

Friends were incredulous when Daisy Karam-Read moved from the shadows of Manhattan's skyscrapers to the rocking-chair pace of Ocean Springs.

Though she has lived in New York most of her life and in Los Angeles for fourteen years, after ten years on the Gulf Coast, Daisy has found a complex culture more profound than she had ever imagined. In her book, *From Manhattan to Mississippi*, she shares her discoveries of southern life. We are pleased to have Daisy share some of her personal thoughts with us and a chapter excerpt from her book.

What inspired you to write a book about your Mississippi experiences?

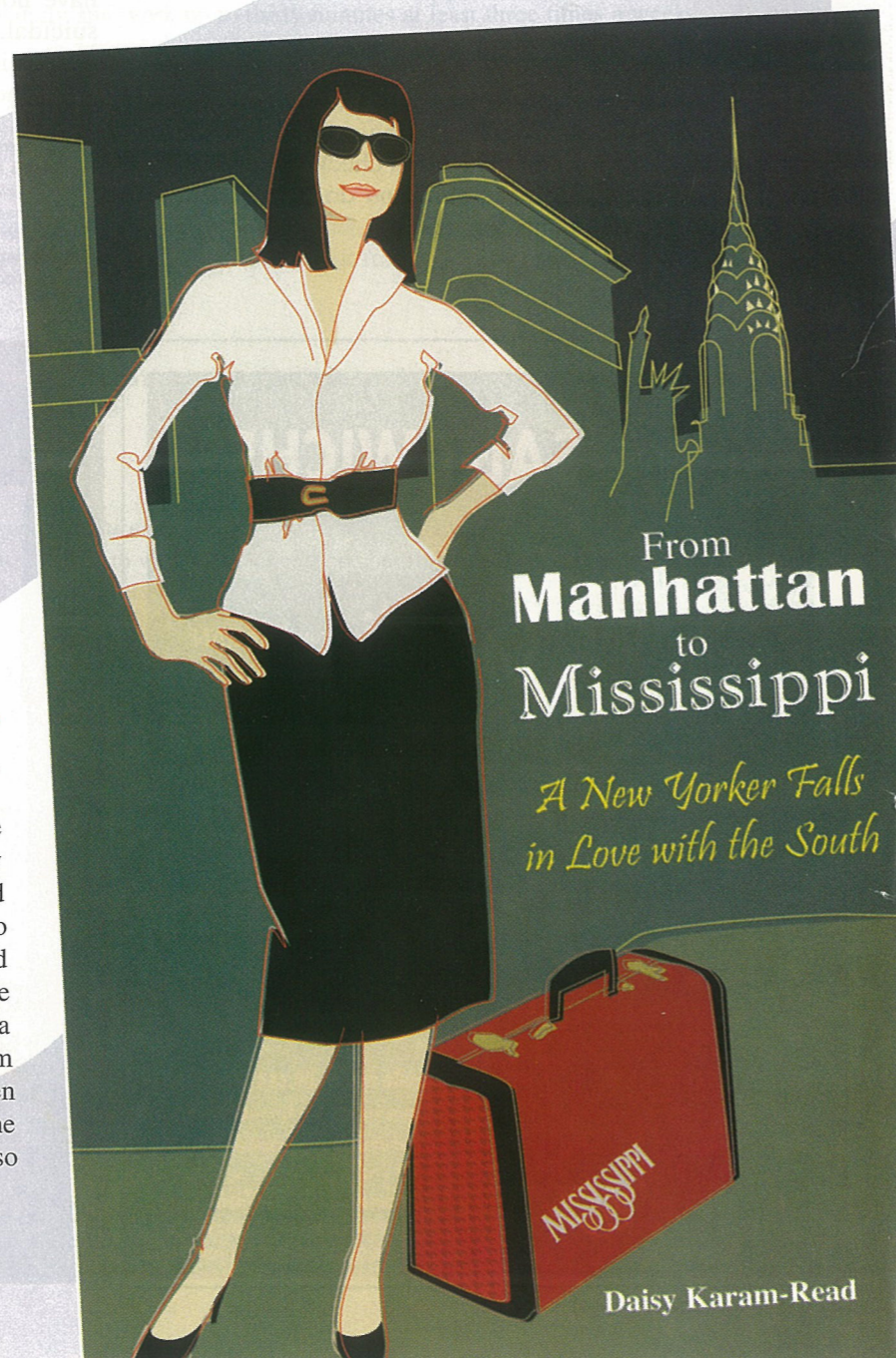
When I moved to Ocean Springs in mid 1998, I was amazed by the marvelous people and lifestyle I encountered. I discovered the talents of Mississippi's women, the courage of its citizens, the voice of its men, its unashamed but balanced religious convictions, and much more. As I became increasingly enamored with life in South Mississippi, I grew dismayed by the prejudices most of America still harbors regarding this vulnerable region. That inspired me to write this little book; as an outsider, I try to bring a fresh eye to the Magnolia State. I hoped that somewhere between Mississippi's moonlight and magnolias image and the Redneck stereotype, I would discover the true Mississippi.

