



A C o n v e r s a t i o n w i t h

S A R A H B I R D

a u t h o r o f

H o w P e r f e c t I s T h a t

**Q: Why did you write HOW PERFECT IS THAT?**

**A:** To cheer myself up. To make myself laugh. I wrote most of this book in 2003 when I was in despair over what was happening in our country. I needed a way to think about the war, about the stolen election, about toxic, Gilded Age levels of opulence and obliviousness. And I needed to do it without wanting to drink Drano. As always, humor seemed to be the way out.

During a conversation with a friend who couldn't afford to get a Pap smear, my need to understand collided with a need to laugh. She was the fifth highly educated friend I'd spoken with in as many weeks who had either just lost a job or had a job with such crappy insurance that basic health care was out of the question. Tired of simply wringing my hands, I suggested that she should move back into the co-op boarding house where we both had lived when we were students at the University of Texas. Why, with the money she saved she'd have enough for that elusive Pap smear in no time!

The absurdity of that prospect—moving back into your old college boarding house—tickled us both and suddenly, laughing seemed like a lot more fun than hand-wringing and railing and wailing. So, rather than futilely obsess about the fate of America, I created a character who was every bit as oblivious, greedy, and short-sighted as those who had delivered us to our current fate. In an attempt to keep hope alive, I also made this scoundrel redeemable. We'll see if the same holds true for America.

**Q: How do you respond to readers who take the novel simply as a comic romp?**

**A:** Hallelujah! First and foremost, the book has to work as a novel and, hopefully, one with elements of humor. The political agenda is entirely my own and one need not share it to enjoy the book.

**Q: Many of your novels portray very exotic worlds and eras, Civil War Spain in *The Flamenco Academy*, Occupation Japan in *The Yokota Officers Club*. You've also set books in the worlds of romance novels and offbeat rodeos. What was it like, essentially, setting a book in your own backyard?**

**A:** There was a still a fair amount of research involved since HOW PERFECT IS THAT is set in social arenas that I don't belong to. For the high society sections, I had to go to school on fashion, shoes, handbags, the whole semiotics of apparel. Which designers are in, which are out, what each one signifies.

So both worlds had their own anthropology and getting the anthropology right is one of my chief joys in writing. Mostly I found it hilarious imagining what it would be like to have Barbara Bush as your mother-in-law. What a weekend with that whole crew might be like!

# K N O P F Q & A

**Q: Originally, the novel has the title *Weightless*. Why did it change?**

**A:** *Weightless* was my working title. I meant it ironically since my protagonist, Blythe Young, is excessively weighted down with social aspirations, regret, guilt, schemes, lies, sins of both omission and commission. She is desperate to be a woman who lives to gain material possessions and lose body weight.

As fitting as the title was thematically, it didn't convey that this is a comic novel. I was moaning to my friend, art/pop culture critic, Dave Hickey, that I needed to come up with a title that was less weighty than *Weightless* and he suggested HOW PERFECT IS THAT. Since Dave is a certified genius with the MacArthur Grant to prove it, how could I refuse?

**Q: You have mentioned in an interview that most of your work is somewhat autobiographical. What aspects of HOW PERFECT IS THAT are close to your own life?**

**A:** Well, of course, there was my conviction for drugging unsuspecting victims, but that's behind me now. The low society stuff is much more autobiographical for me than the high. I did actually live in a UT co-op boarding house called Seneca House while I was getting my master's at the University of Texas. But in that day and age, it housed female graduate students. It has since morphed into a co-ed, mostly undergraduate, sometimes feminist, mostly vegan, generally activist house which the current residents were kind enough to allow me to visit several times.

Beyond that, there's probably less autobiographical overlap in this novel than almost any of my others. Fortunately, many kindhearted souls in high places helped me with the high society research by sharing their worlds with me, allowing me to glimpse lives that are a round of charity galas, private jets, and Dom Perignon by the crate.

An incident that I thought was particularly telling actually occurred after I'd written the book and was checking on details about various designers. One of my sources asked me if I would rewrite the novel and switch designers in order to de-emphasize one she'd had a falling-out with and highlight another she was currently courting! I was fascinated by glimpses of a world where a woman's identity hinges on the designers she is associated with.

