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Book Club Kit



Karma Brown
© Jenna Davis

A Conversation with Maggie Knox



Marissa Stapley
© Eugene Choi

Readers might be surprised to learn that Maggie Knox is the pseudonym for the writing duo Karma Brown and Marissa Stapley. How did you both come to cowrite *The Holiday Swap*?



Late fall 2019 we were at different stages of the book process—Karma was gearing up for promoting her soon-to-be released novel and Marissa was editing her latest—and were bemoaning how isolating author life can be, and how much fun it would be if we could instead collaborate on our projects. Instead of shrugging away that thought, we continued our conversation . . . “If we did collaborate, what would we write?” Because it was nearly Christmas, and Hallmark Christmas movies were streaming, we said, “What about a holiday romance? Something sweet and hopeful. Now, that would be fun to write!” Neither of us had written a romance, nor had we coauthored anything, but we forged ahead regardless. And the idea that started mostly as a musing between friends turned into *The Holiday Swap*.

You both have separately published multiple books in a few different genres. How has crafting *The Holiday Swap* differed from your previous experiences writing fiction, other than the fact that it was with another person as opposed to alone?

There were times during our brainstorming sessions where we’d veer into more serious territory—themes like the devastating loss of loved ones, for example—and then we’d catch ourselves and remind each other this book was a holiday romance, full of happiness and joy and fun and baked goods! Not that we couldn’t address deeper themes—which we did for both Cass and Charlie—but that the darkness we might give our other fictional characters was neither needed nor appropriate for this novel.

Who do you relate to more—Cass or Charlie—and are either of these characters based on real people?

KARMA: I stay away from creating characters based on people I know and prefer to write entirely fictional protagonists. Having said that, both Cass and Charlie have characteristics that resonated with me, either through the decisions they make or the challenges they face. I enjoyed spending time with both of them while writing this book!



MARISSA: I agree! At various intervals in the book, I found myself wishing I could be friends with both Cass and Charlie and related to them both. I grew up in a small town and can identify with the fishbowl feel of it. My work ambitions are a huge part of my life, so writing about Charlie and her ambitions made me reflect on that. I learned a lot from both the twins—and wish they really did exist so we could continue the conversation.

There are so many delicious recipes mentioned in *The Holiday Swap*. Where did you get inspiration for these mouth-watering treats? Do you have a personal favorite?

MARISSA: A few years ago, a friend gave me some sourdough starter, and I became slightly obsessed with it while writing this book—and that definitely shows up on the page! Karma was often amused and mystified by the things I had to do to keep the starter alive, so we decided we obviously needed to work some sourdough drama into the plot of a book with a bakery in it. As for the sweet recipes, we found inspiration in baking shows and our own preferences. We both love lemon squares, for example, and I can't imagine reading this book and not craving one immediately. (In fact, I'm craving one right now.)

KARMA: I'm a baker, and a reality baking show fan, so some of the inspiration for the recipes came from my own life. For example, the Starlight Bread, full of candied fruits, is reminiscent of the Christmas Cake recipe passed down through generations in my family. We still make it every Christmas, and it's one of my favorite holiday traditions.



What was your favorite scene in the novel to write and why?

KARMA: I have two. The first was the opening chapter, because it's fun to create a new world and the people who live in it—I love the challenge of setting the stage and starting to unravel the characters and their motivations. And the second one is when Jake rescues Cass's cat, Gateau, from the backyard tree for Charlie. It's romantic and charged with energy, and any scene that also features both Gateau and Bonnie, Jake's overly enthusiastic rescue pup, is a winner for me.

MARISSA: I loved the cat rescue scene, too. I'm never more in love with my husband than when he's snuggling our cat. I also loved any scene with Faye in it, because she reminded me of my own grandma, whom I love and miss—and because her life experience gave her a beautiful depth. The surfing scene with Cass and Miguel was a lot of fun to write, too. If I close my eyes, I can visualize the moment they reach for each other's hands. It's so perfectly romantic, which is exactly what we wanted this book to be.

How did you come to craft Cass and Charlie's authentic sisterly push-and-pull dynamic? Did you pull inspiration from your own sibling relationships?

KARMA: I have a sister who is only fifteen months younger than me, and we were incredibly close growing up. Due to our closeness in age, we ended up going through many of the same experiences at the same time. Yet despite our similarities, our career paths look quite different—she's in the medical field and I gravitated to one in the arts. We are similar to Cass and Charlie, I guess, who forged their own paths as adults but remain each other's touchstone.



