

A VERY TYPICAL FAMILY

A Novel

SIERRA GODFREY

**BOOK CLUB GUIDE
AND TRAVEL GUIDE TO SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA**

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SIERRA GODFREY'S GUIDE TO SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA



Visit Santa Cruz, the setting of *A Very Typical Family*, through the eyes of author Sierra Godfrey. Plus, listen to this special Santa Cruz-themed playlist during your visit!



Anyone who has spent time in Santa Cruz, whether living there or visiting, has a different experience. Yet everyone who goes is entranced by the deep-blue skies, the roar of the Giant Dipper and resultant echoing screams from its riders, the inviting beaches, and the laid-back feel.

I was lucky to spend the first ten or so years of my life there, and my family owned a house there until I was sixteen. I moved around a lot, but now I live with my family in the San Francisco Bay Area and visits to Santa Cruz several times a year are a must. We try not to go on holidays—the traffic now is terrible—but we know the best places to avoid crowds.

When it came to a setting for my book, *A Very Typical Family*, Santa Cruz was a shoo-in. I knew I wanted the place that still evokes in me the most potent feelings of home to serve as the foundation for my messed-up family, the Walkers. Santa Cruz isn't perfect. It has its fair share of challenges, and living there isn't idyllic 24/7. But there's a reason this spot is beloved by so many: the briny smell of the ocean, the varied blues of sky and sea, the sound of seagulls, and the sight of majestic, dinosaur-like pelicans flying in V formations across the horizon make it incredibly special. You can kick it on any number of beaches, hike among redwoods or along cliffs, immerse yourself with sea life, get a full amusement park experience at the Boardwalk, and eat well. I like to think

the area helped my character Natalie Walker grow and heal, the city quietly working its magic in the background.



I hope this guide is useful for you, and I would love to hear feedback on it!
Email me at sierra@sierragodfrey.com.

Love,
Sierra Godfrey



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WEST SIDE:

NATURAL BRIDGES STATE BEACH

WHY I LOVE IT:

I grew up in this area, attending the elementary school by the same name. Natural Bridges in Santa Cruz had two arches when I was very young, but they originally had three arches! The first collapsed in the early 1900s, and the second collapsed in 1980. These bridges are made of mudstone, which has a lot of sediment in it. The arches formed over a million years ago, but erosion from the ocean has carved them up over time.

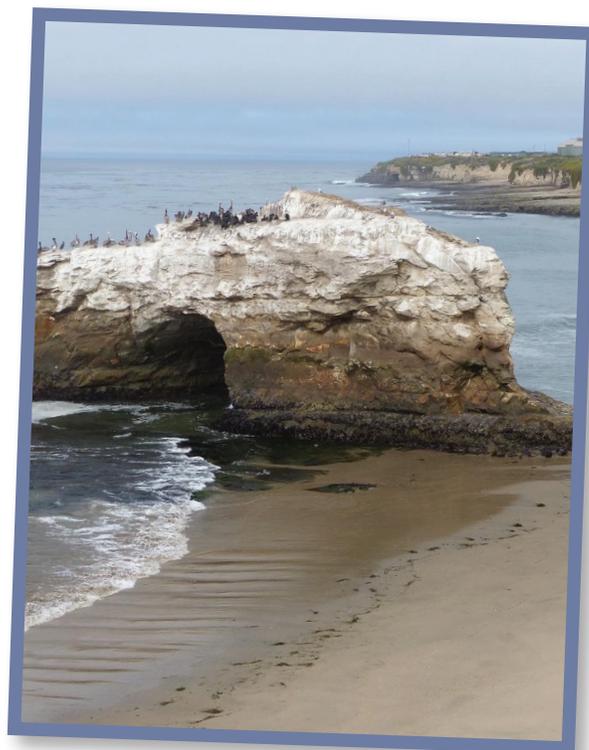
WHAT TO SEE:

We mostly go for the tide pools. The beach is often very crowded, and there are plenty of other beaches in Santa Cruz. However, it's great for families, and there's easy parking, plus bathrooms.

