

## Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

**The Author: Valerie Ann Leff**

**The Book:** *Better Homes and Husbands* (St. Martin's Press, 2004; paperback, 2005) by Valerie Ann Leff

**The Event:** A fictional, posh apartment building on Park Avenue in New York City and a dilapidated southern manse in Sans Souci, South Carolina. What on earth do they have in common? Location, location, location as real estate agents like to say. Or setting and sense of place, as fiction writers call it. Join novelists Valerie Ann Leff (*Better Homes and Husbands*), and Mindy Friddle (*The Garden Angel*) as they discuss "real estate, setting, and the new novel of manners."

**The Open Book, Saturday, August 13 at 6 p.m.**

What's it like to be a novelist living in the South--with a book set in New York City? Asheville, NC resident and New York City native Valerie Ann Leff, author of *Better Homes and Husbands*, admits "The South has its own literary culture, and I feel like an oddball. Yet I've also been amazed by the warm reception southern readers and reviewers have given *Better Homes and Husbands*. I think what's important is that readers everywhere can relate to the characters in the novel. Someone in Asheville said to me, 'Really, the nonsense that goes on in that building is just like a small Southern town!' "

*Better Homes and Husbands*, just out in paperback, is a stylish, richly woven novel about class and caste feuds, played out with ferocity and etiquette in a posh New York apartment building during the tumultuous period of social change between 1970 and 2000. Leff grew up in New York City on Fifth Avenue and now lives in Asheville, North Carolina, where she is co-founder and co-director of the Great Smokies Writing Program at UNC--Asheville. *Better Homes and Husbands*— set in a fictional Park Avenue building similar to her former home — is her first novel.

"From the time I was nine years old until I left for college, I lived at 1040 Fifth Avenue -- the same building as Jacqueline Onassis and other prominent families," Leff said. "We were very ordinary by

comparison. My mother grew up in poverty and, at fourteen became one of the eight original June Taylor dancers; my father was a textile manufacturer.”

Leff attended a girls' prep school in Manhattan and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College where she studied Italian. After college, she moved to Milan, Italy and found a job in the fashion industry. By 1988, “really, really sick of the fashion world,” Leff moved to Los Angeles and studied Physical Geography and worked as an environmental activist. “That was when I started writing, too. The writing took over. I did it for self-discovery and personal expression - - a mental health tool. Eventually, I recognized that I found more fulfillment and joy in writing than in anything else I'd ever done and started to experiment with writing fiction.”

Class, ethnicity, and the American Dream are all themes handled deftly in *Better Homes and Husbands*. “But it wasn't until the book was finished that I understood its underlying themes,” Leff said. “They surprised me. Then I thought -- well, your mother grew up on welfare, your father grew up wealthy. You are half-protestant and half-Jewish. You married a carpenter in North Carolina and chose to adopt a child from Guatemala and become a multi-racial family. So it's no wonder that issues of class, ethnicity, legacy and identity are central to *Better Homes and Husbands*.”

Leff spent last summer on book tour with her husband, toddler son, and teenaged stepdaughter. “My son head-butted me and broke my nose our last day in Los Angeles -- fortunately the day after I gave my first television interview. I showed up to my San Francisco readings with a giant black eye that no make-up could hide and a splitting headache. Had my life changed? Yes! “

Leff is currently at work on a novel set on a remote island in British Columbia, Canada. “I'm also halfway through a collection of short stories all set in the West -- places like Los Angeles, Wyoming, the northern coast of California,” she said, adding the new material is “a lot edgier than *Better Homes and Husbands*; the feeling is contemporary and a little bit weird.”

Leff offers encouraging words to other writers: “I think in writing, revising, publishing and promoting your work, talent is 10% of it and

tenacity the other 90%. Just keep showing up to the work, and don't let self-doubt stop you."

*Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel "The Garden Angel" (St. Martin's Press/Picador.) Visit her website, [www.mindyfriddle.com](http://www.mindyfriddle.com), for more information on writing and publishing.*