MARISSA: I have three brothers, no sisters, and Karma and I would often discuss the difference in our sibling dynamic. With my brothers, it's all pretty straightforward. I appreciate the simplicity, but sometimes long for the deep closeness you can have with a sister. For inspiration with Cass and Charlie, I often looked to my relationships with close friends—and thought a lot about the idea that with a sister, you don't get to choose each other, but you can choose what kind of relationship you're going to have.

What is your signature dessert to make (or buy) during the holiday season?

MARISSA: We always bake gingerbread cookies and a gingerbread house—although nothing nearly as elaborate as the one on display at Woodburn Breads!

KARMA: My family's Christmas Cake recipe is the one thing I make every holiday season!

This might be a controversial question, but if you were a character in *The Holiday Swap*, who would you prefer as a romantic interest—Miguel or Jake—and why?

KARMA: It is impossible to choose. I adore both Miguel and Jake for different reasons and am smitten with each of them.

MARISSA: I feel the same. We fell in love with them both!

Without giving anything away, did you always know how the story would end for Cass and Charlie?

Well, we always knew our twins were getting a happy ending! But for the longest time, we didn't know exactly what that was going to look like. We had a placeholder for the final chapter that was something along the lines of "And they all lived happily ever after, smooch! Swoon!" We think what we came up with for the real final chapter is so much better—and that's all we can say about that.

What's next for you?

Next up for Maggie Knox is our second holiday romance, *All I Want for Christmas*, which is set in Nashville, Tennessee, and features a reality singing competition and two competing musicians, Sadie and Max, who dislike each other but are obligated to pretend to be a couple. They have fantastic chemistry on stage, but behind the scenes is another story. Until they find some common ground and things start to heat up! Karma is also working on her next stand-alone novel, *What Wild Women Do*, which is a dual narrative story set in the Adirondacks in the 1970s and the present day. And Marissa is working on television development for her latest novel, *Lucky*.



Discussion Guide

1.

What treat in *The Holiday Swap* did you immediately want to buy or bake at home, and did you end up doing either? If so, share your experience.

2.

What quality do you think lies at the heart of Cass and Charlie's relationship? Do you have that same sentiment with a sibling or friend, and if so, who?

3.

Do you think Cass did the right thing for Charlie toward the end of filming the Christmas special for *Sweet & Salty*? If you were Cass, what would you have done?

4.

If you had the opportunity to live in the town of Starlight Peak, would you? Why or why not?

5.

If you could switch lives with your sibling or friend for twelve days, who would you switch with, and why?

6.

During the switch, Cass and Charlie realized what they truly wanted in order to live happy lives. Did you relate more to Cass's journey or to Charlie's?

7.

Who would you prefer more as a romantic interest—Miguel or Jake—and why?

8.

What was your favorite scene in the novel, and why?

9.

If you could host your own baking show, what would the name and premise of the show be?

10.

What were your thoughts about the ending?

Triple Citrus Cupcakes

CUPCAKE INGREDIENTS

- 1 (8 ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup butter, softened
- 1 ¼ cups sugar
- 2 tablespoons freshly grated orange peel
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 4 eggs
- ¼ cup oil
- ¼ cup milk
- 2 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt

FROSTING INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups powdered sugar
- ¼ cup butter, softened
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated lemon peel
- 2 tablespoons lime juice, or as needed

Yield: 24 cupcakes

DIRECTIONS

STEP 1: Preheat oven to 325 degrees F. Mix cream cheese, butter, sugar, orange peel, and vanilla using an electric mixer until light and fluffy, about 3 to 4 minutes. Add eggs one at a time, beating after each addition. Beat in oil and milk. In a separate bowl, combine flour, baking powder, and salt. Add to orange mixture, beating just until mixed. Portion into paper lined muffin tins; fill cups two-thirds full.

STEP 2: Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, or until a wooden toothpick inserted in a cupcake comes out clean. Let cool 10 minutes in pan. Remove warm cakes from pan and finish cooling on wire rack, at least 30 minutes.

STEP 3: Mix all frosting ingredients with an electric mixer, until frosting is of desired spreading consistency. Frost cupcakes when they have cooled.

*Recipe from: AllRecipes.com
allrecipes.com/recipe/239261/triple-citrus-cupcakes*

Add Aperol to your frosting to make Cass's Aperol Spritz cupcakes!

Aperol Spritz

INGREDIENTS

- 3 ounces prosecco
- 2 ounces Aperol
- 1 ounce club soda
- orange slice for garnish

Yield: 1 spritz

DIRECTIONS

Add the prosecco, Aperol, and club soda to a wine glass filled with ice and stir.

Garnish with an orange slice.

From Liquor.com