If you go, remember:

- Never take any creature home with you.
- Never turn your back on the ocean. Waves come up at you fast, and you never want to be surprised.

I also love visiting the monarch butterfly sanctuary in the winter months, where you'll see thousands of monarchs in the eucalyptus trees. It's free and it's majestic—but it can get crowded, so plan to go early.



Visit the tide pools during
low or high tide.
To check the tide, visit:



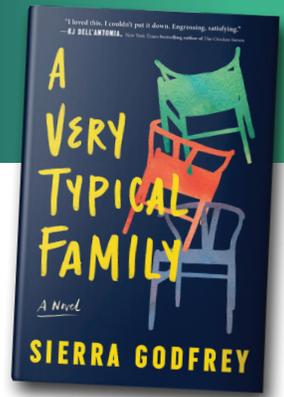
This "Guide to Northern
California Tidepools" can
act as a treasure hunt
layout for littles:



*Fylling's Illustrated Guide
to Pacific Coast Tide Pools*
by Marni Fylling:



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WEST SIDE:

Long's Marine Lab/Seymour Discovery Center

WHY I LOVE IT:

Long's Marine Lab is the marine biology arm of UC Santa Cruz, but it's situated on the cliffs. I was a docent at Long's Marine Lab when I was eleven and featured on the old PBS show *Bay Area Backroads* as a result! I have been visiting Long's Marine Lab since I was very small, when the blue-whale skeleton sat in a field of oat grass, forlorn and weather-beaten. Now, you can view cleaned-up and well-cared-for Ms. Blue next to the visitor's center. There is also a skeleton of a gray whale just beyond.

Long's Marine Lab plays a big part in my book. I set Jake's lab, the Walker Lab, here, and Natalie visits the lab numerous times. It serves as the backdrop for a big gala (I imagined it taking place inside the visitor's center) where things accelerate for Natalie and Asier. They end up smooching next to the blue-whale skeleton outside.



Check out the official website for visiting hours:



WHAT TO SEE:

You definitely want to visit the visitor center. There are touch tanks inside and helpful docents. The gift store is also top-notch. There are several short, easy trails around the visitor center, including along the cliff, with wild rabbits living in the bushes outside. And of course, get a look at the bluewhale skeleton next door! Here are some facts about the blue whale that I still remember from when I was an eleven-year-old docent:

- The blue whale's veins are so big that a cat could run through them.
- The blue whale's heart is as big as a small golf kart or go-kart (how is that even possible?).

WEST CLIFF DRIVE

WHY I LOVE IT:

I've been walking along West Cliff Drive my whole life, including when I was little enough to be in a stroller for part of the way. It's great for walking, running, biking, or cruising in your car with all the windows down.

West Cliff Drive is a three-mile stretch of spectacular winding road along the bluffs, with blue sea on one side and cool houses on the other. It can be crowded, but it's an excellent walk from Natural Bridges State Beach all the way to the lighthouse or Steamer Lane. There isn't much to eat along the way, so pack a picnic and have it on one of the benches on the cliffs or down on one of the many beaches.



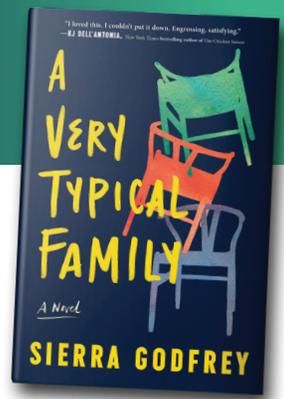
WHAT TO SEE:

Steamer Lane: The iconic surf spot just south of the lighthouse and also one of the places Natalie goes looking for Jake.

Its Beach: The small beach at the foot of the lighthouse. Spectacular rock arches here. Natalie also used to visit Its Beach in her high school days.

The Blow Hole: This jet of seawater spraying up is located between Auburn and Chico Streets. It's what's left of a contraption called a wave motor, no longer in use, but the hole still shoots up water to make waves.

