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BOOK REVIEW - May 24, 2010

Southern Charm - A transplanted New Yorker embraces life on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

"From Manhattan to Mississippi: A New Yorker Falls in Love With the South," by Daisy Karam-Read (Quail Ridge Press)

text by robyn jackson

When Daisy Karam-Read told her friends in New York City and Los Angeles that she was marrying a "Southern gentleman," and moving to Mississippi, naturally they were aghast. But, as Karam-Read writes in her entertaining little memoir, "From Manhattan to Mississippi: A New Yorker Falls in Love With the South," they were responding to stereotypes about the state that are 50 years out of date.

"Those in my entire circle in New York and L.A. were in shock; they couldn't fathom that I would leave my beloved Manhattan, my apartment in Tribeca, and my bicoastal lifestyle," Karam-Read writes in the first of 13 essays that make up this book first published in 2007. "I had been a struggling actress in New York and L.A. and felt equally at home on both coasts. Now I was working full-time in the cosmetics industry and traveling frequently from coast to coast. During one of my monthly business trips to Houston I met Barbara and Jimmie Lewis, a couple I liked immediately. Six months later, Barbara said, 'I have a man in mind for you.' Because I trusted them, I agreed that Barbara could give Jerry my phone number. That was a life-changing moment; it was how I eventually met my husband."

A quick courtship quickly ensued, followed by a wedding on June 20, 1998,

arranged by Jerry Read at Green Oaks Bed & Breakfast on the beach in Biloxi. The newlyweds took up residence in a home on a bayou in Ocean Springs that was eventually destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Karam-Read knew that she would miss her old life in Manhattan - the Broadway plays, the symphonies, the museums, and other cultural events that are part of life in the metropolis. But she was game for adventure and eager to explore a part of the country she knew little about. She soon learned that Mississippi has its own unique culture, even its own symphonies and museums. Crawfish festivals and the Blessing of the Fleet soon became treasured events in her life. And who needs Broadway when you've got Mardi Gras?

The Reads move in a privileged circle - the friends' names she drops include prominent Coast Realtor Ellis Branch, Judge Lester Senter Jr., and the late attorney and John Grisham mentor Will Denton and his wife, Lucy - so her viewpoint is that of a woman with access to the loveliest homes and the finest restaurants. She and Jerry dine frequently at Mary Mahoney's, and there are many trips to New Orleans for Sunday brunch at Commander's Palace. She joins the Symphony Guild and socializes with other wealthy patrons of the arts. Karam-Read admits that she paints with a broad brush, but her observations about Southerners in general and Mississippians in particular - especially Gulf Coast residents - ring true.

