

Saving CeeCee Honeycutt

by Beth Hoffman

About the Book

Twelve-year-old CeeCee Honeycutt is in trouble. For years, she has been the caretaker of her psychotic mother, Camille—the tiara-toting, lipstick-smearing laughingstock of an entire town—a woman trapped in her long-ago moment of glory as the 1951 Vidalia Onion Queen. But when Camille is hit by a truck and killed, CeeCee is left to fend for herself. To the rescue comes her previously unknown great-aunt, Tootie Caldwell.

In her vintage Packard convertible, Tootie whisks CeeCee away to Savannah's perfumed world of prosperity and Southern eccentricity, a world that seems to be run entirely by women. From the exotic Miz Thelma Rae Goodpepper, who bathes in her backyard bathtub and uses garden slugs as her secret weapons, to Tootie's all-knowing housekeeper, Oletta Jones, to Violene Hobbs, who entertains a local police officer in her canary-yellow peignoir, the women of Gaston Street keep CeeCee entertained and enthralled for an entire summer.

Laugh-out-loud funny and deeply touching, Beth Hoffman's sparkling debut is, as Kristin Hannah says, "packed full of Southern charm, strong women, wacky humor, and good old-fashioned heart." It is a novel that explores the indomitable strengths of female friendship and gives us the story of a young girl who loses one mother and finds many others.

Praise for the Book

"In Hoffman's charming debut, Cecelia Rose (CeeCee) Honeycutt tells the story of her tragic life and the strong women who stepped in to save her. At age 12, CeeCee realizes her mother, flouncing around Willoughby, OH, in prom dresses and matching shoes, is crazy and the town's laughingstock. Her father is never home, and nothing is going to change so CeeCee buries herself in books as an escape. But her true liberation comes after her mother's tragic death when great-aunt Tootie sweeps CeeCee off to Savannah. There, a group of powerful, independent women offer the young girl love, laughter and a new chance at life. Readers who enjoy strong female characters will appreciate CeeCee, a survivor despite her heartbreaking childhood, and Aunt Tootie and her friends, all of them steel magnolias. VERDICT Exemplifying Southern storytelling at its best, this coming-of-age novel is sure to be a hit with the book clubs that adopted Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*. Interestingly enough, both novels share the same editor."

—*Library Journal*

"This book unfolds like a lush southern garden, blooming with vivid characters, beauty and surprises."

—Kim Edwards, bestselling author of *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*

Courtesy of Penguin Group

About the Author

My Road to Becoming a Novelist

From the Author's website, retrieved December 20, 2010, from <http://bethhoffman.net/author>

I was born on an elevator during a snowstorm, a story my father often enjoyed telling whenever the opportunity arose. For the first five years of my life, I lived (along with my mom, dad, and older brother) on my grandparents' farm in northern Ohio. It was a rural area, and other than a few tolerant garden toads, a highly social chicken, and Midnight, our family dog, there wasn't anyone to play with. So I created imaginary friends. I'd draw pictures of them and build them homes out of shoeboxes—replete with interiors furnished by pictures I'd cut from a Sears & Roebuck catalog. Eventually I wrote stories about my friends, giving them interesting names and complex lives.

From earliest memory, there were two things I loved above all else: writing and painting. I wrote my first short story when I was eleven and sold my first painting at the age of fourteen. I believed the sale of the painting was a sign of what direction I should take in life. So I chose a career in art that eventually segued into interior design, but I still kept writing and dreaming of becoming a novelist. Life sent me on many creative journeys and I ultimately landed in Cincinnati, Ohio, becoming the president and co-owner of an interior design studio.

Years went by, long hours and hard work brought success, and with it came the inevitable stresses of business ownership. During the busiest year of my professional life, I nearly died from the same infection that took puppeteer Jim Henson's life—group A streptococcal infection that resulted in septic shock. After finally being discharged from the hospital, I returned home to convalesce. I spent weeks reevaluating my life—the good, the bad, and the downright painful. As I struggled to regain my health and find spiritual ballast, my dream of writing a novel resurfaced. But no matter how I looked at it, there simply weren't enough hours in the day to fulfill the demands of my career and write a novel. So I let the dream go.

Then, on a snowy morning in January of 2004, a complete stranger said something to me. And like an unexpected gust of fresh air, his words blew the door wide open. In an eye-blink I knew if I were to write a novel, it had to be now or never. I chose now. I sold my portion of the design business, and after a month of sleeping and meditating and realigning my energies, I plunked down at my computer. Day after day my fingers blazed over the keyboard, and I didn't come up for air until I typed "The End" nearly four years later.

If there's a moral to my story, it's this: take a chance, embrace your dreams, forgive, let go, move on. And if life gives you a big smackdown, there's a reason—and it just might lead toward your own little piece of the rainbow.

