



Dollbaby

Laura Lane McNeal

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A Top Ten Finalist for Best Historical Novel, Goodreads Choice Awards, and a LibraryReads and Okra Pick

A big-hearted coming-of-age debut set in civil rights-era New Orleans—a novel of Southern eccentricity and secrets

When Ibby Bell's father dies unexpectedly in the summer of 1964, her mother unceremoniously deposits Ibby with her eccentric grandmother Fannie and throws in her father's urn for good measure. Fannie's New Orleans house is like no place Ibby has ever been—and Fannie, who has a tendency to end up in the local asylum—is like no one she has ever met. Fortunately, Fannie's black cook, Queenie, and her smart-mouthed daughter, Dollbaby, take it upon themselves to initiate Ibby into the ways of the South, both its grand traditions and its darkest secrets.

For Fannie's own family history is fraught with tragedy, hidden behind the closed rooms in her ornate Uptown mansion. It will take Ibby's arrival to begin to unlock the mysteries there. And it will take Queenie and Dollbaby's hard-won wisdom to show Ibby that family can sometimes be found in the least expected places.

For fans of *Saving CeeCee Honeycutt* and *The Help*, *Dollbaby* brings to life the charm and unrest of 1960s New Orleans through the eyes of a young girl learning to understand race for the first time.

By turns uplifting and funny, poignant and full of verve, *Dollbaby* is a novel readers will take to their hearts.

Dollbaby Details

Date : Published July 3rd 2014 by Viking Adult (first published 2014)

ISBN :

Author : Laura Lane McNeal

Format : Kindle Edition 352 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, American, Southern, Young Adult, Coming Of Age

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From Reader Review Dollbaby for online ebook

Pamela says

In prefacing acknowledgements, Laura Lane McNeal praises her agent and editing/publishing team for their support, assistance, and sage advice. I concur. Without professional tutelage, "Dollbaby" might have become another diamond-in-the-rough among hundreds-of-thousands lost in an overly saturated self-published sea. That would be a crying shame. Dollbaby is a delightful coming-of-age southern jewel. It's my kind of southern-fried fiction: regionally unique and atmospheric rich with quaint ambiance and flavor; an eclectic array of colorful characters; social graces steeped in mysticism, secrets, and perpetual hope; and eccentric magnetism unique to southern social grace – and disgrace.

I felt Ibby's pain of rejection, pawned-off onto an eccentric and somewhat neurotic grandmother whom Ibby had never laid eyes on before. I could smell the Mississippi basin and gulf sea air, and hear gulls and pelicans crying aloft. I could hear the creaking wood floor of the perfumery shop, drenched in earthy and exotic scents. And I could easily visualize Frannie's old Victorian house complete with vine encroaching turrets and pillared portico. And oh the delight of southern superstitions:

"Queenie's bottle tree . . . Every time she finishes a bottle of Milk of Magnesia, she sticks it on a branch of the tree. The bottles, they supposed to capture spirits that wander in the night. Mama says them spirits love blue glass, so they crawl up inside, and once there they can't get out. Then when the sun rises, they burn all up until they no more."

Essentially, McNeal did a nice job authenticating time, place, dialect, customs, traditions, and people unique to New Orleans - and the south in general. The Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in, along with a racially-charged false accusation and the Vietnam War protest rally gave atmospheric credence to the turbulence of the sixties and seventies. And the unique names of people, places, foods, and traditions brought N'Orleans, and all that jazz, to life. Plus I love how Ibby grows and transforms over the years, embracing Frannie, Queenie, and Doll's affection and dedicated devotion as extended family. Truly, good or bad, all the characters were unique and adequately developed.

As for mechanics, a few conversational scenes were a bit choppy. But the overall story had good flow. Divisions between current action and flashback were easy to follow. And for the most part, the story-line stayed on track. There weren't any totally pointless rabbit trails; most everything that McNeal divulged was relevant to time and place. However, not all atmospheric enhancements were relevant to Ibby's story, especially scenes such as Woolworth. Yes it was historically significant to the Civil Rights movement. And yes it was important to the development of Doll and Queenie's characters. But it would have made a stronger impact had Ibby been more directly tied into it. And though Frannie's red convertible emerging on scene at the Vietnam rally was humorous, I wasn't totally certain why it was included. Frankly, the rally scene was so brief it felt more like an aside than a major event.

Overall, Dollbaby is a delightful coming-of-age story - an exceptional debut novel which I enjoyed immensely. I recommend it to all who enjoy an eccentrically rich southern tale embracing culture, hope, acceptance, and family. And because McNeal has room for growth as an author, it only means upwards and onward to greater literary heights. I'm looking forward to reading future novels from her charming southern pen.

Sonja Arlow says

So many themes, issues, secrets and clichés crammed into a story that never really created any depth and complexity. The book blurb also didn't do this story any favours by comparing it to The Help.

It's a sweet, safe and predictable coming of age story narrated by Ibby Bell, whose father passed away suddenly prompting her mother to dump her on the doorstep of a grandmother she has never met.

It's not that I am allergic to sweet stories but this book really struggled to hold my attention. The characters were nice (if very stereotypical of the South) but they just didn't feel very real to me. The plot twists were quite predictable and the ending, well let's just say it was a little too far fetched for me.

Most of this book just felt anticlimactic. For example, the book mentions the Civil rights protests with one of the characters attending a sit-in at a local restaurant. This could have been such a great topic to delve into yet Doll went to the sit-in, police arrived and nothing.... Another example was when a white girl accusing a black boy of raping her. Yet this gets resolved in the span of one chapter with smiles all round.

It almost felt like the author included these issues just to ground the story into the period full of racial tension rather than create real problems for the characters to overcome.

There are a lot of people who enjoyed this and I must give credit to the audio narrator who did an excellent job creating atmosphere however this is not a book I will actively recommend.

If you are interested in Southern Fiction I would rather recommend A Grown-Up Kind of Pretty. Its easy reading southern fiction but with a lot more substance to it.

Angela M says

I started this on Sunday and finished it on Monday. It was just one of those books that is filled with secrets of the past that you just have to know about and characters that you love as soon as you meet them and then you love them more as the author lets you see who they are.

Almost twelve years old and still reeling from the death of her father, Ibby is abandoned by her mother and left on the doorstep of a grandmother who she just barely found out she had. Fannie, her grandmother is a seemingly eccentric, smoking, and gambling, woman is really a mentally unstable, sad woman who has many secrets. The loving relationship that develops between them will move you.

The story is set in New Orleans just as the Civil Rights Act is passed in 1964. Queenie, the endearing maid who "came with the house "has endured losses of her own. She is wise but set in old ways and doesn't think anything will change with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Dollbaby, her daughter, of the newer generation wants change not just for herself but her daughter. These women become as big a part of Ibby's life as they are of Fannie's.

The secrets, one after another begin to unfold about Fannie's life. Ibby learns about Fannie's hard life as a child and how she came to New Orleans. I loved the descriptions of the French Quarter, both when Fannie first came there and in the time when Ibby arrives. But it isn't until the end that the whole story is divulged.

The story though is about more than just the time and place. It is about loss, about friendship, family, race and prejudice, but mostly about the beautiful relationships between these characters. There are things that happened in the past that Ibby doesn't learn until the end , but the most important things she learns is that she is not alone. It's a beautiful story, beautifully written and full of heart and love.

Thank you to PENGUIN GROUP Viking and NetGalley for the opportunity to read this book.

Sharon says

To all those comparing this to The Help by Kathryn Stockett..STOP IT. It's not even close. The plot here is good, but the writing is clunky and inconsistent. Difficult to follow.

Lucy says

Very disappointing. I wanted to like Dollbaby, but it was a real letdown. If you're looking for the next The Secret Life of Bees or The Help, this is not it. Dollbaby reads like a young adult novel. The narration is mainly devoted to spelling out historical details and includes some strange, nonsensical metaphors; the dialog is clunky and contains too much exposition; and the character development is simplistic. The story is disorganized, with plotlines that go nowhere. There are a handful of very good scenes that hint at the book this might have been, but most of it is a big disappointment. And why is it called Dollbaby? The reason is flimsy at best. The character Dollbaby is a potentially terrific lead character, but she remains only a supporting character throughout. My suspicion is that an editor thought it would look good on the cover. (The book does have a great cover, I'll give it that.) This might be a good read for a junior high school-aged reader who has just been introduced to To Kill a Mockingbird. There's no comparison between the two - not by a long shot - but that's the right audience for this novel.

Elizabeth of Silver's Reviews says

The 1960's, New Orleans, a matriarch, a girl without a daddy, housekeepers, families, and secrets.

Ibby was moved to her grandmother's home after her father passed away so her mother could have some time to herself. Ibby had never seen her grandmother before nor had she known about her until a week before this move. Ibby was frightened especially since she heard stories about her strict grandmother from her mother.

Ibby met Queenie and Doll before meeting her grandmother. Queenie and Doll are the staff in Grandmother Fannie's house. They are very loving and caring and huddle around Ibby and take good care of her when Fannie can't.

