



The Bad Behavior of Belle Cantrell

By Loraine Despres
ISBN: 9780060515263

Introduction

Belle Cantrell is a young widow with a rebellious streak (and the future grandmother of Sissy, the heroine of *The Scandalous Summer of Sissy LeBlanc*). With trademark sass and honesty, Loraine Despres takes readers along on a wild ride through Gentry, Louisiana in the summer of 1920. After she murders her husband of 16 years and puts in the proper amount of mourning time, Belle Cantrell kicks off a year that changes Gentry forever. From swimming in her bloomers with a group of suffragettes (and then being sent to jail) to bobbing her hair at the all-male barbershop, Belle is the embodiment of the tumultuous twenties gal who wants to make her own rules.

Questions for Discussion

1. The book opens with the words: "Belle Cantrell felt guilty about killing her husband and she hated that, feeling guilty, that is." You might say the theme of the book is Belle's search for her moral center. Do you view her as moral? Rate her morality on a scale of one to ten. What do you think is most important, chastity or putting yourself on the line for a friend?
2. I spent many, many hours in historical research. What, if anything, was the most interesting thing you learned about life in 1920? Did you learn anything you didn't know about the day women got the vote, the Ku Klux Klan, old cars, how our morals have changed?
3. Did you enjoy reading the historical aspects of the book or would you have preferred to skip that and concentrate on the love story or Belle's bad behavior.
4. In 1920 a wave of narrow-minded intolerance was sweeping the world. Do you feel that time has resonance for our time? How?
5. Which scenes did you find the funniest? Which moved you? Was there a section you couldn't put down? If so where? Did you put down the book and have trouble picking it up? If so where?
6. *The Bad Behavior of Belle Cantrell* celebrates the tie between women of different generations. Discuss the relationship between Belle and Miss Effie. How did it change? What was Belle's relationship with her own mother? How did it change? Do you think their relationship affected Belle's relationship with her own daughter?
7. How did you feel about Belle buying an illegal birth control device and giving it to her unmarried daughter?
8. How does her relationship with Bourrée LeBlanc change during the course of the novel? How does her relationship with Rafe Berlin change?
9. Do you think Belle was foolish or wise to risk so much for love?
10. When the book opens Belle tries to follow the rules of the Primer of Propriety, with her own particular caveats, of course. Plenty of women broke these rules, but they were the standards women worthy of admiration were supposed to follow. They were the "shoulds" of 1920. What are some of the "shoulds" society, fashion magazines, parenting books, health journals, schools, churches, or bosses lay down for women today? Are they more or less onerous?
11. Belle makes up her own rules for her "Girl's Guide to Men and Other Perils of Modern Life." If you had to pick one, which rule did you find the funniest? Appropriate for our time? Would you like to make up your own rule? Would you like to share it?
12. What do you think happened after the book ends? Does Belle stay in Chicago? Does she marry Rafe or return to Gentry and run the farm?

Author Bio

A native of Louisiana, Loraine Despres is a former television writer and international screenwriting consultant. She lives in Beverly Hills, CA.