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# THINGS YOU SAVE IN A FIRE

by Katherine Center

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



## *A Conversation with Katherine Center*

***Why do you think you became a writer? What turned you into a writer?***

Lots and lots of reasons! I'm a talker from a family of talkers. I've always loved words, and I frequently just stop to notice them and admire them and say a word out loud and kind of feel the experience of making the sound ("astonished" is a perennial favorite). I love syllables. I love the music of language and the rhythm. I love conversation—chatting, gabbing, bantering. I love joking around with people. I have a whole mental collection of memories of funny things people have said, and sometimes I'll crack myself up while brushing my teeth in the morning as I go back and remember them. It's really been a whole lifetime of just loving words and sentences and paragraphs and stories—and being endlessly fascinated by different ways of putting them together. My parents loved books and stories (my mom has a master's in library science, and my dad was a journalist and then a lawyer), and I had great teachers who encouraged me. But I think the thing that really turned me into a writer—maybe more than anything else—was keeping a journal. I started keeping journals at the age of twelve and wrote in them constantly for ten solid years. Malcolm Gladwell says you have to practice for ten thousand hours to master something, and that's definitely where I put in my time!

***You often describe your books as "bittersweet comedies." Where did that term come from—and what does it mean to you?***



When I first started writing novels, I couldn't find the right category for classifying them. They didn't seem to fit anywhere just right . . . and so I just made up a category. The stories I write are half comedies and half tragedies. They feature characters who really have to struggle and cope with genuinely hard things—but they do that by cracking a lot of jokes. We have a tendency to separate stories into “tragedies,” down at one end of the spectrum, and “comedies,” down at the other, as if they are totally unrelated things. But in my experience, comedy and tragedy live shoulder to shoulder. Jokes are an essential coping mechanism for stress and sorrow and worry and grief. I truly think that comedy exists because of tragedy. We invented it to help us cope with all the suffering life throws at us. That's my favorite kind of humor—the kind that's fueled by heartbreak. So it doesn't seem strange to me at all to write “laugh and cry” books. Because to me, life is always both, just right at the same time.

***You've said that your battle cry is “Read for joy.” How did you come to that idea? What does it mean to you?***

I used to read for joy—for fun, for delight—when I was young, but as I got older, I stopped. I got into high school, and reading became about serious work and hard-core achievement. For years, I thought of reading as work. Then, on my fortieth birthday, the present I gave myself was that, for the whole year, I wasn't going to read any book that I thought I “should” read. I was only going to read books that I wanted to read. I barely even knew what it meant to read for fun anymore,

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but I decided that if a book felt like homework, I couldn't read it. I gave myself a fifty-page rule—if a book hadn't grabbed me in fifty pages, I had to start another one. There's value in reading difficult, uncomfortable books, of course. But that's not the only way to read. There is also value in reading something that just takes you away, and immerses you, and delights you. There's value in following your own compass about what stories resonate for you and matter to you at different times in your life. I went through an intense period of de-snobification that year, and it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I read twice as much now as I did before—and I have a lot more fun, too. The more I talk to people, the more I think my experience was not all that uncommon. A reader wrote to me one time and said, "My husband even loved your book, and he hates feel-good reads." And I wrote back and said, "Nothing wrong with feeling good once in a while." I wish I could give us all that permission—to just read for joy. It's life-changing, I swear.

***What was the inspiration for Things You Save in a Fire?***

My brilliant editor, Jen Enderlin, noticed Cassie—who has a very minor part in my novel *How to Walk Away*—and wanted to know more about her. Honestly, when Jen suggested that I might make Cassie the main character of my next book, I was hesitant. My husband has been a volunteer firefighter/EMT for many years, and as much as I admire him, I've always had a hard time relating to how he could want to put on a hundred pounds of bunker gear on a hot Texas day and walk into a



burning building. And if there's one thing I really have to do with my main characters, it's relate. I don't have to be exactly like them, but I need to understand them. I need to get it—why they want what they want and what they're willing to do to get those things. I just couldn't imagine wanting to work that hard and be that hot. But then I talked with my husband, and he said, "What if she's just really, really good at it?" And suddenly, I got her. I know what it's like to want—so badly—to reach your potential. I know what it's like to try and try and not give up because you love what you do so much. That's me with writing. Once I had a way in, the story just kind of wrote itself.

***What kind of research did you do before writing this novel?***

So much research! I knew just enough before I started to be intimidated. I knew exactly how much I didn't know. The world of firefighting is a very specific, rather closed culture, and I knew I wasn't a part of that world. I read memoirs and watched documentaries. I put on my husband's bunker gear and tried to move in it (not easy). I visited firehouses and interviewed firefighters. At one house, they announced my presence over the speaker system—"lady in the house"—so the guys would know to be on their best behavior. I felt a little shy going to do those interviews, but the firefighters were universally welcoming and very forthcoming—and utterly hilarious. It was particularly fun to talk with my husband about all of it—which I did constantly during the writing process—because though I'd been hearing his firefighter stories all these years we'd

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been together, I'd never tried to get inside them before. I'd never tried to listen so closely that I could picture myself there. He read draft after draft for accuracy, and he kept saying, "I love it. More firefighting." He had so many great stories, and the more we talked, the more tempted I was to work them in. But finally, when it was time to turn the book in, my editor read it and she said, "I love it. Less firefighting." So not all those stories made it in.

***What's next for you? Are you currently working on another book?***

I have a new book on the way! It's called *What You Wish For*, and it's the story of Samantha Casey, a librarian at a historic school in the sleepy island town of Galveston, Texas. When Duncan Carpenter, an old teacher friend of hers (and a former crush she hasn't seen in years) gets hired as the school's new principal, she thinks his arrival will be great for the school . . . until she discovers that he's changed beyond recognition: from fun, wacky, and warmhearted to cold, tough, and warden-like. When, in the name of safety, Duncan wants to basically turn the place into a prison, