

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Cheré Dastugue Coen is a freelance food and travel writer who makes her home in Lafayette. She writes Louisiana romances and mysteries under the pen name of Cherie Claire.



## SENSE OF PLACE

*A New Orleans writer finds her literary soul in Cajun Country*

by Cheré Dastugue Coen illustration by Christina Brown

**M**y entrée into writing novels began with an embarrassing idea. I imagined that being a newspaper journalist, I could whip out popular paperbacks as fast as breaking news. To make matters worse, my first historical romance was set along the Chisholm Trail, a place this Louisiana native knew nothing about — not to mention never visited; I got the idea from watching the “Lonesome Dove” miniseries on TV.

Needless to say, I soon learned that writing genre fiction requires great skill and knowledge. That first novel remains in a dark closet, never to see the light of day.

After my literary disaster, the universe took pity on my soul and one night I had an incredible dream about a young Cajun entrepreneur falling for an American socialite in 19th century Franklin, Louisiana, along with a fiddle-playing cousin and a host of colorful characters. I had grown up in New Orleans, but been lured toward Acadiana and its culture and traditions ever since my sister attended USL (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) and routinely invited me over to Lafayette for theater, Cajun food and collegiate parties. Even when I worked at *The Advocate* newspaper in Baton Rouge, I would volunteer for every story assignment west of Port Allen.

So, once that dream brought me fresh inspiration, I jumped on the idea, creating the fictional story behind “Jolie Blonde,” a song known as the Cajun national anthem. I sold that book to an editor whose own background included Acadian history (her grandparents were from Prince Edward Island) and she loved the Louisiana flavor and history. The name had to be changed (no French for romance titles), my name changed (no accents for romance authors) and a hunk was assigned to model for the cover. Regardless, “A Cajun Dream” started my novel-writing career and every book I’ve written since has included Louisiana locations, characters and history, most of them set in Acadiana. Even my non-fiction books celebrate Cajun Country, from Lafayette ghost stories to indigenous cuisine.

As if my writing opened the door for my relocation, I ended up in Lafayette, a place I’ve lovingly called home for the past 14 years. I’m now an active participant in a culture I spent years researching and visiting. My Yat accent comes out on occasion, I add tomatoes to my cuisine and after years of genealogy research I have yet to find one ounce of Cajun blood. But, I’ve adopted Acadiana as my home and it has embraced me in return.

What makes my life, hence my writing, unique is the authenticity of South Louisiana culture. It’s not simply a dish, a style of music or a story we tell. Our culture breathes through joyful dance, the pleasure of dining with family and friends, of genuine kindness and hospitality. I continually give Acadiana stories, but Acadiana has given me its soul. ■

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