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WEST SIDE:

Wilder Ranch STATE PARK

WHY I LOVE IT:

Wilder Ranch is a gorgeous cliffside walk that allows you to get down to little coves and caves to see harbor seals and amazing birds. It's a good hike along the cliffs with no hills. You can also visit a late 1800s dairy ranch on site.

WHAT TO SEE:

Take the 2.5-mile Old Cove Landing Trail to Ohlone Bluff Trail, with the trailhead at the parking lot. This takes you to the scenic overlook above Wilder Beach to Old Cove Landing, where schooners anchored in the 1800s, and on to Fern Grotto Beach.

There are longer hikes to be had here too, such as the Wilder Ridge Loop (6.3 miles) or the Enchanted Loop, which is an 8-mile hike accessed from the Wilder Ridge Loop that takes you into the redwoods.

THE WHARF

WHY I LOVE IT:

The Wharf, or Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, is a solidly great wharf, where you can shop, eat, and see sea lions up close. It's a great walk, and it affords lovely views of the Boardwalk and the mountains beyond along with the lighthouse. I have walked on it all my life.

WHAT TO SEE:

Walk to the end and peek down the large square cutouts to see the sea lions congregating and shuffling and snorting. You can see them along the sides of the Wharf too and often in the water.

Choose your time to go carefully. The Wharf can get very crowded, especially on weekends, and you'll pay to park. Eating here is also pricey. But you can grab some commemorative Santa Cruz sweatshirts, T-shirts, and stickers in the shops, and you can even check out Marini's Candies where they're known for their saltwater taffy.



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DOWNTOWN

WHY I LOVE IT:

The downtown mall area, or Pacific Garden Mall, is a district of pedestrian-friendly shops and restaurants. In the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, many of the historic buildings were ruined. They were rebuilt—not always the same as before—but this district is a visual testimony to the area’s resilience. A trip downtown is always part of my Santa Cruz itinerary.

WHAT TO SEE:

Bookshop Santa Cruz: Of course I love this place! Every time I visit Santa Cruz, I pay homage to it. In *A Very Typical Family*, Natalie tells Kit to visit the best bookstore ever and directs him to Bookshop Santa Cruz!

The Tom Scribner statue: This beautiful statue of a man playing the musical saw is of local musician Tom Scribner, who lived from 1899 to 1982, a fixture on Downtown streets. It’s located on Pacific Ave. outside of Bookshop Santa Cruz.

Zoccoli’s Deli: This awesome Italian deli has been around since 1948. My mom remembers grabbing sandwiches from Zoccoli’s in the ’80s when she worked downtown. This place is so popular that the lines are sometimes out the door. I recommend the Castroville Italian sandwich.

Comicopolis: My sons love this comic book store that bills itself as “purveyors of all things nerdy.” It is conveniently located next door to Bookshop Santa Cruz, out the back door.

Level Up Video Games: This awesome gamer store has a cabinet of video game history, which is reason enough to go in, featuring ancient consoles. But also, you can find a wide range of games or buy hard-to-find accessories for older game systems.

Pacific Cookie Company: Every time I am in Santa Cruz—EVERY SINGLE TIME—I go here. Why? Because they make the very best cookies I have ever had. No kidding. The Dr. Midnight and the chocolate chip are beyond delish. Get the baker’s dozen or buy a bag of day-olds. You can’t go wrong.

Pizza My Heart: Pizza My Heart is a Santa Cruz and Capitola oldie. I had one of their original logo shirts in the 1980s when I was a kid. They make fab thin-crust pizza.

Artisans & Agency: Part gallery, part museum shop, but all good. Find Santa Cruz art here, including Doug Ross and Marie Gabrielle, home goods, and excellent jewelry.

