really, truly need him.

back to her character in the book and movie—talking to squirrels for goodness sake—and wonder just what sort of weirdness I’ve gotten myself into.

In Midnight, which is set over a period of time that spans the 1980s. Minerva shuffles about the dark night, sprinkling generous portions of grave dirt, chicken bones and various exotic powders with wonderful names like “High John the Conqueror” over the well-manicured lawns of those local legal eagles who are out to convict antiques dealer Jim Williams of murder. Minerva is quite the memorable character, if only because she operates so far outside of most folk’s comfort zone; after all, how many root doctors do you personally know?

Midnight’s massive success was the shot heard ’round the publishing world, and the bullet that killed the young Danny Hansford continues to ricochet around Savannah’s psychic milieu some twenty-seven years later. If there’s truth behind Berendt’s words, Minerva is incalculable at best.

An acquaintance puts me on to an eccentric woman who runs a Midnight-themed tour company in Savannah. She’s also Minerva’s self-appointed “carer-taker,” so I ring her up. Right off the bat she politely brushes off my request, that smooth, casual way Southern women are taught as little girls. She isn’t giving up the goods.

“Do you know the voodoo priestess Minerva from Midnight?” I ask her.

“Yes I do, but she’s a very old and very private lady,” she returns.

“I’m writing an article about root doctors and I’d love to get Minerva’s take on the whole thing,” I tell her, my frustration swelling slightly.

“I’m very sorry, Minerva does not do interviews. Like I said, she’s very private.”

My first dead end. In a perfect world, I’d ring her up, pop on over for a spell and maybe roll some bones with her. But this is not to be. One thing I learn with each passing day is that nothing comes easy when skipping around the dark fringes of Minerva’s shadowy world.

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At the public library on Bull Street in Savannah I come across a mid-90s A&E documentary about the whole Midnight phenomenon. One of the video’s Midnight “experts” is Dr. John Duncan: He is an eloquent gentleman who sports a gray professorial beard, employs that liqueur-smooth Lowcountry drawl that Hollywood actors always make exaggerated stabs at (and usually get dreadfully wrong), and exudes a perfect balance of hospitable charm and polite distance that is the hallmark of Southern gentility. I find his store, V & J Duncan Antique Maps, Prints & Books, just off of Monterey Square—where Minerva reportedly kept watch over Jim Williams’ Mercer House—and drop in for a chat.
"Oh, we used to see her occasionally," Duncan tells me. "She signed a few books for us, but we found that Savannah was swimming in fakes so we stopped selling them." He retreats to the back of the store, returns and drops a hardback first edition of Midnight, signed by John Berendt, into my lap. He points to the corner of the front page. In what looks like blood-red crayon and the shaky penmanship of a demon-possessed child is scrawled the single name: "Minerva."

"You see," Duncan points out, "Berendt’s signature is real, but Minerva’s is an obvious fake."

"Minerva’s got quite the foul mouth, you know," he continues, regaling me with a tale of the time a television news anchor was filming a segment at his shop. Minerva just happened to be there that day and the newsman asked if he could film her and she harangued him up and down. "She gave him a fit!" injects John’s wife, Ginger, from across the room. "She did not want her photograph taken and just really let him have it." I confess that I, too, am having problems convincing her caretaker to make an introduction to Minerva. "That’s typical," Dr. Duncan says as he leans back in his chair and explains that mine is not the first rebuff. "Why, just last year a French documentary film crew was sent packing, this after traveling all the way from Paris to interview Minerva. The caretaker just called it off."

I wasn’t the first to be rejected. If the French could take it, so could I, at least it wasn’t personal.

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I find myself becoming more captivated by Minerva the more tangled this web becomes. Dr. Duncan suggests where I might look for Minerva in Beaufort, and I blast over the Talmadge Bridge, cruising those picturesque streets of Beaufort looking for a not-too-familiar face. I’m beginning to feel like the X-Files’ Fox Mulder, tirelessly looking for UFOs in the night sky—it is just one ebony void, one dead end after another.