Oh, and there's one more thing: be mindful of the words of strangers.

Courtesy of Author's Website: <http://bethhoffman.net/author>

Author Interview

Beth Hoffman was the president and co-owner of a major interior design studio in Cincinnati, Ohio. She sold her portion of the business to pursue writing full time. She lives in a quaint historic district in northern Kentucky, with her husband and three very smart cats. This is her first novel.

A CONVERSATION WITH BETH HOFFMAN

Q. In another writer's hands, the depiction of Camille's mental illness might come across as humorous or even callous. But you portray her illness with respect. How did you keep that balance? Was that aspect of the book difficult to write?

As ill as Camille was, I saw her as a woman who still possessed threads of a likable personality. Beneath her wild escapades and psychotic interludes was a young woman with a wounded soul. Honoring Camille's fragile humanness allowed me to write about her with empathy and respect. Was Camille a difficult character to write about? Surprisingly, no. From the moment she first entered my imagination, there was an undeniable humor in her pain, and, conversely, there was heartbreaking sadness in her fleeting moments of joy. I took those diametrically opposed elements to the edge by creating the sense of bittersweet release in Camille's death.

Q. Do you, like CeeCee, have an appetite for reading? What are some of your favorite books and authors? Are there books you read again and again?

Yes, words are to me what a steak is to a hungry dog. I cannot go to sleep at night without reading for at least an hour. My taste is eclectic, but I'm most drawn to character-driven fiction. I have too many favorite authors to list, but a few of them are Pat Conroy, Carol Shields, Kim Edwards, Bailey White, Arturo Pérez-Reverte, and Amy Tan.

The books I've read more than once are *The Prince of Tides*, *Mama Makes Up Her Mind*, *Roxanna Slade*, *Cider with Rosie*, *Illusions*, and *The Hundred Secret Senses*. I suspect I'll read *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett again, too.

Q. As we get to Savannah, the setting of your book springs to vivid life. Why did you choose to set your book in the South? Why did you choose to set it in the late 1960s?

The characters actually chose the era of my story. They lived in a time when life was simpler—there were no computers or cell phones and certainly no reality TV shows! Not only did I want my book to have believably eccentric characters, but I wanted it to have multicultural characters, too. And where other than the American South could a little Northern girl so profoundly connect with an African American housekeeper?

My admiration for Southern architecture and gardens, combined with my background in interior design, made the setting of Savannah a natural choice. Most important, without the beauty and graciousness of Aunt Tootie's world, CeeCee's story could have run the risk of becoming somber. It's the contrast of light to dark, joy to sorrow, and humor to sadness that gives the story its balance.

Q. Aunt Tootie is very active in preserving historic Savannah houses, even saving them from demolition. Why did you choose to make this a major part of her character? Is this subject near and dear to you?

Aunt Tootie is a woman in her midsixties who sparkles with joie de vivre—it was imperative that she never come across as a lamenting widow. She needed to possess an inner fire—a cause that was for the betterment of the community and the city that she so dearly loved. By making her an active member of the Historic Savannah Foundation, it gave me the opportunity to weave details of beautiful old homes into the story. Plus it was important for CeeCee to experience her aunt's zest and to recognize that there are more important things in life than wallowing in past injustices and self-pity.

Like Tootie, I've always loved old homes—especially those Southern beauties built from 1780 to 1910. When I enter a grand old home, I get the chills just thinking about all the mysteries and family histories that took place within those thickly plastered walls. Many years ago I read the story of how seven women banded together and founded the Historic Savannah Foundation. I joined their spirit of historic preservation, purchased a big old Southern home, and rehabbed it top to bottom. I'm also a member of several historic preservation organizations, including the Historic Savannah Foundation, the Historic Charleston Foundation, the Kentucky Historical Society, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. As I began writing about Tootie's life in Savannah, it seemed fitting that she would be an active member of such an important foundation.

Q. How did the idea for Saving CeeCee Honeycutt come about? How long did it take you to write it?

From the day I typed chapter one to the day I completed my query letter to literary agents, it was almost exactly four years—more than three years to write the book and a solid nine months of editing.

The core of my novel was inspired by the summer I visited my great-aunt Mildred in Danville, Kentucky, when I was a little girl. Her home was a gorgeous old Greek Revival, and when I first saw it, I literally gasped—I had just entered a world I never knew existed. I was awed by the lush gardens and the genteel lifestyle. But what struck me most were the lovely manners that Southerners possessed. People on the street would nod and say, "How-de-do," and, "Isn't this a lovely day?" whenever they'd pass by. It was so different from how people behaved in my Northern hometown.

