



WHISTLIN' DIXIE IN A NOR'EASTER

by Lisa Patton

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



A Conversation with Lisa Patton

What was the inspiration for *Whistlin' Dixie in a Nor'easter*?

I really was an innkeeper in Vermont. Even better, a Southern innkeeper in Vermont! After surviving three sub-zero winters, discovering Vermonters don't bury their dead in the winter, suffering from vampire bug bites on the back of my neck, and enjoying a four-week summer where I still had to wear a coat at night, I knew I had a story to write.

How has your personal life experience influenced this book? What similarities do you have with Leelee Satterfield?

The first thing that comes to my mind is the way Southern girls are brought up, at least in my era. We were taught to be agreeable and polite. I've heard people criticize Southern women for not saying what's on their mind. That's because we are taught from a young age to be great hostesses and make everyone feel comfortable. It might not be the best way, but it's what we've learned. Sure, there's a bit of me in Leelee. I get caught up in the same trap of sacrificing my needs for everyone else's and wanting people to like me. Like Leelee, I'm a work in progress. Then again, so are most of my closest friends.

The best thing about Leelee is her fun side. Leelee gets herself into all kinds of messes—largely because of the choices she makes. She's Lucy Ricardoish. I'm the same way and while that sometimes makes for a crazy personal life, it sure produces some rich scenarios for writing.

Are any of those crazy characters (such as Helga) based on people you know?

No doubt the characters in *Whistlin' Dixie* are amalgams of all kinds of people I've known—Leelee's three best friends from Memphis in particular. I named all of

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them, Leelee included, after sorority sisters of mine from Kappa Delta at the University of Alabama. Helga is fashioned a little bit after an old spinster piano teacher I had in grammar school. She's also part Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz* and a lot Cruella de Vil from *101 Dalmatians*. I just love a villain, especially a funny villain. Glenn Close is my dream choice to someday play Helga. And I'm dang good at dreaming; it's gotten me this far!

***Whistlin' Dixie* is a fish-out-of-water story. You mentioned *The Wizard of Oz*. Helga and Leelee are obvious parallels to Dorothy and the witch. Are there others?**

Many. If you are an "Ozzy," the likenesses are easy to spot. If not, they might be subtler. Instead of a tornado, Leelee gets caught up in a nor'easter. Leelee befriends three unlikely characters in her own Land of Oz. There are even a couple of lines of dialogue very similar to the movie. Of course there's Leelee's beloved dog, Gracie. The only thing missing from *Whistlin' Dixie* is an actual wizard. But Leelee's survival symbolizes the wizard inside her. I wasn't intentional with the obvious similarities, it just happened that way.

What other strange things happen in Yankee territory, and how is that different from life in the South?

Oh my. To be Southern and living in Yankee territory is quite an ordeal. Not only does one experience culture shock, but the thermal shock is brutal. Southerners have this idyllic image of the Currier and Ives winter up North. We have no idea what it's like to actually exist in it. We see heaps of snow and think, "How perfectly beautiful!" Actually, shoveling snow and rearranging your life to exist in it is another thing all together—for a Dixie chick anyway.

*About the
Author*

“Leelee is beautiful, inside and out, but her charm is the most endearing thing about her.”

I remember having to see a counselor four months into living in Vermont. He sympathized with my inability to connect right away and explained how the subtle cultural differences would make it hard for me. He was right. Southern women are generally bubbly and very friendly. Certainly, the people up North are more direct and they take longer to get to know, but once a friendship is formed it's there for life—without pretense.

What would you say are some of the positive things that Leelee experiences in the North?

Leelee is forced way out of her comfort zone. The nor'easter is a metaphor for the storm in Leelee's life. While living in Vermont, she learns that she can survive any storm, physical or mental. Leelee develops self-confidence in her ability to earn her own living (without the help of her husband). Several real friendships develop for Leelee in Vermont—unlikely ones at that. She gets to experience some Northern wildlife that she's only dreamed about in the South.

How does Leelee grow and change in your novel? What is a “Southern Belle”—a good thing? Or a detriment?

When someone first reads *Whistlin' Dixie*, they might be perplexed at Leelee's inability to consider her own needs. As the book develops, though, Leelee's metamorphosis becomes evident to everyone. Her girlfriends from home are shocked by her newfound ability to say no and stand up for what she needs. Even Roberta, her housekeeper in Vermont, has been secretly watching Leelee's inner strength and true grit develop.

Leelee is a Southern Belle, but that's a good thing. The dictionary.com definition of a “Southern Belle” is “a beautiful and charming woman from the southern US.” Leelee is beautiful, inside and out, but her charm is the most endearing thing about her.



Can you explain the significance of the song “Into the Mystic” in your book?

First of all, it’s my favorite Van Morrison song, bar none. Romance oozes from each note. Leelee declares it’s her favorite song, too, so there’s another similarity between the two of us. When romance finally touches Leelee again, I thought it would be the perfect song to set the mood for this climactic moment in the story.