What strikes me as odd is how every single person featured in The Book seemed to embrace the spotlight it bathed him or her in at one time or another. Everyone, that is, except Minerva. This only sparks my curiosity more: What kind of root doctor doesn’t want money? Through the grapevine, I am told she is ailing and living on government aid. She plays the lottery in Midnight—why doesn’t she cash in the real Powertell now?

With the help of a sharp-eyed librarian named Danielle Landry at the Beaufort County Library I lay my eyes on my first picture of Minerva in a special issue Life magazine from 2004—a "where are they now" that walked down memory lane with such venerated Midnight characters as the Lady Chablis ten years after the fact.

A picture, A root on which to chew.

Like a boy looking for his lost dog, I show the picture all over Savannah, Beaufort and remote St. Helena Island. Have you seen this woman? And yet, still, that doughy face, colorful robe and sinister staff she holds determinedly in her hand don’t seem to ring any bells.

"Maybe this woman was someone the magazine paid to dress up for the occasion—I mean, who would really know?" posits a
I tell Buzzy that from what I hear, his grandpa was a smooth operator with the ladies. Perhaps Minerva was his skeptical friend over beers at Hang Fire. But there is a faction with whom I’ve spoken that swears up and down that Minerva is, in fact, real. I dash over to Bouhan, Williams & Levy, the law office of Sonny Seiler, who represented Williams in his trials and set for a photo by the same photographer in that same Life pictorial. In full irony, I arrive to his office under circumstances similar to the ones John Berendt first came to meet Seiler and his beloved bulldog, Uga; as I’m questioning Seiler about the woman believed to be Minerva, he’s distracted by the opening game of the University of Georgia football season. Still, he confirms that the woman in the picture is the one I seek. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, he reaches into his desk and pulls out a snapshot of he and Minerva, taken around the same time as the Life photo.

The roots are warming up. Throughout this journey, the person I wish I could talk to most—is Berendt himself. All along, I’ve told myself I’ll resist trying to contact him until—a trusted friend—I really, truly need him.

It is becoming obvious that all the roads to solving the riddle of Minerva pass by the hidden grave of Dr. Buzzard. Minerva spends a whole bit of time hammering on about Dr. Buzzard this or Dr. Buzzard that in Midnight. According to Minerva, he hounds her incessantly, keeping her po' by depriving her of the good lottery numbers. I was standing smack dab in Buzzard country, and while I get blank stares when I mention Minerva, everyone knows about Dr. Buzzard.

Working the root for money can court some real world legal trouble. These people run silent and deep because they practice medicine with no license; they deal strictly in cash (which always piques the interest of the lawman), and I’m told there just might be some cultivation of psilocybin mushrooms to help them pry open the creepy doors of perception. All strong reasons to hide in plain sight, and avoiding white magazine writers sniffing around their turf tops the list of things they should definitely do.

Crossing one of Beaufort County’s many low-slung causeways, I spot a middle-aged black man, sweating as he pedals an old ten-speed bike across the bridge. Slowing to a crawl, I crank down my window and ask him: Where might I find a good root doctor around here?

“You should to talk to Buzzy,” he says quite nonchalantly and hardly looking up, as if he was telling me where to buy gas.

“As in Dr. Buzzard?” I ask. My eyes grow wide when I hear the familiar name—is he this close?

“Nah, it’s his son, I think, or maybe it’s his grandson. I don’t know, it’s one of them...just follow this road down...”

The roots are twisting.

I pull up to a modest brick house set back a ways under a canopy of oak and see a little sign sticking-tacked on the door, containing office hours and a phone number. The doctor should be “in” according to his sign. I rap on the door; no answer. I scrawl the number on my hand. Maybe I’ll leave a note? No. Better to not leave any potential talent with my handwriting lying around a known root doctor’s laboratory.

Dr. Buzzard’s grandson allegedly carries on the old man’s trade, though he won’t actually cop to it when I call him up later that week.

“I can’t discuss that,” he says.
He opens up a tad when I ask him about his family’s relationship with Midnight’s famed Minerva; he says, definitively, that they are not related. “They try to make it like she is, but she ain’t.”

