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Liberating Paris
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Your television comedies are known for large ensemble casts of vivid characters. Did you manage the characters in *Liberating Paris* similarly? How is writing a novel different?

Working on a novel gave me the chance to develop and experiment with characters over a period of months. In network television, this is a luxury seldom found. However, I think richly drawn unexpected compelling characters can and do occasionally drift across our television set. But I also believe they are generally written by writers who have some sort of literary bent. For me, our great challenge is to lessen the breach between television, our most powerful venue, and literature, our most exalted.

Which character in *Liberating Paris* was the most enjoyable to write about?

Milan was the most enjoyable character for me to write, probably because she evolved the most for both me and the reader. She began as a seemingly pampered, small town, society queen whose unembarrassed pursuit of life's comforts eventually comes to be seen as an endeavor in simple gratitude. I was especially drawn to Milan because of her complete lack of self-pity and her extraordinary ability to sort out what needs to be fixed and what needs to be forgiven.

Is one more dear to you?

The character most dear to me is Jeter, named for my good friend, the late actor, Michael Jeter. He was inspired by my late cousin Dr. Carl Lanius, a quadriplegic poet, who like Jeter, broke his neck in a high school football game. For me, Jeter is possessed of a great peacefulness that comes perhaps from knowing that his greatest tragedy is already behind him. I liked his affection for Milan and the fact that he could so easily figure out who was most worth loving.

Would you consider a sequel, perhaps of the younger generation?

I haven't considered doing a sequel about the younger generation. But I am so attached to the six main characters in *Liberating Paris* I would consider writing a sequel involving the second half of their lives.

One of the most wonderful aspects of *Liberating Paris* is the way stereotypes are embraced, shattered and skewed.

In *Liberating Paris* and in television shows, like *Designing Women* and *Evening Shade*, I have always sought to deflect the southern stereotypes so often embraced by Hollywood and the national media: For me, there is no more untruthful, damaging or degrading caricature than that of the great, unwashed, ignorant, incest riddled Southerner. So it was a great delight for me to write about a small southern town where smart sophisticated people are still interested in language and literature, where good teachers are revered as icons, where the characters care deeply about religion and traditional values, but do not care to stand with the tall-haired, ultra-conservative evangelicals so often associated with the south. The scene in Wood McIlmore's back yard, where he persuades a large group of wedding goers to accept a lesbian, as well as an interracial couple, was for me, both humorous and unique, because we so seldom get to see small town southerners behaving in this fashion.

What would you like your non-Southern readers to understand about the South?

The idea that people are people, wherever they live—undefined by their geography in terms of worthiness or weakness. With that said, I do cherish the wondrousness of southerners—the way they keep their tender heart and tough sense of justice separate—the uncomplaining and humorous manner with which they accept bitter disappointment—the simple way they love their parents, without caveat or neurosis.

How do you feel about the fate of small towns, like Paris, across America? Are you optimistic? Why is it that big-box chain stores aren't opposed more often?

I think many Americans remain unaware of the great destruction that has been visited on hundreds of main streets across our country. Some are too young to appreciate what that street was like. Others are quite happy with the convenience offered by giant retailers. Although I want *Liberating Paris* to stand as a novel and not a social statement, I do hope it might remind people of what has been and continues to be lost—or that like the characters in *Liberating Paris*, they might instill in their own children the sense of community, the values and the way of life that existed on America's Main Street.

What are your favorite books and what writers do you admire or recommend? Which writers have most influenced your work?

I must confess that I am partial to Southern writers. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still the near-perfect Everest. If only Miss Lee had written more! Truman Capote, (especially his short stories) is the author I turn to for quick inspiration. Mark Twain, my fellow Missourian, remains untouched. (He's still got the bead on Hollywood and Washington. Nobody better at smacking around the elite.) I put him up there with Shakespeare.