The world my aunt created was magic—extraordinary antiques were used and enjoyed instead of protected, her Scottish terriers chased freely across spectacular Oriental rugs, and laughter was the song at the supper table. Her home was a place of beauty and joy. She was a true Southern lady. She not only possessed charm and grace, but she was also an accomplished, highly educated woman who gave freely of herself to her family, friends, and community. And, oh, was she ever witty! Each night of my visit I'd lie in bed and dream that I lived with my great-aunt. And though that dream never materialized, it inspired the writing of *Saving CeeCee Honeycutt*.

Q. Are any of the characters based on people you've known?

Aunt Tootie is based to an extent on my great-aunt Mildred, but all the other characters are products of my imagination combined with snippets of people I've known or observed throughout my life.

Q. What do you think the heart of this book is? What's the one thing you want people to take away from reading it?

What I'm most touched by is how everyone who reads CeeCee's story comes away with a different feeling. Though I didn't realize it at the time of writing my novel, there seems to be something universal in the story that appeals to a wide audience from varied cultures—from Italy to Israel to France and beyond. I believe the heart of the book is threefold: It's about the capacity for forgiveness, being awake to the magic in everyday life, and embracing a childlike spirit whether you're twelve or ninety-two.

Q. What's your writing process? Is there a particular place you like to go or a time of day when you find yourself best able to write? Do you have any words of advice for aspiring novelists?

I have a library/writing studio in my home. It's a wonderful room, with a fireplace, bookshelves, and lots of natural light. I'm very disciplined—I write six days a week. When the muse is with me, I'll write from morning late into the night.

Do I have words of advice for aspiring novelists? Yes. Read! Gobble up the written word until you're stuffed. Observe the subtleties in the world around you. Write from your heart, and always remain open to possibilities. How your story wants to evolve might be quite different from what you originally intended. Imagination is the life force of a writer. Don't get in its way, but don't let it take you from the sublime to the ridiculous, either.

When you've typed "The End" and think you've got a bona fide novel in your hands, I can guarantee that you don't. Not yet. So don't lay rubber on the road to get your masterpiece to the post office. Instead, take a week off, then go back with fresh eyes and edit your entire manuscript with a ruthless hand. I highly recommend editing a manuscript no fewer than four times. When you finally believe you've created something special, it's time to write a killer query letter—and I mean *killer*! If you can't make the hairs on a literary agent's arms stand up with your one-page

query, then she/he will never read your sample pages. “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” Nowhere is that old adage truer than in the publishing business.

Q. What are you working on now?

I’m delighted to say that more eccentric characters are demanding that I hear their stories. This is the process I love—when out of nowhere an idea for a story begins to take form, followed by the distinct voices of the characters. My next work will certainly be a Southern novel, and I believe the primary setting will be in Charleston, South Carolina.

Courtesy of Penguin Group

Discussion Questions

1. CeeCee tries to escape from the harsh reality of her life by turning to books. When did your own love of reading develop? Did a particular person or event inspire it? What were some books you loved as a child?
2. Camille's illness left CeeCee filled with shame and despair. Do you think if she had told Mrs. Odell more of what went on inside the house that the elderly woman could have done something? If so, what? Were there any incidents in your youth that brought you shame or that you were afraid to discuss with an adult?
3. This book highlights comparisons between the North and South. What do you think accounts for the differences—perceived or otherwise—between people who live on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line?
4. As the story unfolds, a remarkable relationship develops between Oletta and CeeCee—Oletta becomes the stable and wise mother CeeCee never had, and CeeCee fills the place in Oletta's heart left vacant by the untimely death of her daughter. Has anyone ever unexpectedly arrived in your life and filled a void? Have you ever filled a void in someone else?
5. After the attack at the beach, Oletta tells CeeCee she must “reclaim her power” to overcome her fears. What are some times in your life when you had to stand up to reclaim your own power? How did you go about it?
6. Forgiveness is an underlying theme in CeeCee's story. By eventually forgiving her parents, she frees herself to begin a new life. What people have you forgiven, and how hard was it to do? What were the rewards?
7. Aunt Tootie and all her friends make an art out of making people feel welcome. How do the various women welcome CeeCee into their ranks? What about their welcome for Mrs. Odell? What are some particular times when you've received a warm welcome? What about the opposite?

8. The incident at the peach farm followed by the days CeeCee spends in recovery mark a poignant turning point in her life. Has there ever been a time when you faced your own turning point? Was there anyone who helped you? What gifts were waiting for you at the end of your journey?

9. When Aunt Tootie tells CeeCee that she's "a very popular lady," it has a profound effect on her. What are some other times in the book when CeeCee takes an adult's words to heart—good and bad? What are some particularly memorable things that were said to you as a child—positive or negative?

10. At several key moments in the story, CeeCee finds that her Life Book is being revised. Are there any other words or terms for "Life Book" that you've heard? What are some moments in your life when you knew an indelible memory was being made? When was the last time you recall thinking, "I'll remember this forever"?

Courtesy of Penguin Group