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Friends Forever

Author Cassandra King bases her latest novel on her longtime friendship with Montevallo classmates.

Imagine the loaded-down car of a Same Sweet Girl on her way to a Gulf Shores get-together. Homemade chicken salad, a 7-Up pound cake, and the makings for a potent fuzzy navel concoction fill a cooler. There's also a rhinestone tiara and bejeweled scepter nestled in the folds of a glittery Mardi Gras cape.

She taps her lacquered nails and glances down at her cheerfully tacky, battery-powered ring. But even the ring's gaudy glory can't compete with her faux diamond SSG pin.

Who's That Girl?

The Same Sweet Girls group consists of about 15 Alabama College (now University of Montevallo) graduates, mostly Alabama natives, who first bonded in college and who remain friends some 40 years later.

Each spring, they meet in Gulf Shores. In the fall, they gather in the mountains of Georgia. No matter where they congregate though, the women repeat sweet dormitory days.

As Same Sweet Girl Patsy Auiler, a retired music teacher, says, "When we get together, it's hard to sleep. You just talk until you pass out."

SSG member and author Cassandra



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Patsy Auiler, Same Sweet Girl

King used the real-life group to fashion a fictionalized version in her latest book, *The Same Sweet Girls* (Hyperion, \$23.95). The novel centers on six college friends and their reunions over the years. Both the book and the real group host a hilarious crowning of a queen each year.

"Elements of our stories are in the book," Cassandra says. "But there are a lot of stories to draw on without having to steal anybody's whole life."

Still, she says, when the SSGs read the book, "I was holding my breath. I

above, left; Cassandra King becomes honorary queen at a New York City gathering of the Same Sweet Girls.

felt sure I'd be excommunicated." Then the positive comments came in.

"She kind of made SPAM of some of us and spread us around," says SSG member and artist Kerry Payne, who now resides in her hometown of Montgomery after living abroad.

Staying Sweet

The group's singular name stemmed from a school-wide address by a beauty queen, in which she gave an account of her world travels. She summed up her talk by proclaiming that she remained "the same sweet girl" she'd always been.

"It's ingrained in you that you don't hurt people's feelings intentionally," says reigning queen Beth Grover of Mobile. "You really *do* try to be as sweet as possible." But, the members agree, you can't let sweetness get in the way of a good time.

Since their college days, the friendships have deepened, Cassandra says. Beth agrees. "If I have something major going on in my life, I feel like I can count on these girls."

Cassandra hopes that's a theme to which women in general will respond. "I'd like to see readers put the book aside, pick up the phone, and call a girlfriend to say, 'I value our friendship, and I'm glad you're in my life,'" the author says.

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