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Books: Searching for Bobbie Faye

by Cheré Coen

Toni McGee Causey of Baton Rouge might have created a new genre with her quirky, humorous books set in South Louisiana: *Bobbie Faye's Very (very, very, very) Bad Day* and *Bobbie Faye's (kinda, sorta, not exactly) Family Jewels*.

Causey is also a member of Killer Year, a group of 13 debut crime fiction authors who produced the anthology, *Killer Year: Stories to Die For*. In 2006, she was a contributor to the non-fiction collection of essays, *Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans*.

The Kinder-born Cajun will speak about her book and film contracts at the Writer's Guild of Acadiana's October meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Barnes & Noble, 5705 Johnston St.

We caught up with Causey while on tour in Oklahoma and she graciously answered some of our questions.

The Times: Your heroine, Bobbie Faye, is atypical. She lives in a trailer and mans the gun and knife counter at Ce Ce's Cajun Outfitter and Feng Shui Emporium. How did you come up with this character?

Causey: I often say that Bobbie Faye showed up one day, her bags packed, moved in and told me I'd have to tell this story. She came alive for me in a flash, and it felt like I'd always known her.

She reminds me, however, of friends of mine. People I've loved, people I've grown up with. She works hard to stretch a dollar, something we can all relate to, and struggles like so many of us have done to try to make ends meet and to try, at the end of the day, to do the right thing for the ones we love. She's a bit of a walking disaster, though she means well, and she makes me laugh. I love looking at the world through her skewed observations, always finding the absurd, even in the middle of a heartbreak or catastrophe. She's my hero, really, with her tenacity.

I'm not sure where Ce Ce's Cajun Outfitter and Feng Shui Emporium came from. I have to tell you that I thought, at first, that she might be a hair dresser and she informed me that no, she was not, that she sold guns and gave shooting lessons at Ce Ce's. (It is probably a little dangerous for writers to admit people talk to them in their heads. Elsewhere, they call that crazy, and don't think for a moment we don't know that we're getting away with being nuts.)

The Times: If you could describe your *Bobbie Faye* books in a few words, what would it be?

Causey: Caper, comedy. Southern fried action adventure, with a little romance, because who doesn't want to be loved?

The Times: I heard you were offered a whirlwind contact and there are talks of a movie? Is this true?

Causey: True. It's been an amazing ride. I started off years ago in non-fiction, writing newspaper and magazine articles, then tried my hand at screenwriting and traveled back and forth to L.A. after I'd landed an agent. Lots of meetings, lots of bridesmaid type of stuff. Later, I was basically offered development type things if I'd move out there. With two sons growing up here near their grandparents, and with our unique Cajun culture, I just didn't want to go, didn't want to separate them from their background and family.

Bobbie Faye started off as a script, because I knew the format well and knew I could get the idea down fast — it was an intense writing experience, because the story came to me whole, bang, and I had to hurry to keep up. I knew by that point, though, that I didn't want to keep pursuing screenwriting and I'd planned to use the script as an outline. A friend read the script, handed it to another friend who called and said, "Is this going to be a novel?" I explained that it was, and had not realized that this friend-of-a-friend was a published writer, a former editor for a publishing house and, most astonishing, wanting to pitch it.

I can't emphasize enough how deals just do not happen like this. For one thing, most published authors just don't have the time — they have their own deadlines and families and life. Secondly — and perhaps most importantly — they don't read manuscripts from people they don't know for legal reasons. (And sadly, I am now in that same boat.) The only reason she'd read *Bobbie Faye* was because the mutual friend recommended it with great enthusiasm. You can't buy that, and you can't substitute anything for it. So I was very lucky.

The writer, Rosemary Edgehill, suggested I write a synopsis so she could pitch it. I said, "They don't buy a first-time novelist's book based on three sample

chapters”—which was all I had done, and a synopsis. The real method — the one most writers use — is to write the book, finish it, polish it, then query an agent and get it out there, get it read. I’d done the research, knew how the business worked. And Rosemary said, “Shut up and write it. “ To which I said, “Yes Ma’am.”