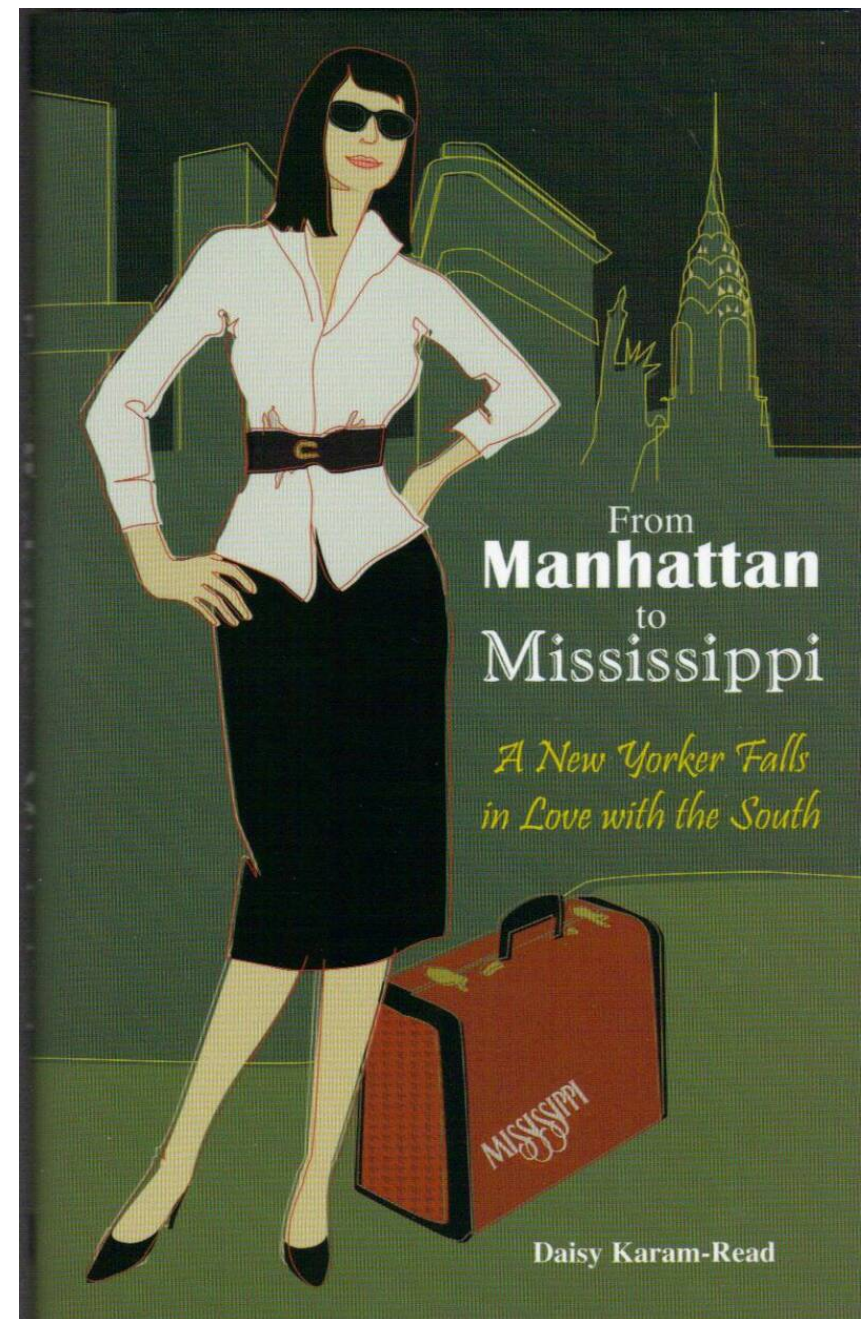
"In Mississippi, you ease into a topic," she writes. "It seems impolite - even unfriendly - to ask for something outright. To Southerners, there's crassness in getting right to the point. First, they want to show you they're happy to be in your company. This is the nature of manners in the Deep South - even for business transactions."

She marvels at the friendliness of the strangers she comes into contact with, whether it's fellow patients in a doctor's waiting room, diners in a restaurant or people standing in line at the grocery store. A chance encounter with a little boy perched in the limbs of a tree is like something she's only seen in a Frank Capra movie.

"In Mississippi, there are no strangers - only unmet friends," she writes

The food also intrigues Karam-Read. Satsumas, mirlitons and Vidalia onions are exotic ingredients that she stumbles upon at a farmer's roadside truck in New Orleans and quickly embraces, as she does gumbo and jambalaya.

"The foods here offer incredible variety," she writes. "They draw not only upon traditional Southern (soul) food, but also Cajun and Creole foods. There are so many locally grown fruits and vegetables, and of course, fabulous fresh seafood. The blend of all these traditions is the unmistakable stamp of Gulf Coast cuisine."



Her descriptions of such South Mississippi and Louisiana delicacies as shrimp etouffee, gumbo and pecan pie are crave-inducing. And her shocking discovery that many cooks keep old bacon grease in a coffee can or glass jar for seasoning their vegetables is amusing.

"Food is an excuse for Mississippians to get together - and talk," she writes.

The book jacket description is a little deceptive. The reader goes into the book thinking this is going to be yet another fish-out-of-water tale about a sophisticated Yankee and her misadventures adapting to life in the strange South, but Karam-Read actually reveals very little about her transition. This book is really a love letter to her new home, her impressions of a place that she quickly came to learn has many things going for it that New York never will.

There's nothing in this book that native Mississippians - especially those of us who were born and raised on the Gulf Coast - don't already know about ourselves, but sometimes it takes an outsider to remind us just how special and gracious our way of life here really is.