



Book Club Kit



/LauraLaneMcNeal



@llmcneal

www.lauralanemcneal.com

An Introduction to *Dollbaby*



It's the summer of 1964 and eleven-year-old Ibby has just lost her father in a freak bicycle accident. Undone by the whole ordeal, Ibby's mother Vidrine unceremoniously dumps Ibby, along with an urn of her father's ashes, at the New Orleans home of Ibby's paternal grandmother, Fannie. The big old house with its boarded-up bedrooms, Victorian embellishments and strange food are odd enough to a little girl who's grown up in the state of Washington. Then there's the grandmother she never knew she had: Fannie is a volatile woman who runs a betting ring on her back porch, has a history of asylum stays, and a mysterious past that Ibby has been forbidden to question.

But soon, Fannie's black cook Queenie, and her daughter Dollbaby, help Ibby orient herself to her new surroundings, welcoming her into the fold with delicious Creole meals, handmade clothes, and plenty of seasoned advice about dealing with her unpredictable grandmother. Fannie, for her part, quickly takes to her new role as a grandmother, pampering Ibby with her very own perfume, a birthday lunch at historic Antoine's, and a sense of family legacies. Though at first Ibby bristles at Fannie's old-fashioned ideas like party dresses and gloves, she eventually warms to Fannie and realizes that beneath her eccentric and impulsive manner, Fannie has a real heart. As Fannie's tragic personal history comes to light, Ibby begins to see her own family history more clearly, finding new appreciation for Fannie's role in her life. What was supposed to be only a temporary stay evolves into a more permanent, although tentative, arrangement as both Fannie and Ibby discover the ties that bind them together.

Meanwhile, the Civil Rights movement is stirring up New Orleans. Everyone seems to be taking sides, and not even Dollbaby and Queenie agree on the direction the country is headed under President Lyndon Johnson's new law. If that's not enough, Ibby's growing friendship with Dollbaby's daughter, Birdelia, makes Ibby a target for racist neighbors.

Still, there's an ache in her heart for all she's lost—her beloved father, and a mother who left her for a visit, then disappeared without a trace. As she wonders whether her mother will ever come back for her, Ibby must decide if chasing the past will give her what's she looking for, or if this new crazy quilt of a family is where her heart truly belongs.

Laura Lane McNeal's vividly drawn characters, caught in the vortex of cultural change, are as bold and charming as New Orleans itself

A Conversation with Laura Lane McNeal



What inspired you to write DOLLBABY?

In a way, I think I've waited all my life to write this novel, but it finally came down to a single life-changing event that inspired me to write DOLLBABY—Hurricane Katrina. When New Orleans lay in ruins after the storm, far-flung politicians questioned whether a city below sea level was worth rebuilding. As much as it angered me to hear this, it gave me a renewed determination to do two things: embark on the writing career I'd put off for so many years, and tell the story of New Orleans, the way it was and never would be again. I wrote DOLLBABY for the people of New Orleans.

How did you choose to set your novel in New Orleans during the civil rights era?

My original intention was to recapture a by-gone era. I chose 1964 somewhat at random, as it was the beginning of some of my earliest childhood memories. It wasn't until I began doing research, reading newspapers from the time, that I became cognizant to the extent of social change in the air, and I felt I couldn't tell a story about New Orleans without the civil rights movement becoming an integral part. In a sense, writing the novel led me on my own journey, picking up pieces of a puzzle I didn't know were missing.

Do you have memories of New Orleans during this time?

New Orleans is steeped in the tradition that *any* life event is cause for celebration. Where else do they bury the dead above ground, have hurricane parties, dance around with napkins on their heads, or think sucking crawfish heads is loads of fun? On the flip side, I have vague memories of side windows at restaurants, separate drinking fountains, separate bathrooms, separate schools, war protests, and love-ins at Audubon Park. I was an outsider looking in, though, too young to understand what was going on around me.

DOLLBABY is told through the perspective of 11-year old Ibby, an outsider to Southern culture, and Queenie's daughter, Dollbaby. Why was it important for you to include both of these voices in the story?

I felt dual perspectives were vital to the story. Ibby's voice lends the eye of a young impressionable girl who is just beginning to question the world around her—a new world she doesn't quite understand. Dollbaby, who is older and wiser and from a completely different background, takes Ibby under her wings and explains the ways of the South. By doing so, Doll reveals her own inner turmoil as she struggles to embrace the ramifications of the changing times. In this way, their stories were able to overlap, intertwine and ultimately resolve themselves.