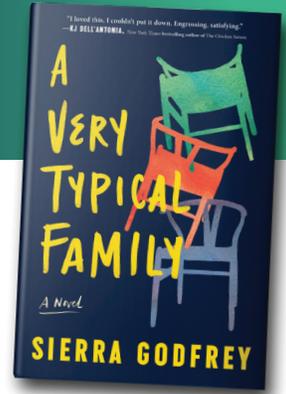
Bunny’s Shoes: Excellent shoes, hats, and bags here.

Fancy Victorian Homes on Walnut Ave.: Stroll along the leafy 240 block of Walnut Ave. to get a glimpse of beautiful Victorians. Which ones do you like the best? I may have used one or two as the inspiration for the Walker family’s mansion in *A Very Typical Family*.

Neary Lagoon Park: This is a hidden gem and again one of my childhood haunts. It used to be a little more hidden and secluded, but nowadays, the lagoon boardwalk has been extended and the walk, while relatively short, is also extended. You’ll walk on wooden floating plants through a lagoon—a great place for bird watching. I’ve even seen river otters in this lagoon. Now there’s a Pollinator Garden on the other side that’s a national wildlife refuge. There’s limited, metered parking on Chestnut Street, but you can also park at the California and Bay Street entrance.



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EAST SIDE:

THE HARBOR

WHY I LOVE IT:

The Santa Cruz Harbor is fun to walk around with good opportunities to eat and ogle.

WHAT TO DO:

On the east side of the harbor, where the big parking lot is, you can have dinner on the upper deck at the Crow's Nest, watching as the boats come in for the evening. There's also a decent little store that sells sandwiches right outside. Or walk down the harbor and admire the house boats. Cross the main road to the other side and walk out onto the jetty until you reach the lighthouse. Watch for sea lions and sea otters lazily looping through the calm harbor waters.

SANTA CRUZ MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

WHY I LOVE IT:

This small building is a quick stop, but it's also across the street from Seabright State Beach, which is a great alternative to the crammed sand of the Boardwalk beach, so you can combine the activities.

WHAT TO DO:

Learn about the first residents of Santa Cruz, the Native Americans who settled along the San Lorenzo River. And see all the types of fish and wildlife in the area, complete with excellent taxidermied specimens.

PLEASURE POINT

WHY I LOVE IT:

Like Steamer Lane on the west side, Pleasure Point is an incredibly nice walk along winding bluffs with great surfer viewing. It's a little quieter and definitely more of a true surfer vibe.

WHAT TO DO:

You can go down the steps to the beach below and pick through the spectacularly flat and wide tide pools here. A coffee cart is often out on weekends, and there are plenty of benches along the way. Brunch or snacks at The Point Market is nice (32nd and E. Cliff Ave.) or stroll up 41st Avenue and browse the many cute shops and coffee places or have ice cream at Santa Cruz's phenomenal The Penny Ice Creamery. Stop in at Two Birds Books, a charming local bookshop.



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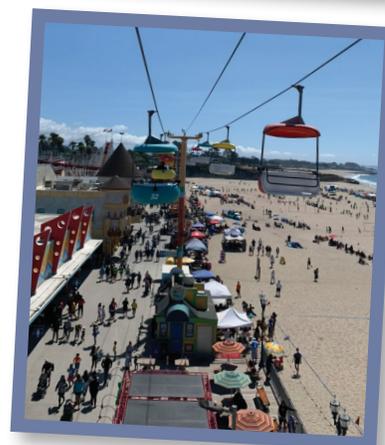
ITINERARIES

IF YOU HAVE A DAY:

If you're a thrill seeker, ride the iconic Giant Dipper at the Boardwalk and relax in the sky bucket ride over the beach. Have a lavish lunch on the Wharf or a lazy brunch at the Crow's Nest at the Harbor. Go to the beach (Seabright or Twin Lakes!). Avoid traffic by leaving early.

