

Kathleen Tessaro

Elegance

ISBN13: 9780060522278

A Conversation with Kathleen Tessaro

Q: Why did you write *Elegance*? Will it help women to feel more confident and better about themselves?

A: *Elegance* is my first novel. I wrote it when I was working on a series of short stories, and I wanted to work on a larger project but wasn't sure how to get started. I had found the original manual of *Elegance*, by Madame Genevieve Antoine Dariaux, about seven years before and had always thought it was fascinating and funny. Then I had the idea that if I used that manual as a starting point, I might be able to tell the story of a modern day woman who's trying to come to terms with various aspects of finding an identity of her own. I decided that by starting each chapter with one of the original excerpts and working my way through the alphabet, it would be like writing 26 short stories. The novel tells the story of female obsession with the way we look and the illusion that if we can only lose 10 pounds or get the right hair style or dress the right way, our lives will change and we'll finally feel happy. But the truth is that while these things may reflect the way we feel about ourselves, real, lasting self confidence and happiness comes only from liking and accepting your whole self, good and bad, fat and thin, stylish and frumpy and knowing that you're exactly the way you're meant to be.

Q: And what about you, do you like yourself?

A: Yes, I do like myself. I have a wonderful life today, and even though I'm older and I've just had a baby (so my figure isn't that great right now), I'm much more content and happier than I've ever been. But I spent years thinking that I had to be perfect all the time and feeling like a total failure at life as a result. I used to wake up feeling that something wasn't quite right about me, and that if I could only get all the external things right (my looks, my boyfriend, my job, my house) then I would feel ok. Of course, it didn't work. All that happened was that I went crazy! What needed to change wasn't the outside so much as my attitude. I had to learn to be positive about my own life and to believe in myself, no matter what was going on. I truly believe that when you're comfortable with yourself on the inside, you naturally become more attractive on the outside and to people around you.

Q: What is your style of dress and make up?

A: The way I dress and wear make-up changes every day. Now that I have a baby and work from home, there are lots of days when I just throw on some chinos and a white t-shirt and pull my hair back into a ponytail. My job on those days is to be able to play with my son without worrying if he gets porridge on my face or in my hair and to write a certain number of pages.

As writing takes me away from him, I don't want to waste a lot of time putting on make-up and getting dressed; these first years are so precious, and I don't want to miss them worrying about what I look like. There are other days when I have meetings or lunch dates, and I make more of an effort. I have some lovely clothes, simple things by Joseph or dresses by Rachel Riley that I wear. I have a few that I rotate, and all the accessories — shoes, handbag, coat — are already chosen, so I don't need to really think about it. Then I get my hair done (it's quite long), put on some simple, sheer make-up, and I'm off. I don't worry if people have seen me in the same outfit before.

Q: Has writing *Elegance* and meeting Geneviève Dariaux changed at all the way you look at yourself?

A: Yes, certainly! The day that I went to meet Madame Dariaux at her home in the South of France, I was six months pregnant and very worried about what I would wear! How could I impress the author of *Elegance* with this huge bump? I only had one, long black pregnant dress and that's what I wore. Luckily, she's very gracious and a wonderful flirt (even at 89!), so she didn't mind and spent most of the lunch chatting to my handsome husband instead. Writing the book made me realize that the way that I look is a reflection of the way I feel about myself. If I hate myself, I might not bother with how I look or, I might just as easily become obsessed with every aspect of my appearance. The real point of *Elegance* is to take care of yourself and the way you look so that you can then forget about it and get on with life. It should set you free rather than enslave you.

Q: Louise, the central character in *Elegance*, deals with all the typical women's problems: beauty, weight, the way men look at her. How does she — and how can women — overcome all this? Without giving too much away about the "secret" of your novel, can you offer a little advice on how women can be happier with their minds and bodies?

A: I wish I knew all the answers for these dilemmas! Every person has their own journey and their own issues. But for me, I had to resolve to change my attitude towards myself. Instead of playing the same tape in my head over and over ("Why aren't you thinner? Prettier? You're so lazy! You should go to the gym! You should be more active! You're a failure!" on and on and on), I had to have to courage to do the opposite and believe that basically, there's nothing wrong with me. I am perfect, just the way I am, even if I don't seem perfect. I'm exactly the way I'm meant to be today. I have to have the courage to change the tape in my head and instead of berating myself, speaking kindly to myself.

After all, that endless self-criticism has never gotten me anywhere; it's only made me depressed. At first I felt stupid doing that; I was addicted to criticism. But after a while, I found I had more energy and that I felt better about myself. Sometimes, I do need to change something on the outside of my life — for example, right now I'm trying to lose weight after the baby. But those things will happen just as fast without me beating myself up all the time.

Q: Do you think Louise — and many of us — are like Cinderella? And if so, why?

A: I think we all secretly long to be Cinderella; who wouldn't like to be transported from a dull life of endless drudgery by a little bit of magic with the wave of a wand? One of the enticing things about the Cinderella story is that it happens instantly; Cinderella doesn't have work to change her life — a fairy godmother just appears and poof! She's suddenly a princess. I think that in real life, women have to be their own fairy godmother. And while books like Madame Dariaux's *Elegance* might point you in the right direction, ultimately you are

the only person who has the power to change your life, and the only person who can say, "Enough is enough! I'm happy with the way I am!"

Q: Do you believe that the mirror women use to judge themselves is the love and attention of men? Or is the opinion of other women more important?

A: If women use other people's responses to them as the mirror in which they judge themselves, than they're treading on very dangerous ground. What matters is what we think of ourselves — not what men or even what other women think of us. At the end of the day, we have to be comfortable on our own, without depending upon anyone else's opinion. No one, not even your husband or your parents or your family, should have that much power over you.

Q: Can you tell me three errors women must not make?

A: Women must not:

1. Take themselves too seriously.
2. Tuck their skirts into the back of their knickers after they've been to the loo.
3. Believe for even one moment that anyone else holds the key to your happiness.

Q: In your opinion, what makes a woman attractive?

A: Confidence, a sense of humor, and a lust for life make a woman attractive. A beautiful woman who takes herself too seriously or who is constantly obsessed with her looks to the point that she cannot be at ease in her own life ceases to be attractive to those around her very quickly. As I say in my novel, it's in the moments when we forget ourselves entirely that we are at our most attractive.