

Rules for the Southern Rulebreaker: Missteps and Lessons Learned

Katherine Snow Smith

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Katherine Snow Smith muses on the vicissitudes of life in her essay collection *Rules for the Southern Rulebreaker*.

Smith's twenty-two essays follow a loose chronology. The daughter of a prominent Southern journalist, Smith also pursued a newspaper career in the South and beyond. Her insightful anecdotes concern self-image, career, child-rearing, divorce, dating, and mortality. Some entries are serious, some not; each is self-contained, but together they capture the highlights of womanhood in the modern world, especially womanhood that considers the expectations of the South. Smith shares episodes from a lifetime defying rules of Southern living with aplomb.

Clever titles, including "A Minute on Your Lips, Forever on Your Hips" and "Miranda Lambert is Not a Licensed Therapist," reflect the grit, resourcefulness, and humor of the entries themselves. One entry, about meeting President and First Lady Obama, reflects a sweet interaction, but one that becomes all about the high heels torturing Smith's feet, while "Don't Move to Podunk" and "Don't Talk to Strangers" are glimpses of the unglamorous life of a young reporter covering town council and school board meetings and the pitfalls of fielding the romantic interest of a source.

Its style pithy and unaffected, the book boils its stories down to their essences and finds levity in the most heartbreaking moments, including the death of Smith's sister, heart surgery, and cancer. When Smith's daughter undergoes surgery, Smith's compassion and concern are palpable, though without the suggestion that she's a perfect mother. A story about a dying friend includes funny incidents from their time coleading a Girl Scouts group and baking brownies; these punctuate Smith's last moments with her friend well.

Rules for the Southern Rulebreaker is a warm, genuine memoir about living fully beyond the bounds of others' expectations.

WENDY HINMAN (July / August 2020)

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