IF YOU HAVE A WEEKEND:

- Take a long walk along West Cliff Drive.
- Have lunch at El Palomar downtown or at the end of the Wharf at the Dolphin Restaurant, where you can get fried clam strips and fries, or fried shrimp and fries.
- Get some Pacific Cookie Company cookies downtown and browse in Bookshop Santa Cruz.
- Spend the afternoon on the beach.
- Ride a few rides at the Boardwalk: the Giant Dipper, the Cave Train, Logger's Revenge, and the Sky Glider. Or play a round of indoor mini golf at the unique and amazing Neptune's Kingdom mini golf course. This used to be an indoor pool! There are old timey photos on the walls of its former days.
- Take the Santa Cruz Beach Train from in front of the Boardwalk up to Roaring Camp, where you can ride in the open carriages among the redwoods and drink in the silence and calm.



FOR NATURE SEEKERS:

From birds to sea lions, there's so much to see in Santa Cruz. If you sit on any beach, you'll likely see sea otters and sea lions popping their heads up. I have also seen porpoises leaping from Black's Beach and plenty of snowy white egrets on the shore.

- The pelicans! Oh, the pelicans. These prehistoric delights are graceful, huge, and plentiful. Sit on any bench along the cliffs and watch as they fly in echelons across the horizon.
- Look for long-necked black cormorants streaking across the sky.
- Early mornings on beaches will allow you to see sandpipers stabbing the wet sand, and I have seen great egrets also doing this.
- Watch for little heads of sea otters popping up and having a snack while floating on their backs. Great places to watch for sea otters are anywhere that you see the dark kelp forests. Steamer Lane is a good place. At Four Mile Beach, a stretch of beach just north of Santa Cruz, you can see pelicans at eye level as they soar past the cliffs.
- Hear the sea lions gawp and roar from the Wharf.
- Spot daffodil-yellow banana slugs slithering across the redwood forest floor in the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park or in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park in Felton (a few minutes out from town).

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READING GROUP GUIDE



1. At the beginning of the book, Natalie thinks she wants the promotion at Argo & Pock. As the story develops, it's clear that's not what she really wants deep down. Think about a time you were adamant that you wanted one thing in life only to realize you wanted something completely different. How did you react? Did you go after it?
2. Discuss why you think Natalie felt so desperate to cling to her relationship with Paul and her friendship with Teensy.
3. Natalie seems to have a reluctance to live outside her comfort zone and pursue her professional dreams. Why do you think that is? Have you ever held yourself back in life, either intentionally or unintentionally?
4. Do you think Natalie was right to have called the police on Lynn and Jake That Night? Do you think it was fair that they in turn blamed her for Carlos's death and being sent to prison?
5. Do you think Natalie ever would have reconciled with her siblings if her mother hadn't died?
6. Which sibling seemed to change the most between when they were kids and now? If you have siblings, are they more or less the same, or have they changed pretty drastically since childhood? What about you?
7. Natalie is under the impression that a lot of people still hate her for what happened That Night—Jake and Lynn, her mom and Buck—when it turns out a lot of that is in her head. Have you ever mistakenly thought someone was mad at you? How did you deal with it?
8. Natalie quickly forms a close bond with her nephew, Kit. Why do you think she was so eager to do so?
9. Beyond being a romantic interest, what other role does Asier play in helping Natalie heal from her past?
10. In what ways are each of the siblings similar? How are they different? If you have brothers or sisters, do you think your personalities or the ways you deal with things are similar or very, very different?
11. Do you now live in a different place from where you grew up? If so, when you've gone back to visit, what was it like? What memories did it conjure up?

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



What inspired you to write *A Very Typical Family*?

This story went through a lot of iterations before I arrived at its final plot, but throughout them all, I kept drifting to a story of adult sibling dynamics. I didn't grow up with siblings, so watching how siblings of all ages interact and rely on each other—or don't rely on each other—is fascinating. For this story, I wanted to explore the worst possible thing a sibling could do to another, and sending someone to prison was at the top of the list. There are a number of ways hurt can play out, and I was interested in what you do with that hurt and how you go on afterward. If siblings have a strong foundation from childhood, how does that buoy their adult relationship? Most of all, I wanted to play with the idea that family in adulthood is partly about choice—and we see Natalie and her siblings make that choice both ways at different times in their lives.

