

Mary Kay Andrews

Savannah Blues
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Q: You went from journalism to novel writing. What demands does the novel form make that journalism does not, and vice versa?

A: Point of view and voice are such an important part of fiction writing, but in journalism, the point of view is generally that of an objective by-stander. One reason I wanted to try fiction was that I longed to pour some passion, or emotions, into my writing. Journalists are trained to look passively at all sides of an issue, present the pertinent information, and move on. Part of the function of a working journalist is that of gatekeeper, of deciding what information is relevant and what is not. The novelist is free to tell one person's story, warts and all, and to imbue that story with all the trimmings that usually fall away from nonfiction.

Q: Why use Savannah for the setting and not your hometown of Atlanta? Both have plenty of history. What made you decide on Savannah—and why did you feel you had to "run away from home" and go back there to write it?

A: I'd written eight novels set in Atlanta, where I've lived for the past twenty years, and still have lots of story material, but Savannah, the city where I lived as a newlywed, where my first child was born, kept calling me back. Atlanta is so typical of the New South, always looking forward to the next challenge, the next deal. But in Savannah, the pace is slower, and so much depends on the past. It's a place where secrets linger, and memory counts. I wanted to really absorb my reader in the emotional feel of Savannah, so I needed to experience that again for myself. Living by myself, taking long walks around the historic district, attending dinner parties, listening to the local gossip, made Weezie's world real to me so that I could make it real for my readers. Besides, we were remodeling our kitchen at the time, and I couldn't bear the mess and distractions!

Q: You also mention that you asked to be locked up by the deputies at the Chatham correctional institute "for authenticity's sake"? What in particular did you learn from the experience, and what did you pass on to Weezie's character?

A: Thanks to the cooperation of the local district attorney and the sheriff, I was able to go through the booking process at the jail in Savannah, from arrival at the "sallyport" to the end experience of being bailed out. I was surprised at how dehumanizing the experience was—being patted down, searched, having your possessions seized and locked away, being photographed and finger-printed. Even being forced to wear "jail-issue" rubber thongs. Weezie was particularly horrified at the humiliation of the entire episode, and of having the whole world know she was a "jailbird."

Q: Are you still an antiques "picker"? What was your best find?

A: Antiquing starts as a hobby, and if you stay with it long enough, it becomes a lifelong addiction. Rarely does a weekend pass that I'm not out "junking." I still sometimes pick up such a great bargain that I end up selling it to a dealer. One of my best finds ever was a French majolica asparagus dish, which I bought at an estate sale in my neighborhood for 75 cents. I sold it to a dealer at the old Elco flea market here in Atlanta for \$75, and at the next month's show, he had the dish marked \$500! And currently, I have an oil painting hanging in my den, which I bought for \$5 at an estate sale. It was in horrible condition, so I spent about \$150 to have it professionally restored. Not long afterwards, a dealer told me my find was 19th century American, and probably worth close to \$1,000. I love the painting and don't intend to sell it, but that's what keeps me junking!