What prompted you to write from the perspective of young girls, rather than an adult?

One basic theme that permeates the novel is discovery. From both Ibby's perspective, as well as Dollbaby's, the lingering question remains—who am I, and where do I fit in this world? It's a question everyone asks of themselves at some point in their lives, which is why it remains so poignant. What does life, and ultimately death, mean? I felt this discovery was more powerful coming from a young girl who had very little perspective about the world around her. It is a coming-of-age novel, certainly, but it is more than that. It also begs the question—what do I do when I get there?

How much of your own life permeates this story? How have your experiences with New Orleans affected the way the Ibby encounters Southern life?

Southerners are natural storytellers, keepers of their own oral history, so when I decided to write the novel, I rounded up tales I'd heard as a child, threw them into a big pot, and added a pinch or two of my own story now and then. It became clear that I needed a character able to discover New Orleans from a fresh point of view in order to translate these peculiar customs to the reader without having to explain them outright.

Did your writing process entail any research into the Civil Rights era?

I researched the novel for well over two years before I sat down to write it. The research ran the gamut from re-reading Southern classics such as *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Faulkner's *Light in August*, books about old New Orleans and Southern folklore, as well as books by respected black authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison. I read the newspapers of the time, both the regular dailies and the black weeklies. And finally, I read books including *Voices in Our Blood*, a literary anthology of the most important interpretations of the civil rights movement, past and present, a book I highly recommend.

New Orleans truly becomes a character in DOLLBABY. What is it about this city that you hope readers will understand after reading DOLLBABY?

In New Orleans, there is a saying—you can leave New Orleans, but the city never leaves you. The language, cuisine, architecture, the mix of cultures, the way we celebrate life, even the way we celebrate death, can't be duplicated. New Orleans has always been a place where people from all walks of life live in close proximity, creating a *shared* culture, a sort of commonality that exists regardless of race or background, a diversity that goes beyond skin color or place of birth. The novel lends a glimpse of what it was like to live in such a place, one I felt needed brought back to life after Hurricane Katrina so the city could once again breathe on her own, even if she remains a faded rose who hasn't lost her thorns.

This is your debut novel. What were some of the challenges you endured, and what have you taken away from the experience?

Upon completing the rebuilding our home after the flood, which took two years, I took the opportunity to enroll in a fiction writing class at Loyola University. For several years after that, I participated in a writer's workshop. By the time I sat down to write DOLLBABY, I already had an initial novel under my belt. That experience gave me the confidence to write DOLLBABY the way I felt it needed to be written, from both a black and white perspective. My goal was to write a classic Southern novel that would have legs. I wanted to prove that you don't need vampires or made-up worlds to tell an enduring and engaging tale, that meaningful stories exist in everyday lives. What have I taken away from the experience? You have to believe in yourself and be passionate about what you're doing. I've also learned there are many more stories out there for the telling!

What do you hope readers will take away from reading DOLLBABY?

I think Norman Mailer said it best: "Novels go happiest when you discover something you did not know you knew: an insight into one of your opaque characters, a metaphor that startles you . . . a truth . . . that used to elude you." In a sense, I hope this is what readers will take away from DOLLBABY, a truth they didn't know existed, but are happy to discover.

Dollbaby

Playlist



“Nights in White Satin”

The Moody Blues

“Big Chief”

Professor Longhair

“In the Mood”

Glenn Miller

“Tighten Up”

Archie Bell and the Drells

“Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud”

James Brown

“Wish Someone Would Care”

Irma Thomas

“Rag Doll”

Frankie Valli and The Rag Dolls

“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”

(Hymnal)

Listen on **Spotify**

Queenie's Favorite Recipes

Queenie learned to cook the way many New Orleans cooks do—by watching their mothers or grandmothers in the kitchen. The key to their cooking is improvisation, a willingness to experiment and come up with their own recipes. Many of the recipes you will find in the section are just that, a combination of recipes I've found over the years, many of which I've tweaked to make them better. These are traditional New Orleans recipes, most of which combine the African, Creole, Caribbean, Spanish, Indian and other cultural influences that make New Orleans such a melting pot of flavors. Enjoy!



COCKTAILS

Old-Fashioned

(Makes one serving)

Sugar (dash or to taste)

Aromatic Bitters such as Angostura (one or more dashes)

2 to 3 ounces Bourbon or Rye Whiskey (whichever you prefer)

Pour above ingredients in an old fashioned or double old-fashioned glass (a tumbler with straight sides and a thick bottom, but any glass will do).