I was working for Michael McDonald around the time I wrote the scene with “Into the Mystic” and when he read it he was inspired to record the song on his next CD. He covered it on his 2007 Soul Speak record in honor of Leelee’s romantic dance. Michael’s version is quite dreamy, by the way.

Can you discuss the role of friendship in *Whistlin’ Dixie*?

Friendship equals family to Leelee. Having lost her parents at an early age, and as an only child, Leelee relies on her friends to be a substitute for that sense of belonging and love. Despite her insistence to the contrary, Leelee is definitely naïve. Her entire life, prior to Vermont, has been spent inside a reinforced bubble. Her friends from home, including her childhood nanny, are not only her family but also her advisors. Much to her surprise, Leelee’s time in Vermont produces three more dear friends who become her Vermont kinfolk.

How did you find the time to write this novel, as a single mom of two boys? Is there any message you’d like to give to the single mothers out there who may read this book?

Single motherhood is an enormous job and it leaves very little free time. Stolen moments are responsible for the writing of this book. Late at night, early in the

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*“Find your
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morning before work, halftime on the soccer field, and waiting in the carpool line for the boys—I grabbed all the spare time I could find. That’s why it took me years and years to finish. I dedicate the book to my sons but I also have a dedication to single mothers. They need encouragement and it’s crucial to have hope in difficult situations. My message is to find your heart’s desire and never give up, no matter how impossible it might seem. I know because it happened to me. I have a testimony.



Food for Thought

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Recipes from the Peach Blossom Inn

I'm a sucker for fine gourmet food and I get many of my recipes and ideas from Fine Cooking magazine. Most of the menu items in the book were taken from my own restaurant in Vermont. One of the appetizers, Crabmeat Henry, came from an old historic restaurant in Memphis called Justine's. Readers are invited to visit www.lisapatton.com to learn more!

—Lisa Patton

White Chocolate Mousse with Raspberry Purée

Ingredients:

Mousse

16 ounces high-quality white chocolate, chopped

½ cup unsalted butter

2 cups chilled heavy cream

6 large egg yolks

½ cup sugar

2 tbsp Kirsch

Raspberry Purée

2 cups raspberries

1 tbsp Grand Marnier

1 tbsp sugar

Garnish

White chocolate shavings, mint sprigs, whole raspberries.

Food for
Thought

White Chocolate Mousse with Raspberry Purée

Directions:

Mousse:

Separate eggs into two bowls. Melt chocolate in a double boiler (a metal bowl set over a pan of simmering water, or a glass bowl in a microwave at 50 percent power for 3 to 5 minutes), stirring frequently until smooth. Whisk in butter. Remove from heat and add egg yolks, whipping until smooth. Add Kirsch and mix.

In a separate bowl beat egg whites, slowly adding sugar, until soft peaks form. In another bowl (preferably metal) whip cream until stiff and slowly fold into egg white/sugar mixture.

Fold $\frac{1}{3}$ of the egg white and whip cream mixture into the chocolate. Then fold that new mixture back into remaining egg white and whip cream mixture. DO NOT OVERMIX. Cover and chill.

Raspberry Purée:

Puree $\frac{3}{4}$ cup berries with sugar and Grand Marnier in a food processor. Strain into small bowl, pressing on solids. Mix in 1 cup berries.

Spoon mousse halfway into 8 (6-ounce) stemmed glasses. Add some berry mixture. Gently spoon remainder of the mousse. Chill, covered, for at least 6 hours. Let stand at room temperature about 20 minutes before serving.

Garnish with whole raspberries, white chocolate shavings, and mint sprigs.

Serves 1–12 depending on indulgence.

Recipe compliments of Chef Paul Kropp



Peach Daiquiris: A House Specialty

1 fresh Southern peach, peeled, pitted, and sliced

1/4 cup lime juice

1 jigger (1 ½ ounces) light rum

1 ounce apricot brandy

dash of vanilla

1 tbsp superfine granulated sugar (or to taste)

1 cup cracked ice

twist of lime

In a blender, blend peach, lime juice, light rum, apricot brandy, vanilla, and, if desired, sugar for 10 seconds. Add the cracked ice and blend for 15 seconds. Pour into a chilled 12-ounce glass. Garnish with lime.

Crabmeat Henry

This one comes from Memphis's iconic culinary jewel, Justine's restaurant. Although it's no longer around, Justine's lives on in the hearts and taste buds of many Southerners from Memphis and way beyond.

6 tbsp butter

¼ cup sherry

dash of Tabasco

dash of lemon juice

dash of Worcestershire sauce

½ lb. of the freshest possible lump crabmeat, rinsed and pieces of shell removed

3 pieces French bread toast

¾ cup Hollandaise sauce

Put butter, sherry, Tabasco sauce, Worcestershire sauce, and lemon juice together in a pan and simmer over low heat. When mixture is hot, add crabmeat and lightly fold over with a spoon. Heat. Be careful not to burn or boil.

Put slices of toast in bottom of 3 small ramekins. Cover with drained crabmeat mixture (use a slotted spoon). Top with Hollandaise sauce and place in a preheated 450-degree oven. Bake until Hollandaise begins to brown, 8–10 minutes. Serve bubbling hot.