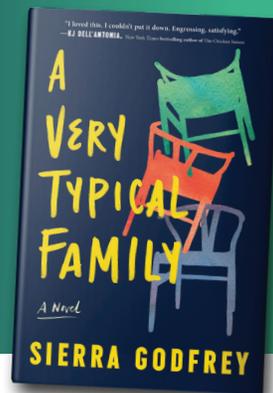
Santa Cruz, California, is such a great setting for this book and plays a big role throughout the story. What are some of your favorite memories of having grown up there?

Santa Cruz is on a lot of lists of top destinations in Northern California, but for me it'll always look and smell like home. It's a small city and yet captivating for so many—the beaches are great, the surfing is good, and there's this sort of shabby-chic undercurrent to life there. Even the fog and the light are special. I tend to conflate memories there with an easier time in life—when I was little, family and my world were simpler. Favorite memories for me include frequent visits to Long Marine Lab. I remember visiting the blue whale skeleton when it was sitting atop a windy hill of wildflowers, unconnected and unprotected. I was a docent at the lab when I was eleven, back when it was just a series of portables, and I was featured on an episode of *Bay Area Backroads* as a result. I was that kid telling visitors, “The arteries of a blue whale are so big that a cat could comfortably run through them.” The facility helped usher in my lifelong love of marine biology. Other great memories include the Beach Boardwalk—I was too little and scared for the Giant Dipper, but I loved the log ride—and walks along West Cliff Drive and in Neary Lagoon. There is so much to do there for such a small city.

The Walkers and their Victorian mansion could be any one of the city's Victorians or Queen Annes, especially those near West Cliff Drive and over on Walnut Ave. I set their home in my head on Santa Cruz Street on the west side, but I took their home from those around Third Street on the Boardwalk hill. I visit as often as I can and build new memories with my children!

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Do you see parts of yourself in any of your characters? What is the process you go through from that first idea for a character to bringing them to life on the page?

I am sure there's a part of me in every character, no matter how much I try to pretend there isn't. Natalie in particular has a very passive element to her that plays out as conflict avoidance. It's difficult for me to engage in conflict or muster up the energy required to initiate a conflict, and I think that's true for Natalie. It's one of the reasons why Paul is allowed to say what he does and stick around as long as he does. In fact, edits to the story included making sure to get that confrontation on the page—and for me, it was a major deal to write those scenes!

First I wrote them very passively, with Natalie simply firmly telling Paul off without raising her voice much. But I knew she had to do it better, and finding a way to do that better was a big deal for me emotionally. Unlike me, Natalie doesn't sweat and feel anxious before a confrontation. The final confrontation with Allen was similarly difficult to write because again—conflict.

As for Lynn, I think she has chosen to approach the idea of death, which has affected her so much in life with the loss of her father at a young age, then the loss of her friend Carlos, followed by her mother's death, without resolution between them, by handling it head-on as her profession. That's not something I could do myself, but I am fascinated and drawn to the way we look at death and handle—or don't handle—our reaction to it, especially in the United States. The excellent book *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory* by Caitlin Doughty addresses these issues and was also an inspiration and reference for Lynn's professional funerary pursuits. It is hilarious and kind of gross, which is how I choose to look at death too.

What do you think happened to the Walker family—Natalie, Jake, Lynn, and Kit—after the book ends? Do they all stick around in Santa Cruz together?