I wrote several really terrible drafts of that synopsis. At one point, Rosemary said, “I didn’t think you could make it worse, but you did.” I kept going (tenacity and willingness to learn is 99 percent of getting published), and when it was finally decent, Rosemary pitched it to Nichole Argyres of St. Martin’s Press, gave me an agent’s name to query (which I did). A week later, the agent signed me, Nichole wanted to buy it, they haggled for a week, and there was suddenly a three-book offer as a pre-empt to take it off the table before we went to any other publisher. It was a bit staggering. I kept asking the agent, “Are you sure they know this isn’t written yet?” (I was slightly terrified.)

So it sold, 20 years almost to the date after I’d sold my first non-fiction article. There had been a tremendous number of articles and screenplays in between, years’ worth, a nearly finished MFA, but even looking back, it still feels like a whirlwind.

Just prior to the book coming out, Carla Shamberg from Double Feature Films (who was the executive producer for *Erin Brockovich*) read the manuscript and wanted to produce. We’d talked to several producers, but I really clicked with Carla and think she not only gets the character, but will honor the culture and the area, which is important to me. I know things will change — having been a screenwriter, I see the logistics in converting a book back into a film experience — but I think she’ll do a great job. She’s got it at a studio now, but as they say, who knows? Knock wood, cross fingers and prayers said, we’ll see. Films rarely happen quickly, if they happen at all.

All that said, I want to encourage people not only to dream, but work hard to make them happen. No two writers get published the same way, and anything’s possible.

The Times: What book is next and is the title as eccentric?

Causey: A week ago, if you’d asked me this question, I’d have had a different answer for you. It’s been a pretty amazing and strange week. St. Martin’s called and they are going to do a big release in the mass market — and they threw a twist in that I’m thrilled over: they’re re-releasing book one as a June lead title, then book two will follow in July and book three will debut in August. I’m so happy with the lead title slot, it’s insane. They’re going to be doing a tremendous amount of promotion for it, and the film producer is utterly thrilled. The book titles, however, will change for the mass market editions. (There’s barely room for titles that long on the mass market, much less

squeezing in my three names.)

- ***Charmed and Disarmed*** (book one) June, 2009
- ***Girls Just Wanna Have Guns*** (book two) July, 2009
- ***When A Man Loves A Weapon*** (book three) August, 2009

Crazy, I know. We'd hoped to be released in mass market (and there is an entire conversation to be had on the merits of hardback vs. trade vs. mass market), but in this economy, I truly wanted to have the mass market edition. My agent and I are over the moon.

The Times: How about that sexy FBI agent?

Causey: Yeah, how 'bout that guy? He's a lot of fun to write, and in book three, there are some surprising (and I hope, intriguing) twists involving him and people from his past. He's got a plan, that Trevor, and he's really not one to give up a plan very easily.

The Times: What other things have you written?

Causey: There is a Bobbie Faye short story in the fantastic thriller anthology called *Killer Year: Stories to Die For*. It was edited by the amazing *New York Times* bestselling author Lee Child, and has one of the best collections of thriller short stories I've seen; I'm just truly fortunate to be a part of that group. There's also an essay published in the anthology, *Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans*. Beyond the copious feature articles mentioned before, I also blog every other week on Murderati: <http://murderati.typepad.com>.

The Times: What would you like to write if not about Bobbie Faye?

Causey: I have so many stories I want to tell. There's a very dark thriller I'm itching to do one day and a very funny sort of supernatural thing I'd like to do as well. I've got outlines for several suspense novels and that's not even counting the crazy paranormal tale I'd like to try. I write the kinds of stories I grew up on, things I loved to hear, things that make me laugh and cry. You never know, as a writer, if you'll get published or, once published, if the readers will keep picking up your books. You hope it happens, you hope you tell a story with enough vivid imagination that readers will lose themselves in your world and keep coming back for more. That's the ultimate compliment, those readers. So I'm lucky right now, and who knows if that will keep happening. With that in mind, I'm just going to keep writing what I love and hope the readers will love it, too.

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