

Sarah Bird cooks up laughs

Book takes a look at Austin's vegans, hippies and high society

By Joy Tipping

The Dallas Morning News

Austin novelist Sarah Bird said her piece of "extremely good luck" is living in a city "with a sense of humor, where they let women be funny. ... I mean, we had Ann Richards, we had Molly Ivins. We're evolved."

She clearly adores Austin, and it loves her right back: In 2001, the weekly Austin Chronicle named her the city's best author, and she took over Kinky Friedman's Texas Monthly column when he ran for governor; she now alternates with him.

The love affair could be tested with her latest novel, "How Perfect Is That" (Knopf, \$23.95), which offers up Austin society on a skewering fork.

It's set in 2003, midway through George W. Bush's first term as president. It was a time, Bird said by phone, "when Austin was sort of reeling - there had been this fundamental shift, and Austin had true society for the first time because of the Bush connections.

"But that was so anathema to what Austin used to be. You had this very blue dot on the map that suddenly got heated up by red society when Bush was governor. The Michael Dells of the world" - the book's "Dellionaires" - "were all over the place in this petri dish of venture capitalists and start-ups. And even when a lot of those things burned out, there was still this healthy rich residue of money floating around, mixing with Austin's vegans and hippies and students. Bizarre."

Bird, 58, started working on "How Perfect" "to cheer myself up," she said, from both real life and a writing project that seemed to be going nowhere, a much more serious novel called "The Flamenco Academy."

"My mom had passed away, and I had painted myself into a corner with 'Flamenco' that I wasn't smart enough to get out of," Bird said. "And I was in total despair about what was happening to our country. ... I needed a solution that wouldn't end up with me putting my head in the oven. I dealt with it, essentially, by gossiping about these characters so I could laugh at something."

Her protagonist, Blythe Young, runs a near-bankrupt catering company called Wretched Xcess, something of a metaphor for Bush-era Austin and the entire country, Bird said. Blythe - devious, occasionally criminal, not above drugging party guests when desperate - is hardly a "heartwarming book-club heroine," the author acknowledges with a chuckle.

"How Perfect Is That" is Bird's seventh book, not counting several romances written as Tory Cates. She said "Perfect" is "180 degrees removed" from the last book, "The Flamenco Academy," a tale of obsessive love set in Albuquerque, N.M., where Bird earned an anthropology degree from the University of New Mexico. She also received a master's in journalism at the University of Texas.

Her anthropology background served her well on "Perfect." She researched Austin's society cliques "like a South Sea tribe," she said - brunching at local hot spots, mining for college nuggets (she references the "Pi Phi Bulimia Queens") and culling Junior League directories for over-the-top Texas names such as Kippie Lee Teeter, Noodle Tiner and Lulie Bingle.

She swears all the names are real, if somewhat mixed-and-matched. "I mean, we have a famous divorce lawyer named **Becky Beaver**. ... Even I couldn't make that up," she notes with a wry laugh. "Even with comedy, sometimes you can't go as far as real life."