**Q: Your protagonist, Blythe Young—while good-hearted—is not always a likeable character. (Cut to our heroine drugging guests at a party she is hired to cater). What was your inspiration for her?**

**A:** "Good-hearted?" That remains to be seen. Blythe is a scoundrel! A reprobate! A user and an abuser! The whole question in the book is: Can she be saved? Is she redeemable?

This likeability question intrigues me. It comes up far more often in novels with female protagonists than it does when the hero is male. The conventional wisdom is that female readers don't like books where the heroine is not "likeable" or "relatable." I may be a complete freak in this, but I loves me a bad girl, a woman with some deep and real characters flaws as opposed to a protagonist whose major flaw is giving too much or something totally cooked up like that. Blythe was fun to write and, I hope, she's fun to read.

**Q: To name a few of the socialites that appear in the book: Kippie Lee Teeter. Missy Quisinberry. Noodle Tiner. Lulie Bingle. You can't just make these names up. Do these ladies (or their likenesses) actually exist in Texas?**

**A:** An early reader in New York told me that the names were just too over the top, too unbelievable. Not that truth is any defense when writing fiction, but I did have to laugh since all those names came from lists of Texas Junior League board members. In fact, I wish I'd read today's newspaper in time to include a couple of names I saw there: Naelynn and Gary Beth.

Although Texas likes to think of itself as Western, it manifests a lot of "southernness," and, in particular, a lot of rural southernness, in girls' names.

# K N O P F Q & A

**Q: While HOW PERFECT IS THAT can be read as a light read, it has serious undertones that address our current political climate. Recalling the backlash against Dixie Chick Natalie Maines after her famous declaration in 2003 that she was ashamed President George W. Bush was from Texas, how do you think the political attitude has changed in Texas over the past few years?**

**A:** Night and day. At least in the world where the novel is set.

Austin had always been this happy, liberal blue island in a hostile sea of red. Well, after the 2000 election, that sea threatened to swamp our little island paradise. This period-when to criticize the president was to be a traitor-already feels like history, like the McCarthy Era: something that happened a long-time ago. Or maybe didn't happen at all: a time of madness when politics wasn't the thing you didn't talk about because it bored everyone so much but because friendships would be ended and concealed handguns drawn.

The whole country went through this calamitous convulsion, but it was particularly rancorous here in Austin. There is a large and influential group that, beginning during the years when Bush was governor, gained tremendous social cachet through personal friendships with the Bushes. In these circles, politics suddenly became an even more fraught topic than it did in the rest of the country. I was fascinated by the peculiarly personal dimension this discussion took in Austin where suddenly, friendships that dated back to college hippie days were subjected to political litmus tests and judgments could be rendered on who did or did not accept invitations to the White House. Seating charts became color-coded with the unreconstructed Blues moved far down the table or out altogether.

I knew that the tide had turned when, during the summer of 2006, I walked in on a conversation and heard one of the Austin inner circle of Bushies say, "We never really liked George. Laura was always the one who was our friend." And now, interestingly, some members of that inner circle are supporting Obama.

**Q: What would you say to people who want to categorize this book as just a book for Texans?**

**A:** This goes back to the long, ongoing controversy about "regional" literature and the extremely condescending assumption it is based on: that the story set in New York-preferably Manhattan-is universal, anywhere else and it's regional.

Blythe Young is a social climber for the ages. She has an interesting manifestation in Austin, but could have cropped up anywhere in the country. She is a classic American hustler amped up on the steroidal greed of the dot-com era and flavored with the virulent strain of Southern Belle-ism that afflicts a certain type of Texas woman.

**Q: Your loyal readers are likely to notice that HOW PERFECT IS THAT, while funny, has a darker brand of humor than some of your previous books. How would you compare this novel to your others?**

**A:** As my husband asked during the 2000 election when I was marching, and leafleting, writing letters to the editor and ranting non-stop, "What happened to that carefree girl who didn't used to know who the governor was?" I guess that carefree girl wrote the earlier books.

**Q: What's next for you?**

**A:** I'm currently writing a film adaptation of my last novel, *The Flamenco Academy*.

**For booking information, please contact:  
Sarah Gelman/212-572-2799/sgelman@randomhouse.com**