

She's got next

Melissa King... Melissa King... Name rings a bell, doesn't it?

Ed Gray, our books editor, handed me her latest—her only, come to find out—and said that very thing, making a point of showing me the last line of Ms. King's author's bio: She lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Her bio also said she'd written for *Sports Illustrated* and been featured in *Best American Sports Writing*. So maybe she's related to Peter King, *SI's* expert on pro football. Or maybe she's of Texas' literary family, a cousin, say, to Larry (*Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*) King. How about Florence King's long-lost daughter?

No, no and no.

Curiosity and the first half of Melissa King's new book, *She's Got Next*—by turns, funny, thoughtful, irreverent and sentimental—got the better of me. How the heck did she learn to write like that? So I caught up with Melissa (no relation to famous authors) King of Fayetteville, Arkansas, last week by phone. Why did I find it charming that she preferred talking on her old-fashioned land line rather than her cell phone? Or that she could only talk during an atypical span when her 3-year-old was occupied?

The full title of King's debut is *She's Got Next: A Story of Getting In, Staying Open, and Taking a Shot*. Published by Houghton Mifflin and officially due for release next month, this unusual memoir features on its cover a photo of a twentyish woman with a ponytail holding a basketball above her head while playing on the streets of, well, from the gritty, big-city walkup looks of it, somewhere other than Arkansas. So is she an Arkie or not?

Meet Melissa King: Born in Conway, she grew up in Central Arkansas and attended the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. So far, so very predictable, even expected. But then she got wanderlust, longed to hit the road, anxious for change, something different. Cold. Industrial. Un-Arkansas. A big city with history.

She chose Chicago. Got a job there in marketing. On a whim, she started playing pick-up basketball games. King is 5-foot-5½, a confessed bench-warmer on her small high-school team, and (hearty laugh) "not very good." But she wanted to meet folks, and, also, playing kept her in touch with the other Melissa King, the one who shot baskets with her brother till dark on a driveway goal in little ol' Arkansas.

As her pick-up games morphed into obsession, she had no intention of dribbling a book out at the same time. But out it came, flowing seamlessly, a manual on how to play and how to live. If it's not quite basketball-as-allegory-for-life, as King's editor insists, it's basketball-as-adventure-in-strange-new-lands.

What I like best are the little *ain't-it-the-truth?* nuggets of wisdom she drops into her prose between ballgames. Like these:

- When I backed my overflowing Honda out of the

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driveway and pointed it north, my grandmother's plaintive, "Oh, honey, why?" was still fresh in my ears. Been there, heard that. Lots of Arkansans have before they lit out for the territories and Shangri La preparatory to heading back for good in a few years.

- We were all good catches with no boyfriends in sight, the kind of straightforward, low-maintenance women that meddling mothers try and fail to convince their sons to date. Only later, when we male Neanderthals outgrow our tendency to be "easily intoxicated by the delicate way an unfathomable woman might apply her lipstick" do we come to understand that mom was right.

- Of a teammate who worked in landscaping: I admired that he could tell people what he did in a day without saying "implement" or "reorganize" or "going forward, our key takeaways are." Amen, sister.

- Funny, what a convoluted route it can be to wanting what's home. Yup.

I've already found myself highlighting passages with all the reverence usually reserved for re-reading Walker Percy.

But enough about the book. Let's get back to Melissa King. How'd she go from ballplayer to author?

In her Windy City days, the local weekly, the *Chicago Reader*, ran a regular feature: Send in your slice of city life. Like the old send-in-your-jokes bit in *Readers' Digest*. King sent in a slice of life about, um, getting mugged. "It was more ridiculous than frightening," she assured. "I sent it in, they used it, and I got 30 bucks. I had all these basketball vignettes, so I sent them in, too." (After all, she'd just put a Macintosh Performa on her credit card, and she was determined to get her money's worth and use the blasted thing.)

The *Reader's* editors liked the piece enough to use it on the cover. Later, they nominated King's story to be included in the collection, *Best American Sports Writing of 1999*. It made the cut. Houghton Mifflin publishes *Best*. Can you say great connection? Skipping past the inevitable conversations with agents and editors, manuscript stops and starts, rewrites and reconsiderations... voilà! Melissa King of small-town Arkansas is a published author. And an honest voice with a bright future.

She's got next? No, she's got now.

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Melissa King