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Betty Sweet Tells All
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Q: What is the significance of the title *Betty Sweet Tells All*? What is your character Betty Sweet getting off her chest to speak in this book?

A: For the two years it took me to write the novel, the working-title was *Vital Signs*. I thought it was perfect since Betty was not only a nurse, she was showing definite signs of life despite everything she'd been through. Then a day before the book went to press I was told that Robin Cook had used that title back in the 1980s. I had one day to come up with something new. I'm not good at titles so the first dozen or so I came up with were really bad and finally one that we all liked, *Betty Sweet Tells All*.

Betty finally comes to terms with a secret she's kept for 38 years. She realizes that for all those years she's allowed guilt and fear to stunt her life. She'd been her own judge and jury and had given herself a lifetime-sentence of solitary confinement. Now she understands that it's time to forgive herself so she can move on with her life and the possibility of finding happiness with Charlie Love.

Q: In *Betty Sweet Tells All*, gossip, sin, and retribution seem to play important roles in shaping characters' motivations. What do you find interesting about these themes?

A: In small towns gossip is a form of entertainment. In small bible-belt towns gossip, sin and retribution are the major forms of entertainment.

I find it interesting that the worst gossips in town couldn't slander my characters any more than they slander themselves. Most of my 'sinners' beat up on themselves so badly it's almost a relief when they decided to let the chips fall where they may even if it 'ruins' their lives. As Shirley from the Curl and Swirl says, "I tiptoed around the gossips for years and despised myself for trying to stay on their good side. But the thing is, they don't have a good side. I know it's scary being ruind, I mean, deep down through-and-through ruind, but it could be kind of freeing."

Q: You portray divorce and infidelity with humor and sympathy for the characters involved. Why did you decide to treat such serious subjects with a sense of humor?

A: My characters didn't take their divorces lightly. Maggie stayed in a loveless marriage for 19 years. Betty stayed with an alcoholic husband for four years. I have a lot of sympathy for them because all their lives they put everyone else's comfort and happiness ahead of their own. It took them a long time to realize that they deserved to be happy too.

There are plenty of tears in my novel, but I find humor a great coping mechanism even in the most serious situations so I passed my 'gift' along to my characters.

Q: Are there any special challenges involved in writing a book that tackles four generations of one family?

A: I come from a big family myself and find it fascinating to try to understand the different points of view from just about everyone on just about everything. We're very close, and have never had a major fight, but there are times when we really grate on each other's nerves. Once a year we have a weeklong family reunion at the beach where we rediscover that some of us are smokers while others hate and despise smoke. Some of us use up all the hot water forcing the others to take cold showers. Dad goes for a long father-daughter walk with one sister and only walks for ten minutes with the others. And we think, "Dad always did like her best." By the third day of the reunion the grating on the nerves commences. For instance, once I told a sister that I love Bonnie Raitt. She said, "Bonnie Raitt's a country-western singer." I said, "She is not! I hate country-western and I love Bonnie Raitt. She's a rhythm and blues singer." She said, "Is not!" I said, "Is too!" See what I mean? Two grown women who love each other can be reduced to a childish, "Is not. Is too," argument over just about anything.

So when it comes down to writing about four generations of people with very different personalities just throw them together in a small town, stir things up a bit, and in a year or two or three, you have a novel.

Q: You evoke the milieu of everyday life in the small-town South. What aspects of the extended Sweet clan would be impossible to capture if they were set in another region of America?

A: I was living in Ohio when I started writing my first novel *Maggie Sweet* so I placed my story there and gave her a mid-western accent. But somehow her voice never seemed right. When I gave her a southern accent she not only came to life, she stood up and told me the most personal details of her life and introduced me to her family and friends. I love my characters and their lively accents and colorful country sayings. I can't imagine that they were ever anything but southern.

A while back a southern friend told me that in the north they hide their family eccentrics, but in the south they put them on the front porch for all the world to see. They may not be true, but I couldn't resist writing about a place where people consider that bragging.

Q: Charlie Love seems like the perfect antidote to Betty Sweet's stress and constant familial obligations. When you started writing this book, did you know that a Sweet-Love marriage was in store?

A: Betty was an almost invisible, background character in the *Maggie Sweet* novel. She's been divorced for years and had spent her life keeping her head down, taking care of everyone and always trying to do the right thing. Betty was fifty-seven when I decided she deserved to have a life of her own and to be happy. I knew I wanted her to find love and that the special man would be English. I didn't necessarily plan for them to marry, but the minute I named my character Charlie Love he took on a life of his own and their whole relationship seemed to fall into place.