The characters in DOLLBABY were ones I fell in love with along with Ibby, whose real name was Liberty

Bell. Ibby was an understandably sad young lady for a twelve-year old with a heartbreakin story.

Queenie and Doll were warmhearted, Fannie was rough on the outside but loving on the inside with a past that was kept secret as well as a few other secrets that made the ending superb. Birdelia was sweet even though she was kept out of sight most of the time and had a story of her own. Well...just about every character had a story that was kept under wraps.

If you love Southern fiction with a *Gone-With-The-Wind* feeling, you will love **DOLLBABY**. We the reader follow Fannie, Ibby, Queenie, Doll, and Birdelia in their day-to-day activities during the time of The Civil Rights Movement.

DOLLBABY is an engaging, beautiful debut novel with amazing description, terrific, authentic characters, and a true-to-life storyline. The cover itself will pull you in and will keep you reading.

Historical fiction fans and fans of family sagas will not want to put **DOLLBABY** down and will miss the characters when the book ends. The ending was filled with revelations and proves family is everything even though they might have secrets.

Add **DOLLBABY** to your reading list this summer. I know you will love it too. It is going to be a favorite read for this year. The characters are what made **DOLLBABY** special.

I truly enjoyed this book. I hope you can read it too. 5/5

This book was given to me free of charge and without compensation by the publisher in return for an honest review.

Judy Collins says

A special thank you to PENGUIN GROUP Viking, Pamela Dorman Books, and NetGalley for an ARC, in exchange for an honest review.

Update Audio Book 2015:

Almost a year has passed since the launch of award-winning **DOLLBABY**, a favorite among southern fans.

Being an Audible member, I enjoy going back to some of my "all time favorites reads" from the previous year, and re-reading by listening to them via audio. What a pleasure experiencing once again an extraordinary and heartwarming story by Laura Lane McNeal, performed by *January Lavoy*, delivering an outstanding performance! (A perfect match). Highly recommend any version; however, the audio most definitely captures the essence of time and place, as well as the intense emotions of the turbulent sixties.

Move over Southern writers, this newfound author is here to stay! **THIS GIRL IS ON FIRE!** Laura Lane McNeal, where have you been? Hands down, **DOLLBABY, The Best Debut Novel of 2014!** *A predicted bestseller chart topper.*

From the exquisite and stunning front cover, beautiful fonts, and the intricate filigree throughout the book—resonating the elegant New Orleans style of southern charm and sophistication, worthy of this much loved historical setting—matched with a beautifully- written, impressive debut novel, from the first page to

the last.

A heartwarming and poignant story of strong women, facing many obstacles, tragedies, and challenges in a time of racial tension during the 60's and 70's. From Civil Rights, Vietnam, family secrets, and lies, to the days of Woolworth's, President Johnson, Black and white TVs to color---in the exciting and beautiful southern backdrop, where architecture, jazz, music, dance, southern creole and Cajun food feed your soul.

What a storyteller---this inspiring, uplifting and funny novel, full of flawed and lovable characters, will keep crying and laughing, as they win reader's hearts.

It was 1964 and Liberty Alice Bell (Ibby) 12 yr.-old, born on July 4th, from Washington, has just lost her dad, due to a biking accident (they were on their father-daughter outing). Ibby's mom, Virdine, (not a very caring mom), dumps her daughter, (with no explanation), along with her dad's ashes and an urn---on her eccentric grandmother, Fannie's doorstep, in the historical area of New Orleans. Of course, Virdine does not care for her mother-in-law, and the feeling is most definitely, mutual.

Ibby is not aware she has a grandmother prior to this date, nor is she knowledgeable of her southern roots, her dad's family, or anything about this foreign culture. She is grief stricken, and now left alone with a grandmother she does not even know, in a strange town.

Boy, is she in for a treat of her life, when she is greeted by Fannie's black, smart and wise housekeeper, and cook-- Queenie, who seems to run the household. Queenie came with the house, and has been with Miss Fannie since she was eighteen. She has seen and heard it all, and well equipped for the job!

Queenie's daughter Dollbaby (Doll) -- (23 yrs. old), a talented seamstress and manager for Miss Fannie, runs the household as well, keeping everyone in line. One of her main duties is ensuring Miss Fannie, the lady of the house stays calm.

This group loves hiding things, and keeping secrets to protect their owner. (And let me tell you, this family has plenty of dark, hidden secrets), keeping you engrossed from beginning to end! Doll's daughter, Birdelia (sassy and fun), also Ibby's age, so an immediate family and friendship. (If only Annabelle could be so easy to win over).