Serves 3.

Hollandaise Sauce

1 lb. butter

4 egg yolks

¼ tsp cayenne pepper

4 tsp cider vinegar

Melt the butter. In a separate bowl, whisk together egg yolks, cayenne, and vinegar until yolks are fluffy and light. Add a small amount of melted butter at a time, while beating, until all is used. For added thickness, place pan over boiling water and beat until desired consistency. Served with just about everything.

For an easier version, use a mixer and beat egg yolks, vinegar, and cayenne together until thick and fluffy. Reduce mixer speed and slowly add the melted butter.

Makes 2 cups.



Recommended Reading

The lovely people at St. Martin's Press asked me for some comments about my all-time favorite books. This is just a sampling, but each will forever hold a special place in my heart.

To Kill a Mockingbird

What can I say that hasn't already been said? I'll just reiterate the words of many. Literary genius—*Southern* literary genius. If only I could be Harper Lee!

The Prince of Tides

Intrigue, mystery, dysfunction, compassion, and pain, all blended together with a sardonic sense of humor. That's what I'm looking for when I crack open the pages of a generational saga. It's hard to call yourself a writer when Pat Conroy claims the same profession. I'll just call myself one of his interns.

Can't Wait to Get to Heaven

Fannie Flagg accomplishes the ultimate—at least she does for me! She has written a novel that makes me laugh out loud so hard that tears are tumbling down my face for a solid five minutes. When Aunt Elnor is wheeled through the hospital on the gurney as a dead person and suddenly speaks to the shyster hospital admin man, I threw the book across the room. Thank you, Fannie, thank you. You are my literary comedic hero.

The Notebook

Okay, I admit it. I'm a sucker for romance. Nicholas Sparks gets me every time. I remember reading this one on a short airplane jaunt between Boston and New York and almost tripping down the steps of the plane because I couldn't bear not to finish the scene. My face was a slobbery mess when I turned the final page. Oh . . . I also wish I was Nicholas Sparks.

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The Great Gatsby

I've finally gotten to the point where I'm grateful to my high school English teachers for insisting that we read the classics. F. Scott Fitzgerald was the first writer to truly grab my attention, probably due to his portrayal of decadence and the insincerity of aristocracy. He introduced me to Long Island and the Plaza Hotel, the Rolls-Royce and gigantic mansions, not to mention that he gave me my first glimpse into an intriguing blend of characters so rich in dysfunction, opulence, and mystery that I was hooked on reading. The relationship between Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan still intrigues me to this day and inspires me, as a writer, to reach for the stars.

Charlotte's Web

Breaks my heart. I was only a third grader when I first learned of Fern, Wilbur, Templeton, and Charlotte but the book still resonates with me today. An innocent portrayal of maternal love, loyalty, and friendship, it inspires me toward greatness and to try my hand at a children's book. Did I mention I suffer from author envy? E. B. White takes the cake.

Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood

I read *Ya-Ya* when I was just starting to write *Whistlin' Dixie* and it served as one of my greatest inspirations. Identifying with Siddalee was a no-brainer, having grown up with loads of family dysfunction. (Are we beginning to see a familiar theme here in my favorite books?) I laughed, I cried, and I screamed out loud, "I get it Sida, I truly do." Rebecca Wells is a treasure and her ingenious portrayal of Southern, life-long friendships is spot-on.



Reading Group Questions

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1. Alice, Virginia, and Mary Jule try talking Leelee out of moving to Vermont. How blunt should you be with your friends if you see them potentially making a big mistake? Were you frustrated with Leelee when she made her decision to follow Baker up North?
2. Would you move across the country or even out of the country for the person you love? Ponder the thought. If your spouse wanted to pursue a dream that would uproot the family, would you actually leave your comfort zone and move far away from all things familiar?
3. Friendship is vastly important to Leelee. Why do you think this is true? Virginia, Alice, and Mary Jule surprise Leelee by coming to Vermont to help her through her toughest time. What is the most selfless thing you've done for a friend in need? How far would you travel to help a friend?
4. Leelee is surprised by her growing camaraderie with Roberta. Have you ever become close with someone who at first seemed an unlikely friend? Do you make a point to diversify your friendships?
5. How much influence do your friends have over your life? Do you consult them or your spouse first when making big decisions?
6. When Baker deserts Leelee, all she wants to do is come home to Memphis but Kissie talks her into staying put. She tells Leelee, "You can stay in Hell a little while, long as you know you're getting out." What does she mean by this? Would you have left at that point or stayed put?

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7. Why do you think Leelee decided to go back home to Memphis instead of staying in Vermont with Peter?
8. Although grown, Leelee and her friends still enjoy their shenanigans together. What is the craziest thing you've ever done with your adult girlfriends? Are you ever too old for pranks?
9. Leelee's friends think she is a doormat because she has a hard time saying no. Do you agree? Are you able to tell someone no and be okay with it?
10. Southerners are often criticized for not saying what's on their mind, and Northerners are often accused of being too blunt. Do you agree with this? What are the pros and cons of both sides?