I tell Buzzy that from what I hear, his grandpa was a smooth operator with the ladies. Perhaps Minerva was his mistress?

“Well,” he says, “he was about 87-years-old when he died [in 1947], so she must-a-liked them old as hell.”

Back when Dr. Buzzard—real name Stephenie Robinson—was creeping about the Beaufort County courthouse on a regular basis, he was the most notorious root doctor, bar none, to ever lay down a bad hex on the East Coast. His “gift” came from his father, who arrived in South Carolina in chains on a slave boat. To be on the business end of Dr. Buzzard’s purple-spectacled gaze was to court disaster, and it’s said that his mere presence in a courtroom was all it took to guarantee a fast acquittal. For a poor Gullah dirt farmer down on his luck, it was a much better deal to hire a root doctor than hope some slick white country lawyer might tip the rusty scales of justice in favor of a black man in a Southern courtroom.

What exactly is a root doctor? Well he ain’t no medical doctor, that’s for sure. A “root” is a hex of sorts—a spell cast on some unfortunate soul by a practitioner with “the sight.” Daufuskie Island-based author Roger Pinckney, whose father was the coroner of Beaufort County for years, explains: “They use goober dust—dirt off a grave. Good men for good, bad man for bad. Gathered at “dead time”—a half hour before midnight for good, or a half hour after for bad.” Dr. Buzzard did well during his long reign. He lined his pockets by keeping the true believers scared out of their wits from his roost near the Oaks Plantation on St. Helena Island.

Beaufort County writer and consummate Southern gentleman Pierre McGowan says his father, Sam, whom he wrote about in The Gullah Postman, told him that Dr. Buzzard would show up at the post office every week to fetch his voluminous stack of mail. He dressed like a deacon and was driven there by one of his sons. He would then open the stack of letters, which had been sent to him from all over the country, if the envelope held cash he would stuff it in his pocket but if it were a check, he’d rip it up and toss it. “Dr. Buzzard was no fool,” says McGowan. “He left no paper trail for the IRS to follow.”

Still, all the root elixirs in the world could not cure Dr. Buzzard of the stomach cancer that claimed his life in 1947, and thus began the next twisted chapter in his great story. No one really knows where he is buried or even if he was even buried at all. There are many theories: He’s tucked away in a churchyard, he’s buried in the woods somewhere, and then there’s my favorite. The grisly yarn that his body was “cut up and passed around” and distributed to the other conjure folk on the island. In his book Blue Roots, Pinckney quotes a friend who remarks, “Can you imagine being a conjureman in possession of a box of Dr. Buzzard’s metacarpals? You could be elected mayor of Savannah.”

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And this is how I wound up knee-deep in this voodoo no man’s land, swatting gummy, sticky spider webs from my eyelashes like a kitten batting a feather. I emerge from the tick-laden bush with the 80-year-old...
McGowan, who valiantly guided me in there to find Buzzard’s grave, and he is as stumped as I am. “I know this is where it is... I’ve been here before and seen it plenty of times,” he says, wiping the sweat from his furrowed brow. I pull Blue Roost from out of my back pocket and flip to the last chapter, which details Pinckney’s own hunt for Dr. Buzzard’s final resting place. He mentions the water tower that I am now standing in front of, and how he’d stumbled around those very woods for a good six hours trying to find the grave, but to no avail. I am clearly running in the sort of mystical circles that protect the root doctors and their shady business from people like myself.

Minerva’s near, I can practically hear her cackle, mocking my quest. Dr. Buzzard is laughing, too, for as any good root worker knows, it’s supposed to be a secret. It’s supposed to be off limits. If the moss curtain is really pulled back then the old juju loses its juice. I climb into his truck and as we pull onto a busy Highway 21 he curses the conga line of new arrivals to St. Helena Island. “My daddy would roll over in his grave if he could see this island now.”

Cruising across the river back into Savannah, just as Jim Williams did in his green Jaguar as he returned from Minerva’s Garden of Good and Evil, I resolve the time has come to call on the man himself. I have obtained John Berendt’s personal phone number from a Savannah friend; I pick up the phone, dial the number and ever as gracious as the words he poured onto the pages of Midnight, he begins to tell me about Minerva.