Miss Fannie has had a tough life after her husband, and two son's death. She has a colorful past, yet is the foundation of the town, and knows everyone. Fannie is rich, street smart, has guts, tough, funny, and well respected. (Even though she does like to drink now and then, and go a little nuts). Her main family is Queenie and Dollbaby, and of course, their immediate family. Fannie will do anything to protect them, as they her. Even though Fannie is strange in many ways---she has a wonderful and giving heart and takes Ibby under her wing. However she wants to protect her in the event her mom comes back for her.

The funniest is Fannie's love of betting – tennis, golf, football, race horses, etc.....she is sharp, has a thumb on the winners, and a town of followers, ready to follow her lead. She begins to teach Ibby, the ways of the south from-- the way you dress, entertain, manners, and how to win at life! (The white gloves and pearls, a trademark of the South)---yes I am a southerner!

Queenie and Doll informs Ibby the rules of the house from their point of view:

Rule #1: Don't ever go asking Fannie about her past (gets her all emotional)

Rule #2: Fannie talks about her past, let her talk, but don't go asking no questions.

Rule #3 You see her hand start twitching, you better change the subject or she gone have one of her spells

Rule # 4 You got something you want to know you come ask one of us

Rule #5 I will tell you what you need to know, but don't never let on to Miss Fannie that I said nothing.

Rule #6 Keep Miss Ibby away from Miss Annabelle

"Just remember those rules and we won't have no troubles!"

As Ibby searches for a family and her own identify, she finally comes to know her real grandmother, with all her secrets and flaws; and love of the other powerful women in the house on Prytania Street, who irrevocably shaped and nurtured her grandmother, past the ghosts she left behind.

From the flash backs to the fifties to the present time of sixties through the seventies – what a ride, from loss and love, to forgiveness and redemption.

Loved these quotes: “You can’t choose the day or time when you will fully bloom. It happens on its own time, when you least expect it. “Whenever there’s a loss, there’s bound to be a gain somewhere else. You just have to know where to look for it.”

Fans of Dorothea Benton Frank, Beth Hoffman, Karen White, Susan Rebecca White, Fannie Flagg, Joshilyn Jackson, Wiley Cash, Charles Martin, Kathryn Stockett, Sue Monk Kidd, Sarah Addison Allen, Julie Kibler, and Diane Chamberlain (just to name a few of my favorites), will welcome **Laura Lane McNeal’s DOLLBABY**, and assured to enjoy her unique style and authentic first-hand knowledge of the south, its characters, and dialect.

This big-hearted, coming-of-age debut novel, is the type of book, you cannot put down. A page-turner, keeping you wanting to know the next secret and fate; yet at you come to the close, you do not want it to end as you want to savor each word. (Missing Commander’s Palace—and my favorite seat in the garden patio). Please, let’s hope for a sequel, as these characters are too good, to end. You have to love New Orleans and this house!

Would love to continue to hear more about future adventures of Ibby, Doll, Birdelia, and T-Bone. Fans will definitely root for a movie –as can you image the cast?

A powerful, thought-provoking, inspiring, and satisfying read. I highly recommend! A talented author you will want to follow for years to come-can’t wait to see what comes next!

Judith D. Collins Must Read Books

TOP 30 BEST BOOKS OF 2014

Jessica says

I don't understand how this one has such a relatively high rating on Goodreads. It sounded like a very promising novel of a young girl coming of age in 60s New Orleans, against a backdrop of civil rights

protests and family secrets, and it's drawn comparisons to *The Help*. But the writing is very awkward -- most of the background information is revealed through dialogue and the concept of exposition is ignored completely in favor of offering explanations after the fact -- and the characters barely rise above cliche. Not for me.

Diane S ? says

3.5 A coming of age story set in New Orleans during the era of Civil Rights. A story that is gently and atmospherically told, filled with secrets, family and tragedies from the past that have a strong hold on the present.

It is, however, the characters that make this novel so special. Ibby is 12 years old, her father recently dead, when she is dropped at her grandmother's house, by her mother. A grandmother she had never met and had been told by her mother many bad things. There she meets two wonderfully drawn black women named Queenie, the other Queenie's daughter who they call Dollbaby. Her grandmother is a generous, often overwhelmed woman, whose life holds many personal struggles and secrets. The rich characterizations of these characters is amazing.

We get little bit of the music scene, a visit to the black community and their church when President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, and a Vietnam War protest at Tulane. We watch Ibby grow and as secrets are revealed, her struggle to understand the woman who is her grandmother.

A wonderfully written Southern novel, full of the atmosphere that is still found in New Orleans today.

Caryne says

I have so many books on my to-read list that I didn't even finish this one. It has been compared to "the help" and in my opinion, is far from that in quality and story-telling. The characters are annoying, and the big family secrets revealed are obvious and boring.