Stir well. Add ice if preferred. May also add an orange twist if using bourbon and a lemon twist if using rye.

Milk Punch for a Bunch

Here is a simple recipe for a bourbon based milk punch using ice cream that is good for a crowd:

1 quart vanilla ice cream

½ gallon milk

2-3 cups bourbon

vanilla to taste

nutmeg

Mix above ingredients in a large pitcher or container. (It's easier if ice cream is left out to soften.) Sprinkle a dash of nutmeg in each glass when poured. Best if made a day ahead. I often empty ½ gallon containers of milk to make this recipe. This makes about one gallon.

APPETIZERS

Queenie's Famous Deviled Eggs

6 eggs
1//3 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon lemon juice
¼ teaspoon horseradish mustard
5 teaspoons mayonnaise
a few drops of hot sauce such as Tabasco or Crystal
¼ teaspoon onion juice
paprika
a few sprigs of parsley

Place eggs in a saucepan of cold water, bring to a hard boil, then reduce heat while letting eggs boil slowly for about 15 minutes. When done, run cold water into pan to cool eggs off then peel under cold running water. Cut eggs lengthwise and place yolks into a bowl. Mash yolks with a fork and add mayo and other ingredients except parsley and paprika. Mix well. If too dry, add more mayo. Fill the egg white halves with the mixture. Sprinkle lightly with paprika and garnish with parsley. Serves 6.



DESSERTS

Or as Queenie would call it, the hereafter!

Pecan Pie

3 eggs, beaten
1 cup brown sugar
¾ cup dark corn syrup
¼ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon vanilla
3 tablespoons melted butter
1 ½ cups pecan halves or pieces
9-inch unbaked pie shell

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Mix eggs, sugar, syrup, salt, vanilla, butter and pecans. Pour into unbaked pie shell and bake ten minutes. Reduce heat to 325 degrees and bake 35 minutes or until knife inserted into the center comes out clean. Serves 6. Some serve with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top.

Places of Interest in New Orleans



Antoine's

Established in 1840 by Antoine Alciatore, and still run by the same family, Antoine's is the oldest French-Creole fine dining restaurant in New Orleans.



Places of Interest in New Orleans



City Park

Opened in 1854 on the site of the former Allard Plantation, City Park is one of the oldest urban parks in the country. The 1,300 acre park is situated along the remains of the Metairie Bayou and contains the world's largest stand of mature live oaks.



Places of Interest in New Orleans



Jackson Square and St. Louis Cathedral

Built in the early 1700's and called the Place d'Armes by the Colonial French settlers, Jackson Square was renamed to honor General Andrew Jackson after the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. St. Louis Cathedral, built in 1727, was the first building of "brick between posts" construction.



Places of Interest in New Orleans



Metairie Cemetery

Located on the former site of an equine racetrack, Metairie Cemetery was opened in 1872. The expansive plots allowed for grander tombs built of marble and embellished with statues and stained-glass windows.



Places of Interest in New Orleans



Paddlewheelers

Paddlewheelers first made an appearance on the Mississippi River around 1812 and were a popular form of transportation until after the Civil War, when railroads became the prominent means of travel. Several of these boats are still available for pleasure cruises.



Discussion Questions



1. Ibby's arrival to Fannie's home is the catalyst for change. How does Ibby transform the household?
2. Ibby is warned early on not to ask Fannie about her past. Why is she given this advice?
3. Why does Vidrine leave Ibby with Fannie? Later, after four years, why does Vidrine suddenly come back and what does she wish to achieve from the visit?
4. As Ibby lives in Fannie's house, she begins to uncover its hidden truths, both physically and emotionally. What secrets does the house hide, and what do they mean to her?
5. In some ways Fannie is very old-fashioned, yet in other ways she seems quite progressive for someone of her era. How would you characterize her, and why?
6. Dollbaby wants to participate in the civil rights protests but Queenie tries to discourage her. What is the difference between their views on the issue and why do you think they differ?
7. As the era unfolds, what are its political effects on Fannie's household? How do the realities of race and class trickle down to affect the characters' lives?
8. Fannie tells Ibby that she must be "willing to live the life that is waiting for you." What does she mean by this, and how does the advice relate to both of their lives?
9. Through this novel McNeal seems to suggest that family is what we make it. How does Ibby's adopted family influence the person she ultimately becomes?