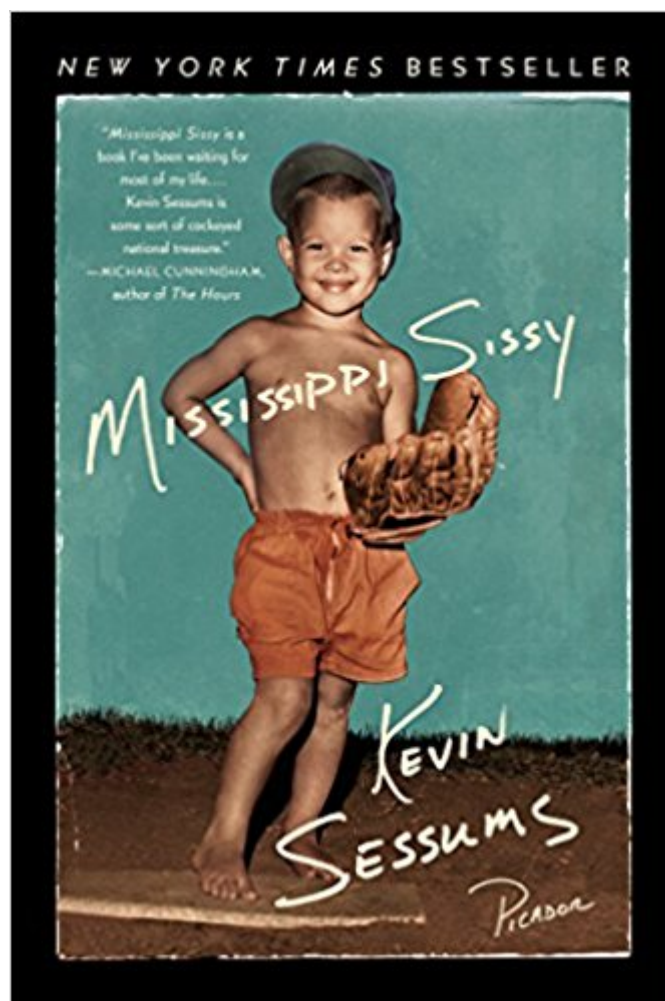


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# Mississippi Sissy



## Synopsis

Mississippi Sissy is the stunning memoir from Kevin Sessums, a celebrity journalist who grew up scaring other children, hiding terrible secrets, pretending to be Arlene Frances and running wild in the South. As he grew up in Forest, Mississippi, befriended by the family maid, Mattie May, he became a young man who turned the word "sissy" on its head, just as his mother taught him. In Jackson, he is befriended by Eudora Welty and journalist Frank Hains, but when Hains is brutally murdered in his antebellum mansion, Kevin's long road north towards celebrity begins. In his memoir, Kevin Sessums brings to life the pungent American south of the 1960s and the world of the strange little boy who grew there. "Kevin Sessums is some sort of cockeyed national treasure."

• Michael Cunningham

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. As an eight-year-old boy coping with the horrific loss of his parents and a nagging sense of being "different" from his peers in the Mississippi town of Forest, Sessums assumes the persona of What's My Line panelist Arlene Francis. "Call me Arlene!" he insists, and his grandparents "despite their rather reactionary stances in the realms of politics, religion and sexuality" manage to lovingly comply. In performing his electrifying coming-of-age memoir, Sessums adroitly introduces the cast of characters who shaped his journey. The vocal renderings of such memorable figures as the family's loving and devoted "as well as self-confident and determined" maid Matty May, who repeatedly recites "Poitier" as a mantra in the days and weeks following Sidney Poitier's 1963 Oscar win, resonate with remarkable clarity. Listeners accustomed

to contemporary autobiographical titles should be forewarned that they are entering unapologetic gothic territory akin to that of Eudora Welty (a friend and mentor to Sessums) or even Flannery O'Connor. Raw human emotions of love and hate play starring roles, refusing to remain mere stage props. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Adult/High School Sessums, a journalist who specializes in celebrity interviews, describes and analyzes his own childhood and youth, writing candidly of both sexual orientation and race relations in the '60s and early '70s. As a toddler, he swished and posed instead of responding to his basketball coach father's expectation of masculinity. His mother was more broad-minded. However, both parents were dead by the time he was nine, and he and two younger siblings were reared by their maternal grandparents. Small-town Mississippi during the third quarter of the 20th century was less hostile to the young gay boy than outsiders might imagine. Sessums recalls his grandmother's willingness to call him Arlene, in honor of television personality Arlene Francis; his sixth-grade teacher allowed his book report to be on Jacqueline Susann's best-selling Valley of the Dolls; there was even a local gay bar, which Sessums began visiting at 16. However, life provided great and certain bad times as well: the author recalls a sexual assault by a stranger when he was not yet a teen, and another by a preacher a couple of years later. Most harrowing is the event that frames the narrative, the murder of his mentor, and 19-year-old Sessums's discovery of the bludgeoned body. Whether gay or straight, readers will relate to the author's youthful awareness that self-certainty and terrifying uncertainty seem to be inextricably bound. His observations on—and, more importantly, his experiences of—race relations engage and reveal, and remind readers of the complexity of social status. Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book touched my heart. I felt so many emotions while reading it. Having grown up in Mississippi almost a generation ahead of the author, there were many connections. The racism, sometimes ignorant and sometimes intentional, among the residents was something I saw as a child and hated. I left in my early 20's and felt shame for what went on there during the 60's. I also know how the jocks and others bullied and shamed anyone who appeared to be a sissy. I hurt for them anytime I saw it happen. My empathy returned when Kevin Sessums shared his most shameful secrets of his young life. How cruel a fate to grow up as a homosexual in an unforgiving,