Angie Lisle says

This is southern-lit about a family in New Orleans, when a girl named Libby Bell is abandoned by her mother at her paternal grandmother's house in the 1960s and all the family secrets proceed to spill out of the closets.

I loved this book. Loved. The story has the magic of Alice Hoffman, Sarah Addison Allen, Rebecca Wells, and Mildred Taylor, all rolled up into one. I also thought about the older movie version of *Steel Magnolias* while I read this book - not because of similar plot-lines or characters, but because of the way the story feels as it's being told. I think another reason this story made me think of *Steel Magnolias* so much is because I would love to see this book become a movie.

I'm so glad I received a free advanced copy of this book from GoodReads First Reads in exchange for a

review. I had allotted four days to read this book (reading a quarter of the book per day) but I was so into the story that I carried the book around with me and read whenever I found a spare minute. I finished the book in three days. I look forward to reading future works from Laura Lane McNeal.

Julie says

Dollbaby by Laura Lane McNeil is a 2014 Viking Adult publication.

This highly praised novel has oft been compared to “The Help”, and to a lesser extent “The Secret Life of Bees”. However, I would advise you to avoid going into this book with that type of preconceived notion. This book is nothing at all like “The Help” with the exception of it being set in the south in the 1960's, and featuring strong black women, but the similarity ends there.

When Liberty's (Ibby) father dies suddenly, her mother abruptly drops her off at her paternal grandmothers' home without Ibby ever having met the woman, and with no indication when her mother might return for her.

Fannie is nothing like Ibby thought she would be, and with Queenie and Dollbaby on hand, Ibby settles into a new life in New Orleans with these three special women who raise her into adulthood, while Ibby slowly unlocks the dark family secrets Fannie has hidden in the old house for all these years.

The hot, humid backdrop of New Orleans in the sixties where race tensions were high provided a uneasy backdrop to this engrossing coming of age story. Queenie and Dollbaby are the real caretakers of Ibby, although Fannie makes most of the big decisions about her granddaughter's future, such as attending a prestigious Catholic school, despite the fact they weren't Catholic, as an example.

Queenie and Dollbaby know most of Fannie's secrets and moods, and slowly reveal them to Ibby until she finally has clearer picture of who Fannie is and what is at the root of her instability. You will most likely begin to piece together the truth about Ibby's family as time passes on, but ultimately this is a story of friendship, love, and family.

The writing could have been a lot more cohesive and the outline needed some work. However, at the core, the story is solid, it just lacks a smoothness to it, and could use a little more shine and polish. However, the story itself overrode any writing issues. I had some mixed emotions about some parts of the story, but the south had it's own way of handling things back in the day and Fannie and Queenie, especially Queenie, took an unorthodox approach in what was most certainly a no win situation. I still wondered at some of the ramifications of Fannie's story, but can't really dissect it in this review without giving too much away.

I think the story is though provoking, atmospheric, sad, yet ultimately the truth, as harsh as may have been, really showed that love transcends all manner of obstacles, especially with family. Forgiveness, acceptance, and peace often comes at a high price and all the women in the story made sacrifices in order to do what they felt was right or for the best. We may not agree with all their choices, but I did find them to be strong and inspirational, in the face of much tragedy and difficult times.

Overall, I still feel somewhat conflicted by this book, but any story that keeps me thinking about it long after I have turned the last page, means it left an impression. I have struggled with how I wanted to rate the book, especially with some of the writing issues I mentioned, but I think the story is about average- so this one gets

4 stars.

Sharon says

Very stilted writing and xeroxed characters. DNF.

Jen says

This is a subtle, southern charming read that gets under your skin as you read it. It's 1964 in the deep south of New Orleans. It's the summer and the heat is oppressive. Ibby Bell is abandoned by her mother just after her father has passed away. She is literally left on the doorstep of her eccentric grandmother whom she has never met. The atmosphere of the story is one of racial tension, acceptance of differences and the love and protection found in a non traditional family. A 50-year old story unfolds that is amazingly sad but full of hope and provides such clarity. McNeal's writing is both descriptive and thematic. The story is told from Ibby's point of view, however throughout there are various flashbacks into her grandmother's life that tell her story. There was only one minute part that I didn't quite buy into and kept this at a 4.5 rather than a 5★. Well worth the read if you enjoy southern lit.

Laura says

I loved this book. The characters are so likeable you just can't help falling in love with them. They become family. The author continues to feed you bits and pieces until the plot comes around full circle. Loved it and highly recommend. Quick and easy book!
