

BY BONNIE W. MASON



The Air Up Here

A widow journeys back to remote Maine in Siddons's new novel, *Off Season*, due to hit bookshelves in August.

Standing in the doorway of her cottage on Maine's Penobscot Bay, *New York Times* best-selling novelist Anne Rivers Siddons welcomes a visitor with a sweet, girlishly high melodic voice that gives away her southern roots. Dressed in a coral-colored sweater and white linen slacks, she exudes an air of studied cheerfulness.

Her living room resembles a rustic retreat—nothing elegant or fussy—just pine floors, pine beams across the ceiling, an abstract painting of boats on one wall, and cozy, comfortable furniture.

She graciously asks to be called “Anne.” And although she has made millions on her 17 bestsellers, which include *Up Island*, *Low Country*, *Colony*, and *Sweetwater Creek*, she's not the least bit pretentious. Above the windows, a banner displays a colorful photograph of *Prince of Tides* author and close ally Pat Conroy kissing her husband Heyward on the cheek at his 80th birthday party. The headline proclaims “Conroy finally proposes!” It's an inside joke.

Bestselling author Anne Rivers Siddons pens a second novel set in Maine

Siddons, 72, became fast friends with Conroy when they both were struggling writers in Atlanta during the 1960s. Siddons grew up the daughter of a prestigious Atlanta lawyer and lived the life of a “southern belle” debutante before discovering the writing life. “If you're caught up in a debutante whirl from birth, you've got a tough trail to take,” she confides.

She has taken other trails, including the one that led to her beloved Maine coast. “I became a Mainer the day I first stepped off the plane in Bangor over 40 years ago,” she says. Besides loving the Maine sun and wind on her face, she feels that there is no problem she cannot solve in this setting.

She and her husband usually arrive in the state right after Memorial Day. The place they call home is part of a summer colony to which her husband's family belonged long before the couple married in 1966 in Atlanta. It was this coastal setting that may well have inspired Siddons's 1992 bestseller, *Colony*, her first—and until now—only novel set in Maine.

Her second book with a Maine milieu, *Off Season*, hits bookstores in August. This long-awaited arrival follows a string of bestsellers set in mostly Southern climes.

But no matter the locale, Siddons always populates her pages with strong women, be they Steel Magnolias of the south or Maine Yankee survivors.

The strong woman in *Off Season* is Lilly, a widow who journeys back to her Maine coastal roots after the death of her beloved husband, Cam. What Lilly discovers upon her return changes her whole way of looking at life.

“All my books are about women taking journeys they might not want to take,” says Siddons.

Much like her writer friend, Pat Conroy, Siddons is not afraid to shine a light into the darkness of personal-ity. Perhaps that's because she once battled and overcame a depression that left her unable to write for three years.

“I take tragedy and I run with it. The darkness is just an aspect of the self. It's in all of us. But I try not to crawl in there too strong. My books are really about growth and change in spite of infinite pain and suffering. They are about women who are misfits, but in the end, find their fit.”

Do these women echo parts of herself? Of course, she replies. “How else would I know how they would react in any given situation?” But she is quick to add, “I always make my characters a good bit better than I am.”

“It's about finding wholeness. I know so few whole families anymore. And how can we have whole families if we don't have whole women?” +