I think they all remain in Santa Cruz, because after all those wasted years, they don't want to spend any more time apart. I like to think Natalie settles into her work with Dr. Berkhower and keeps a good set of galoshes handy for those times when they have to go out to do necropsies on dead whales and sea lions on beaches. And she takes it appropriately slow with Asier, but they are really happy together. She wants to have a healthy, lasting relationship, so she's not jumping into things too quickly, but they spend a lot of time snuggling in bed on weekend mornings with the fog creeping over the cliffs. I think Natalie

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



and Kit continue growing a really great relationship, and Natalie and Lynn get to the point where they enjoy spending time together. I envision Sunday meals in the house for them all, including Buck, overriding those bad memories of That Night in the house. Friendships are important to Natalie, so she probably spends a lot of time with Michelle and new friends she makes in her illustration program. She and Teensy keep in touch—but maybe not as much. And Penguin sticks around these days, choosing to live at the Walker house no matter how many times Natalie brings him over to the house she eventually shares with Asier on West Cliff Drive. (Penguin splits his time between the houses and often scores two dinners out of the deal.)

You often talk about the importance of tension in stories. Why is it such an important element? What are some tips you have for writers to employ more tension in their own writing?

Tension is so much fun! Tension makes the payoff of a conflict that much more exquisite. Everyone lives off tension, in good and bad ways. It frustrates me when I'm reading a story that gives me the resolution too soon. I want to see characters yearning for what it is they want, even if they make poor choices along the way. If we all got what we wanted right away, it wouldn't be as fun. Tension is universal in stories too. It can make a horror story incredibly scary by drawing out the dread, and it can make romantic elements sing when characters yearn for each other without getting the payoff of each other for a while. A good writer, I think, pulls that string of tension taut or loose depending on the scene, playing the reader like a musician. My advice to writers struggling with tension is to throw as many obstacles in the way of their characters as possible. Never let them get what they want; don't let them be safe, don't let them be loved, and don't let them have the final say. Until they do, of course.

What was your path to becoming a writer? Did you always know you wanted to write novels?

I have always written stories. I used to fill notebooks with stories in middle school and high school. I wrote when I was younger to make sense of emotions and situations and to play out how I thought things could go—or not go. It was my own form of therapy. In my twenties, I wrote longer stories, but it wasn't until my early thirties that I got serious about it. I began to learn about the publishing industry and genres and word counts. It took a lot of manuscripts and a lot of years, but I'm so grateful to be where I am. Writing novels, supported by such an amazing team, is the dream.

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What is your writing process like in terms of your routine? When and where do you write? Are you a plotter or a pantser?

I'm a plotter first! I'm a technical writer for my day job, so having an outline and structure is absolutely key—I learned that early on in my career. For novels, I usually start with the fifteen *Save the Cat!* beats (read *Save the Cat!* by Blake Snyder if you're not familiar) and go from there. I structure stories in chapters according to the plot, and then after that it gets a bit looser. I want to allow myself space to grow the story the way it wants to be grown, so I'll allow myself to meander for the first draft. I always need to squirrel myself away from family and work in order to write, so I usually have my headphones on, a cup of tea ready, and the door closed. No distractions.

What are some of your favorite books, and what is it you think you love so much about them?

I love the old sagas by Maeve Binchy and Rosamunde Pilcher. There's incredible richness in their stories in terms of character, pain, and setting. There are elements in their books that I read when I was a kid and still think about today. They handle love, siblings, parents, and friendships very well, while often being subtle in their resolution but no less satisfying.

I also love dry humor. I have loved all books by Marian Keyes because she takes really complex situations and makes them so funny. I am always drawn to stories about relationships, whether it's between families or lovers, because there's so much in them that can go wrong and so much we have to do to make it right. More currently, I love smart, wry fiction about families and relationships.

Do books have a designated place in your home? What's in your TBR (to-be-read) pile these days?

I have a lot of tall bookshelves! In fact, we recently had a whole wall of our living room converted to bookshelves. I love looking at their spines and remembering the feelings I had while reading them or what I learned from them. Books are so personal too, so for me it's a shy way of saying "Here is who I am" to the world—or anyone who comes in my house. My TBR pile is always growing, and I'm compelled these days to read new releases and books by author friends. I set a goal for myself to read a certain number of books a year, but so far my average is about thirty-five. I am always trying to pick up that pace.