

A woman with curly brown hair, wearing a blue floral dress, is smiling and sitting at a desk. On the desk, there are several books, a lamp, and some papers. The background is a plain wall.

# ARTS & CULTURE

## SET IN THE SOUTH

*The sense of place in reader-turned-writer  
Lauren Denton's second novel is just as much of  
a character as her first.*

**BY MADOLINE MARKHAM**  
PHOTOS BY LINDSEY CULVER

Lauren Denton has always been a big reader, a passion she now shares with her daughters Sela and Kate.





Long before Lauren Denton was a writer, she was a reader. So it's fitting that her first novel came after a time when she was having a hard time finding something to read. "What would make the elements of a perfect book?" she asked herself. It would take place in summer, near water—the place this Mobile native always chooses over anywhere cold. And of course it would be set in the South. She thought of New Orleans and Mobile Bay, and then a bed and breakfast popped into her head. "And the story started bubbling," Lauren recalls. "It was the first time I started trying to write a story and it kept coming and it kept coming."

Fast forward to today. The novel set in both New Orleans and Sweet Bay (based on Magnolia Springs near Mobile) had characters spring to life, and now countless readers have joined in on the story. In fact, it spent eight weeks on the USA Today Bestseller list and made it to the Top 20 Most Sold list on Amazon and top 10 fiction ebooks list in the Wall Street Journal in 2017. Its title? *The Hideaway*. "I knew it was something different," Lauren says. "I was invested enough in the characters that I thought other people would be too."

### THAT SOUTHERN SETTING

Both *The Hideaway* and Lauren's two forthcoming novels started with a setting that evolved into a character itself. "I always thought the characters would come first and I'd build a world around these characters," Lauren says. "But for all three novels, it all started with a place." For *The Hideaway*, it was Sweet Bay.

For her second novel *Hurricane Season*—which comes out April 3—it was an area she made up in Baldwin County, Alabama, north of the coast in that "rural area that's familiar to so many who've driven through it on the way to the beach." "Everything I have written so far is familiar to me. Even the places I have made up I have based on places that are familiar," Lauren says. The third book she is working on is set in a fictional town based on the tiny one outside of Mobile where her grandparents lived.

Speaking of *Hurricane Season*, here's its plot teaser: Husband and wife Ty and Betsy own a dairy farm and have tried to have their own children for years. Now Betsy's "wild child" younger sister Jenna drops off her kids for two weeks while she goes on a photography retreat in Florida, and their life starts to look like they had always imagined it. Lauren summarizes it best: "In short, it's about marriage,

Author Lauren Denton often writes by hand as she brings her characters to life.



motherhood, sisters, daughters, cows, photography and hurricanes. I'm a little biased, but I think you'll like it."

Back to the setting, it's hurricane season—an intense one Lauren based off the 2004-05 hurricane seasons with Ivan and Katrina. "I was remembering what it was like to have these storms coming over and over," she says. "Hurricanes come in and cause a lot of upheaval, and I thought it was a good metaphor for what was going on in their lives that summer." To get there, though, she had to figure out how exactly a farm readied itself during a storm, so she spoke with a couple of dairy farmers—Gilmer Dairy Farm in Lamar County and Middleton Farms in Moss Point, Mississippi, that went through Katrina. "Dairy farming is really hard work and not quite as quaint as I once thought it was," Lauren notes.

### A NEW NICHE

Back before dairy farms and bestseller lists, Lauren simply got an itch to write. It started in 2009 after her first daughter Kate was born. Before that she'd written for local magazines but had never thought about venturing into fiction, thinking it just wasn't something she could do. But then came the ideas, bouncing around her in head, and coming out in sets of 10-20 pages at a time until she'd get bored. Eventually she finished a novel before *The Hideaway*, but she later realized it was a "practice" book.

When it came time to shop for an agent for *The*

*Hideaway*, Lauren ended up taking a slightly different route. Coffee with writer Patti Callahan Henry, who lives in Mountain Brook, led to an editor friend of Patti's and a book deal with Thomas Nelson. And the agent came later. "Agents get upwards of 50 queries a day, and you're lucky if they even snatch yours out of the pile," Lauren says. "I give a lot of credit to Patti for getting my manuscript out of that slush pile."

You might recognize Thomas Nelson as a publisher of Bible studies and Christian novels, but Lauren's book is in a new niche they are venturing into. "I was hesitant about it at first," she says. "I don't read Christian fiction and I don't write it, but my faith informs what I write. I like writing stories I can give to anyone to read, and I like stories that have some hint of redemption without having an overt faith message." And so she fits in this niche somewhere between the "super sweet" Christian fiction and mainstream secular novels that Thomas Nelson markets to bookstores and libraries of all kinds.

