



Photograph by Mario Holsten

# "about this

## an interview with sarah dessen

by Anthony James Holsten

notes contributed by NCLR

It's a Monday morning. Labor Day, in fact. The last of a three-day weekend for some and an early return to the work week for others. But for all, the slight chill in the air grants a blissful respite from the ninety- to one hundred-degree summer heat that has been plaguing the residents of Chapel Hill for nearly a month.

In the parking lot of the Timberlyne shopping center, it's an idyllic scene. An elderly couple walks by in their matching sweat suits and glasses, arms swinging in synchronicity. An anxious dog walks her owner to a nearby copse of neatly-landscaped pine trees, sniffing excitedly for the ideal spot or perhaps the scent of a squirrel.

The front porch of Cup-A-Joe is littered with coffee house regulars. One couple sips from mugs as their dog, a friendly Labrador retriever, greets all who pass by with a swish of his tail. At an adjacent table, two goateed men savor their cappuccinos as they huddle over a chess board.

Inside, the décor is a delightful blending of organic and retro: sparkling red cushions, chrome swivel chairs, a framed black-and-white photo of Castro and Hemingway, and a USDA Certified Organic plaque. A poster beside the front door advertises a local production of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and a yellow flyer offers "FREE compost for your garden!"

Both inside and out, the dress code is casual comfort – facial hair for the men, and Birkenstocks, t-shirts and soft flannel for all.

It is a scene full of both character and characters, so it's no surprise that Sarah Dessen would pick such a place to meet. It fits her: it's honest and true and down to earth. As she walks in, wearing a black t-shirt, jeans, and sandals, she offers a genuine smile. Despite the early time of day, this author of seven novels beams.

After the publication of her first novel, Sarah Dessen went from being a writer/waitress to being a writer/teacher. Currently, she is "just" a writer. Though she misses the classroom, she admits that taking time off from teaching was the right thing to do: "I'm very conscientious. It's hard for me to not do as much. But it had been a long time without a break. And I was getting burned out."<sup>1</sup> Despite the difficulties of having to balance teaching and writing, Dessen has done remarkably well. When she began teaching, she had recently published her first book. Six years later, she

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the Dessen quotations are from Anthony Holsten's interview with her at Cup-A-Joe in Chapel Hill, NC, 5 Sept. 2005. The quotations excerpted from this interview for this essay have been only minimally edited for clarity. Such small editorial changes are not noted, but as always, the author and editors have endeavored to be true to the voice and intentions of the speaker.

girl!:



Photograph © 2003 Sophie Gaud/North Line Productions

Allison Janney (left) stars as Lydia and Mandy Moore as Halley in New Line Cinema's romantic drama, *How to Deal*

has six more books under her belt; and her first two books, *That Summer* and *Someone Like You*, were combined in the 2003 film *How to Deal*, starring Mandy Moore and Allison Janney.<sup>2</sup>

Sarah Dessen, like many of her protagonists, is not afraid to go her own way. Instead of plunging after an academic career, Dessen knew what she wanted to be – a writer: “I’d been on the five-and-a-half year college plan, and when I graduated [from UNC] my parents were hoping I’d settle down and get a Real Job so they could stop worrying about me. But instead of doing the whole resume/pantyhose thing, I decided to stick to my job waiting tables at the world famous Flying Burrito Restaurant and try to publish a novel.”<sup>3</sup> And publish that novel she did – although her first published novel was not her first attempt. “I haven’t looked at it in a long time,” she says of her first “book” manuscript. “It’s like a doorstep,” she laughs. “It is the biggest, longest book.”

Dessen admits that she made the same mistake that a number of first-time writers make: she tried to do it all. “Nobody knows how to write a novel,” she confides. “I’m sure that there are people who, the first book they ever wrote, they sold, and more power to them, but for me it was my third.” The mistake that many new writers make, Dessen explains, is to try to cram every experience and everything they have to say in their first book because they might not ever write another one.

Or worse, they try to write what other people think they should write: “When I was in school, everyone else was writing what I call ‘capital-L Literary’ stories – serious stories with lots of descriptions about trees, and I had these little high school stories that I was writing that were very funny, and everyone thought I was very cute, but I felt like I wasn’t being taken very seriously. So I tried to start writing more” – she pauses for effect – “dramatically.” And the resulting work was not her best. “My friends who used to read my stuff asked me, ‘What is this? What are you

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<sup>2</sup> Dessen’s first two novels, *That Summer* (New York: Orchard Books, 1996) and *Someone Like You* (New York: Viking, 1998), which inspired the movie *How to Deal* (dir. Clare Kilner, New Line Cinema, 2003), have since been reprinted into a single volume with the movie’s title (New York: SPEAK, 2003). Dessen’s other novels include *Keeping the Moon* (1999), *Dreamland* (2000), *This Lullaby* (2002), *The Truth About Forever* (2004), and *Just Listen* (2006), all from Viking (New York).

<sup>3</sup> This quotation is from Dessen’s website at [www.sarahdessen.com](http://www.sarahdessen.com).