“She’s real,” states Berendt from his home in New York City. It sounds like he has a cold.

I give him the usual rundown and mention the Life photograph of Minerva.

“It’s the only photograph you are going to see,” he says. I do not mention Sonny’s photograph.

“It was a surprise to me that Life got her to agree to pose. It was the first time that she had ever come forward publicly to acknowledge that she was Minerva.”

“So,” I prod. “The whole scene in the book about driving over to Beaufort to see Minerva with Jim Williams in his Jaguar, with his vodka and tonic in hand, nine shiny dimes and the water that hadn’t run through any pipe, all so she can lay down the hex on the Savannah District Attorney...that all really happened?”

“Jim took me there right away when I started working on [Midnight],” Berendt begins. “She was one of the first people I met. It was an evening that I’ll never forget. But Jim did not really believe in [voodoo]. I am very careful to say so in the book. He liked the energy, their mental energy. He was not a believer. She would spend her time concentrating on his case, so that, to him, was valuable. How? I don’t know.”

Then Berendt, with slight exasperation in his voice says, “I was told by someone in Savannah that you were told that she was totally made up.”

I was told that. And I had begun to believe it.

“I don’t have that kind of imagination,” he assures me, refuting claims that Minerva had been his creation, nothing more than fictional seasoning. “You’ve been told a lot of things that are not true in life. It does not surprise me,” he continues. “I was told last week that Chablis is dead. I have heard that rumor many times over the
last eight years and she is very much alive. But you hear these rumors all the time. I had never heard one that [Minerva] does not exist. She does exist and has met a whole lot of people. I doubt you can get to see her, though. Maybe you can. I don’t know that she would help you. She’s a very mysterious kind of woman. She’s very old you know? She was old in the 60s."

And is Minerva her real name?

"No," he says. "She asked me not to use [her real name]. I was talking with a friend in Savannah and I said, ‘I can’t get her to use her real name, but that doesn’t really matter, what shall I call her? ’ And he said, ‘My maid has a great name,’ and I said, ‘what is it?’ He said, ‘Minerva.’ "

"Did you really spend much time with her?" I ask him.

"I saw her the times that I mentioned in the book," Berendt says. "I’ve since seen her many times. But for a long time she didn’t want me to tell [about her]. I wanted her to come on the Today Show with us. Nothing that I could say to her could get her to do it."

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Midnight is a force of nature. While a quarter of a century has passed since many of the events portrayed in the book took place, it, and all its various characters—Minerva included—are permanently imbedded in Savannah’s lush landscape and lexicon. Perhaps she still visits the garden to commune with her old flame? Nine shiny dimes filling my pockets and some variation on a vodka tonic in hand, I head back to Beaufort one last time.

There is nothing written of Minerva, or any of the other names I’ve been told she operates under, working the root in the old stomping grounds of Dr. Buzzard. People who know of such dark arts claim no knowledge of her—aside from her role in Midnight. Still, the women in the picture is real, and according to those who knew her, she still haunts those same overgrown South Carolina stomping grounds, very much in the flesh and blood.

Dorothy Kingerly, Jim Williams’ sister, tells me that while she never met Minerva, or ever heard her brother mention the woman, she confirms it was in her brother’s curious nature to be fascinated by someone like Minerva. From what I gather from all who knew of the relationship, Minerva was just an eccentric woman who often sat on a wooden bench in Monterey Square across from Mercer House, feeding pigeons and squirrels, who Jim took a shine to. He occasionally gave her a little money and in return she’d "work the root" for him. Maybe it worked. He was finally acquitted.

Back in the shaded swamps of Beaufort County, miles and miles from the comforts of Savannah, I’ve ventured to the place I’ve constructed in my mind’s eye—like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle—to be Minerva’s garden. You pass countless faces—dark as soot, wrinkled and smudged by time—all along these old roads, dotted with majestic oaks, palmettos and a blanket of angry kudzu. I feel a remote presence as a primordial mist floats in over the marsh. My watch strikes the beating heart of the dead hour. I am not alone.

—TS