Movies' stereotypical La. irks author

By SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH

One of the characters in Jennifer Blake's new novel, Joy and Anger (Fawcett Columbine, $18), is an actor who plays a Cajun in a movie being filmed in Louisiana. He gripes to the director about the casting:

"What I had in mind was one of those picturesque-looking shirts with sleeves gathered on the shoulders and an open neckline," he tells Julie Bullard. She insists he wear worn-out shoes and an open neckline, "he tells her. "I want him to be careful of how he approaches her. It's her choice. It's the woman who says yes or no. It makes him seem respectful to her."

Jennifer Blake admits that this book was inspired by her being fed up with all the movies that make Louisiana look bad or that are blatantly inaccurate in their settings, dialects, costumes and cultural details.

The movie that really set her off and which she mentions in the novel is Steel Magnolias. The movie has axles and crepe myrtle blooming at the same time, silk flowers in the grass at Easter, people in formal attire at a North Louisiana wedding doing a Cajun dance, the mother standing alone by her daughter's grave after the funeral service. All the writer's fictional characters in Joy and Anger declare:

"I tried out as an extra for Steel Magnolias," the author, whose real name is Patricia Maxwell, said in an interview last week in New Orleans, where she was one of the speakers at the national convention of romance writers. She got a close-up look at the Steel Magnolias set and movie-making techniques.

"I was called back for the role of the wife of the brother of the groom. I didn't get the role, though. She was supposed to be the mother of seven. And she didn't look matronly enough. Then she was supposed to be in the wedding reception scene but had to go to Louisiana. She was dating a boy who also went there, and they got married."

Joy and Anger is firmly contemporary, with well-developed characters (and believable Cajuns), vividly (and accurately) described terrain (swamps and bayous and the French Quarter), suspenseful plot (a series of bizarre incidents, natural and man-made), and interesting relationships. The plot of the movie parallels Julie's real-life father-daughter relationship and her real-life romantic dilemma: give up her dream of being a famous director in Hollywood and have babies or pursue the glitter of a Hollywood career empty of personal happiness.

"Readers can't help wishing for just one real-life Hollywood director who would attempt to portray Louisiana and its inhabitants as they really are instead of the way outsiders perceive them."

Maxwell has just completed the manuscript for her next novel, due for publication next year, which combines historical and contemporary settings. One story is set in the 1850s, the other in the 1990s. They parallel each other and mesh at the end to show how the earlier story affected the later one.

Maxwell says that people in other parts of the country regard Louisianians as ignorant and backward, whereas what she sees on her trips is "a mystery about it. They're not that different. People don't usually bother to thank them for their work."

"Louisianians interest people. They want to understand it. There's a mystery about it. People are always telling me I don't have a Southern accent. I think I do, but apparently her accent doesn't sound the way they expected it to, she said.

"This romance writer doesn't enjoy reading other authors' romance novels. "I'm too analytical to really enjoy it," she said. "I like to read mysteries -- Sue Grafton, Mary Higgins Clark, Robert Parker, Sara Paretsky -- and biographies, as well as National Geographic, Discover, The Wall Street Journal."

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Patricia Maxwell, aka Jennifer Blake

Bayou, which is magically free of mosquitoes. How come?"

Maxwell grinned and said, "Mosquitoes would have detracted from the romantic atmosphere."

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