What would you say is the biggest positive difference between Southerners and the rest of the country?

I think the biggest positive difference between Southerners and the rest of the country is the genuine modesty of Southerners. Most Southerners I've met, Mississippians particularly, are completely lacking in pretense. There is a simplicity in even the most accomplished people here. That naturalness is endearing and refreshing. And that's what makes the good manners so deep--the courtesies here are heartfelt, not just an expression of a mastery of etiquette, but something much finer.

In the book you write about many aspects of Southern life. In a few words, what is the overall message you wish to convey in the book?

This book is my Valentine to Mississippi, my love letter to the Deep South. The South, and especially Mississippi, have been so maligned and misunderstood over the years. So I hope that my book states, in no uncertain terms, what a fine place Mississippi is and how good its people are--deserving respect. I hope that I shed a new light of appreciation on the Magnolia State. And because I'm not from here, I believe that I'm objective. Life on the Mississippi Gulf Coast has been enlightening, and I wanted to convey its allure to the rest of the country, especially to our big cities, where so many opinions are made and disseminated.



A chapter excerpt from Daisy's book, **From Manhattan to Mississippi**

"The Southern Lady: Alive and Well"

I expectantly opened the cheerful invitation. Its brightness matched the early summer day. Our yard had come alive with white and pink crape myrtles; the Japanese magnolia tree had finally blossomed; and the oleanders were out in full bloom. Across the bayou, the noise of our neighbor's motorboat was receding, now just a hum as it made its way to distant waters. Abbie, the Aussie German shepherd that lived next door, bounded about, unsuccessfully chasing a squirrel as if it were a mortal enemy.

The invitation from my friend Lucy requested the pleasure of my company at an afternoon party introducing her son Walt's fiancée to the circle of female friends and acquaintances who would soon become part of her life and embrace her with southern sisterhood. Such an occasion isn't an engagement shower - no gifts are involved - but, in fact, it has elements of a debutante's tea, with the newly affianced woman standing in a receiving line with her future mother-in-law. It's a gracious way of welcoming the newcomer - one of many social graces that distinguish the lives of Mississippi women. In the Denton's magnificent white-columned house on the day of the party, I thought about how fine it would be if we welcomed newcomers this way north of the Mason-Dixon line.

Southern ladies still practice other rituals that are disappearing elsewhere in the United States. They send handwritten thank-you notes, no matter how simple a dinner they've enjoyed. Although they have as much Internet access as anyone anywhere, they don't use e-mail to express gratitude or sympathy. They take the time to stamp an elegant envelope - beautiful stationery is customary - and mail it. They take pride in nice penmanship, and a letter from a southern lady usually has the perfect look of what we used to call in New York "parochial school handwriting" legible, even, never a scrawl. And the southern woman always mentions something specific that she particularly enjoyed about an evening spent in your company. There's nothing generic about her note. It is for you, and only you.

The beauty and grace of the south Mississippi I love - the heirloom silver, the carefully tended gardens, the elegant cocktail parties, the pearls, and the antique furniture - would not be here without the southern lady. Without her the Gulf Coast, while naturally blessed, would be little more than a place to go fishing and hunting. The southern lady doesn't need expensive silver and priceless antiques, however, to work her magic.

Never has this been more apparent than after Hurricane Katrina destroyed so many of these luxuries. It was Thanksgiving 2005 - less than three months after the storm. Jerry and I were temporarily living in Fairhope, and our friends Lucy, Claire, and DeLo, who had all lost their homes as well, were now living together in a tiny fixer-upper in Biloxi. It was still the worst of times for most of us, but we decided to celebrate Thanksgiving together, grateful to be alive. We had shrimp cocktails and drinks on the tiny porch, which was unscreened and faced a dismal-looking street. Because the oven didn't work, Lucy and friends prepared the entrée in the kitchen, but Courtney had to keep driving back and forth to her home to pop things into the oven.

It was a far cry from the gracious living of better times. But like Scarlett O'Hara and the famous drapes, these southern ladies used the resources they had. They placed a bowl of lemons as a centerpiece on the coffee table in the cramped living room. Fresh flowers adorned the table in the minuscule dining room, and glowing candles surrounded us as we gathered at the table to say grace. I don't know how all eleven of us plus a five-month-old baby managed to fit into that dining room, but it was inviting and lovely, and we were happy to be there. Creating this scene had nothing to do with money; it had everything to do with these women's appreciation of beauty and friendship and their good taste, which, once cultivated, is not easily lost.



Daisy Karam-Read