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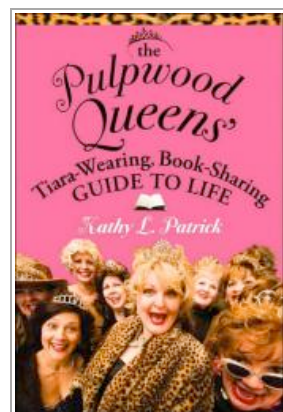
BOOKS How Kathy L. Patrick helped me learn to read: a memoir from behind the pine curtain

By Stayton Bonner SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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There was neither a book shop nor bar in my hometown of Henderson. I guess the logic was that books and booze, consumed together or separately, might lead to sinful notions. Like a lot of dry acreage behind the pine curtain, Rusk County was sober as a preacher on Sunday morning.

Saturday night, however, was a different matter. In Longview, just across the county line, a row of neon liquor stores and seedy topless joints lighted up the pines like a Vegas strip. All the sin you could handle was down the road. From the back of our white 1980 Buick station wagon, my brothers and I would stare in wonder at the beer-can-littered gravel parking lots as our mother encouraged us in a different indulgence — the book-buying excursion.



(enlarge photo) The Pulpwood Queens' Tiara-Wearing, Book-Sharing Guide to Life by Kathy L. Patrick, Grand Central Publishing \$13.99

Kathy L. Patrick and the Pulpwood Queens What: Reading, signing, what-have-you When: 7 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 30 Where: BookPeople, 603 N. Lamar Blvd. Information: 472-5050

Compared with Henderson, Longview might as well have been New York City. In addition to the aforementioned Whiskey Bend, it had a shopping mall, movie theaters and bookstores, including a place called Barron's, where a woman named Kathy L. Patrick worked in the children's section from the mid-'80s through the early '90s.

At Barron's, Patrick always stood out. Unlike Mr. Barron, a slight, soft-spoken man, Patrick was a force of nature. She was a tall brunette who would welcome us from across the room with a loud East Texas "Hey yaaaawwlll!" On one visit, she might greet us as Scarlett O'Hara in a white wide-brimmed straw tea hat; the next time, she might be a swami in a black velvet turban. She staged extravagant book readings, showing up in a big red bow to read Eloise's adventures in the Plaza hotel, a do-rag and eye-patch for "Treasure Island," or full Cat in the Hat regalia.

My brothers and I didn't know what to think of her. But over the years, we came to appreciate how fervently she promoted reading in one of the state's poorest and most illiterate regions.

Thick with rolling hills and piney woods, East Texas feels like the Old South — more Flannery O'Connor than Elmer Kelton. As Joe R. Lansdale writes in "The Two Bear Mambo," East Texas is "one of the great forests of the United States, and everything opposite of what the TV and movie viewer thinks Texas is about." During the 20th century, oil ruled the region. Yet most East Texas residents haven't benefited much from the boom.

Instead of money, most residents worship God. Of the region's 49 counties, 11 are outright dry and all are partially dry. It takes effort to buy alcohol.

But if bars are few and far between, churches are abundant. Baptists rule the piney woods. In Henderson, they unofficially outlawed Halloween when I was a kid, claiming it was a pagan holiday. My parents had to find heathen households whose owners didn't believe their souls would be damned for handing out half-melted Tootsie Rolls



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and Snickers bars to kids in costume.

Some people hold a stereotypical image of East Texas as a stagnant backwoods mud puddle of racism and ignorance. Like all stereotypes, it has some truth to it. But it applies just as well to Houston's 2 million residents as it does to Arp's 901.

The interesting characters who do periodically emerge from the region tend to be just that — characters. Lightning Hopkins, Charlie Wilson, Audie Murphy and Ellen DeGeneres all grew up in small East Texas towns. Where's the fun in being a free thinker in a liberal university town? The interesting people who emerge from rural areas tend to be particularly interesting, because it takes bravery to be different in a small community.

Which brings me back to Kathy Patrick.

Crowning moments

In 2000, after leaving Barron's and a brief stint as a regional bookseller's rep, Patrick opened the world's first beauty salon/bookstore, Beauty and the Book, in Jefferson. Located in Marion County, the second poorest county in Texas, Jefferson is a dried-up old railroad town with a colorful community — a mixture of good ol' boys, Old South aristocrats, Bigfoot watching societies and antiquers. After writing "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," John Berendt considered devoting his next book to Jefferson.

It was, in fact, the perfect place for Kathy Patrick. Inspired by her customers' enthusiasm for the books she recommended, Patrick founded a book club called the Pulpwood Queens. (Motto: "Tiaras are mandatory and reading good books is the rule!") Following a flattering write-up in the Oxford American magazine by Austin writer Carol Dawson, she became the subject of a media frenzy.

Now a platinum blonde, Patrick sold her literary endeavors to the world with the same sense of showmanship I'd seen years ago at Barron's. Instead of dazzling East Texas kids, she was now appearing on "Good Morning, America," "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and the Oxygen network. Pulpwood Queen book club chapters sprung up as far afield as Italy and Thailand. Earlier this month, the Hachette Book Group published "The Pulpwood Queens' Tiara-Wearing, Book-Sharing Guide to Life," a Patrick-penned catch-all that's one part memoir, one part manifesto, one part self-help tome, one part cookbook and one part book-club guide.

But Patrick hasn't forgotten the folks back home. After Hurricane Katrina hit, Patrick raised money for displaced families who had moved to East Texas and helped restock flooded Louisiana libraries. She hosts a Pulpwood Queen "Parade for Literacy" in downtown Jefferson, where she and her leopard-print-clad friends march with authors while throwing hair care products and bookmarks to the crowds. Once a year, Patrick and the Queens host a "Hair Ball," a yearly circling of the club's estrogen-fueled wagons that brings tourist money into town.

I last saw Patrick a year ago at the 2007 Hair Ball. She had invited me to help promote a chapbook I wrote about Larry McMurtry's career as a bookseller. (In one of the numerous appendices to the Pulpwood "Guide to Life," my book is listed on the 2007 "Bonus Books" reading list.) Shaking off the gray East Texas cold of that January evening, I stood at the entryway to the ball. Through the door, I saw Patrick navigating a sea of black-clad authors, tiara-topped Pulpwood Queens and awkward-looking husbands in blue jeans and button-down shirts. She was yelling something to a TV cameraman. From the end of her leopard-print sleeve, Patrick's red-nailed hand waved something in the air. The overhead lights momentarily caught the gloss of a book cover in her hand before she disappeared in the crowd.

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