
Loraine Despres

The Scandalous Summer of Sissy LeBlanc
ISBN13: 9780060505882

Q: How did you conceive of *The Southern Belle's Handbook*?

A: *The Southern Belle's Handbook* is the culmination of generations of Southern wisdom. Growing up in the South you naturally get these messages from your mother, who got them from her mother, who got them from hers. These messages are all about how to be attractive and take your place in society, which is basically how to make those around you feel comfortable and important, and also how to take care of yourself.

My favorite rules are: "It's OK for a woman to know her place. She just shouldn't stay there" (Rule Number 48); "You have to take your life into your own hands, otherwise you can be damned sure, someone else will take it in theirs" (Rule Number 32); and "You can't change the past, but a smart girl won't let that stop her" (Rule Number 101).

Q: Who are your favorite Southern writers? How have they influenced your work?

A: William Faulkner, of course, for his mesmerizing style and because, as he said in his Nobel Prize Speech, he writes "to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before." I was knocked-out by Harry Crews' novel, *Body*. I loved his tough, bare-bones style and his looney characters as he took us into the world of female body builders. Rebecca Wells in her novels, *Little Altars Everywhere* and *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, created a spot-on picture of small-town Southern women of my mother's generation.

But my real inspiration didn't come from a Southern writer, but a French one, Gustave Flaubert, the master of precision and irony. As I agonized over *The Scandalous Summer of Sissy LeBlanc* and wondered if anyone would care about the comic plight of a woman trapped in a bad marriage and stuck in a town too small for her, I was emboldened by the image of Emma Bovary, another small town girl who dreams of romance.

Q: How do you define a southern belle? Are you a southern belle?

A: The days when her biggest concern was when to wear white shoes is over. A modern southern belle doesn't even have to be southern. She's a woman of great charm, who knows what she wants and has a strategy on how to get it. A true southern belle takes care of herself, and doesn't let the bastards grind her down. That's something I aspire to.

Q: Having lived both in the south and on the west coast, do you find that there are in fact differences in how individuals relate to each other?

A: I can't generalize for everyone, but even today my friends in Hollywood and New York are all focused on hard work and success. My southern friends tend to be a little more laid back and friendly. In Louisiana, entertaining and having a good time is a priority. The Cajuns in south Louisiana say about inordinate ambition, "Chéri, if you can't eat it and you can't love it, what good is it?"

Q: Were there any skills you developed while writing for television that eased the challenge of writing a novel?

A: Television writing taught me discipline and gave me confidence in my ability to write dialogue and to shape a scene, leading the reader into the unexpected. Screen writing also taught me how to keep the story moving because before anything else, I wanted *The Scandalous Summer of Sissy LeBlanc* to be a page-turner.

For more background and new rules to *The Southern Belle's Handbook*, drop by [Loraine Despres's web site](#). She'd love to hear from you.