intolerant place like Mississippi. He is, however, one of the lucky ones, because he was able to get away and find a life better accepted in other places. In many ways I am proud to be from Mississippi, I love the manners, the food, the friendliness and fond memories of friends during my (segregated) childhood there. But in other ways I feel ashamed to be from a state so ignorant and unkind to certain classes of people. This book took me back to a culture I thought I'd left far behind and forgotten. Obviously not, since I felt much sadness, anger and disgust during the reading of this book. But reminders are good. I hope I will always remember to be kind and understanding to others, whoever they are. I've tried to learn from what I saw and knew to be wrong, and have raised my own children to be open-minded, accepting and tolerant, as well as kind, to others, no matter how different. So for that I guess I can be thankful for the childhood I spent in Mississippi. I may not have had the same awareness had I grown up elsewhere. This book is a treasure, shining with honesty, beautifully and courageously written. I am looking forward to reading Sessums's next book, "I Left it on the Mountain."

Excellent memoir of a young man coming to terms with a difficult life and his sexual orientation which literally made him a small pariah even as a little boy. There is a terrible injustice at the heart of this story -- the injustice of small children losing both parents when they were in their 30's and the children were 8, 6, and four. The injustice of discriminating against people based on sexual orientation via unkind comments and actions even to a child. Thoughtless racial discrimination that was prevalent and even occurred when otherwise decent people were "friendly" with their black employees and neighbors or in Sessums case, the woman who cared for him as a little boy. It's a well-written honest book that I am very glad I read.

Def a 5 star book. I have given this twice as a gift and both people couldn't put it down. The title says it, the experience of gay youth in the south staying afloat and surviving another day. While reading it's as if you are in the room as an observer, the author's fluid writing style carries you page to page. This book is especially poignant and often times funny through the eyes of the author as a child. It is in the vein of Burroughs. For many reading this will bring them back to their youth, can be bitter, can be sweet, can be both. I think for many it's confirmation they lived it alone in fear and figuring out the steps as they went along and all the time hiding in plain sight, and in particular as they land into adolescence realizing that most of them are really playing a part until they can escape into adulthood.

I absolutely loved this book and recommend it to everyone, gay or straight, but especially gay men. It's a deeply personal, powerful memoir of a gay man who grew up in a small rural town in Mississippi during this country's most turbulent decades (60's 70's). I don't want to share too much because I don't want to spoil it for anyone, but if you have an interest in stories of individuals who faced a lot of suffering at a young age and were able to rise above it and still find life worth living, then this story is for you. I plan to purchase Kevin Sessum's newest book, which is a sort of follow-up to this one very soon.

This memoir is flamboyantly written with a unique poetic style. It's a no-holds-barred, tell-all of the author's life growing up in Mississippi which he's now etched into print for eternity. It was difficult starting his story, his unfamiliar words kept me tapping my Kindle for the definition of words not commonly used (I'm glad I didn't have to keep a dictionary nearby!). I pushed myself forward and was pleasantly relieved to read faster with laughter about his neighbor girlfriend from across the street. One cannot read this memoir without thinking of one's own experiences growing up and the naughty things one might have done. I recognize the disturbing, emotional upheaval the author went through during his young life, and putting his history into words. However, I know he's at peace with the life he has now in NYC. Kevin has come a long, long way.

I'm only giving it 4 stars because I wanted more! Kevin Sessums is smart and he spins a wonderful yarn about his years growing up in Mississippi as a little gay boy. I don't know Kevin personally, but I'm a little biased as we have a few friends in common and that, coupled with the pieces of his that I'd read in years past in VANITY FAIR, were my initial reasons in ordering the book. It was a splendid read and he takes you right back to the action and it's as if you were there. The cream always rises to the top and his life, and the retelling so poignantly of it, confirm the truth in that. You don't have to be gay to appreciate this...anyone who ever felt the scorn of being different in any way will relate. The settings -- the deep south during the Civil Rights era, the false piety which creeps into every scene, the vivid, searing memories of things no child should have to see or deal with -- all combine into a powerful, gripping narrative. Kevin should work on that great American novel that I'm sure is just waiting behind the next bend...

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