Lauren also calls her work both Southern fiction ("I feel like they wouldn't be the same stories if they were set outside the south.") and women's fiction. "There's a lot of drama about what's women's fiction and what's chick lit, and why women's fiction even has 'women's' in front of it when there's no men's fiction," she says. "I think women's fiction is following a woman or a group of women on some sort of journey. Women are more emotional than men, and as women we are interested to see how other women deal with



things. I think it opens the door to how other women live.”

Whatever you call her work, Lauren’s readers like it. One reported stayed up until 2 a.m. reading and then set her alarm for 6 a.m. so she could finish it before work. “The really sweet messages are the ones where they say the story made them think about their grandparents differently, or they’d found themselves in a similar situation where they learned about something after their grandparent had passed away. Or the book made them want to learn their grandparents’ stories before they go. I have always been one to email writers and tell them when I love a book, so it’s humbling to be on the other side.”

### THE WRITING LIFE, THE READING LIFE

What exactly does the writing life look like for this Homewood mom of two? In the early days she wrote during nap times, but those were always changing. When she was having trouble finding a time to write, her husband suggested doing it early, when he got up to run. At first she thought it sounded awful but then she did it, and the 5-7 a.m. writing time stuck—until her youngest went to kindergarten this year. She never writes at night. Usually you’ll find her sitting on the couch in her living room, or spread out over a table at Homewood Public Library, where she often sets out notecards to rearrange plot points. “People will come in and say, ‘What are you doing?’ But I think they are used to it now,” Lauren says.

With *Hurricane Season*, she’s found herself writing long hand—in notebooks labeled 1, 2 and 3 with calendars she has drawn out in the back cover to keep track of the story’s timeline and spelling words her daughter has written on some of the pages. “I have found my brain works in a different way when I am writing with a pen,” she says. “When you are looking at a blank computer

screen, it’s more intimidating than this ratty Dollar Tree notebook. I can scratch through everything. If I get stuck, I can go back to this and then transcribe it all back to the computer.”

Amidst it all Lauren is always reading too. Reading is kind of a big deal for the Denton household in fact. “My husband reads. I read. My kids see it’s a neat thing,” Lauren says. “I read anything I can get my hands on, and (my daughter) Kate does too, which is really fun.” Kindergartner *Sela* sits and “reads” picture books, eagerly awaiting learning the words to put it all together.

Lauren says her kids are “really pumped” about her books, too. She walked into *Kate’s* room recently and found her flopped across her bed reading the first few pages of *The Hideaway*. The librarian at Edgewood told her that when she asked *Sela’s* class if they knew what an author was, *Sela* raised her hand and proudly stated, “I know what an author is and my momma is one!” Then there was the time at the grocery store right after the book came out when they passed a woman they didn’t know, and *Kate* leaned over and asked Lauren, “Do you think she knows you’re a famous author?”

Now this book fan girl has her own fans—eagerly waiting for *Hurricane Season* to hit shelves in April. As Lauren writes, “What I love most about reading (is) that moment when I’m reading a book and the character’s words echo something deep inside me—maybe even a feeling I have but haven’t figured out a way to put it into words. It makes me say, ‘Yes! That’s it! THAT is what I want for readers of my books.’”

Join author Lauren Denton for a launch party for *Hurricane Season* on Saturday, April 7 from 6-8 p.m. at Little Professor Bookcenter. Books will be available for purchase and signing, and there will be drinks and snacks too. ●

READ THIS BOOK

# A Whole New World

Recommendations from

Lauren Denton

Author

The Hideaway and Hurricane Season



One of the great pleasures of reading for me is when a novel teaches me something new. These five novels will open your eyes to a world, concept or event that is likely unfamiliar to most people, but I bet you'll be hungry for more information when you finish reading!



## To the Bright Edge of the World

By Eowyn Ivey

This epistolary novel follows a group of explorers in the 1880s as they travel through undiscovered Alaska. If this sounds like a book that wouldn't interest you, give it a shot anyway. It's a spectacular journey and adventure.



## Good Morning, Midnight

By Lily Brooks-Dalton

This one follows a crew of six astronauts on their return trip from Jupiter after an unnamed cataclysmic event has happened back on earth, shutting down their contact with Mission Control. We also follow a brilliant astronomer living in the Arctic tundra as he too is cut off from the rest of humanity. It's beautiful and fascinating.



## The Longest Night

By Andria Williams

Paul Collier moves his family to Idaho Falls for a job overseeing one of America's first nuclear reactors. Through a cast of flawed but empathetic characters, we see the delicate intricacies of marriage and the bounds of community set inside the tension of America's early nuclear age.



## The Last Days of Night

By Graham Moore

I never knew the battle surrounding the invention of the lightbulb and AC/DC current could be so intriguing! This is fantastic historical fiction about a time and subject rarely covered.



## Flight of Dreams

By Ariel Lawhon

This is a fictional account of the final flight of the Hindenburg zeppelin. The author did meticulous research on the event itself and the people on board, giving us a layered and emotional tale held together by tragic and illuminating facts.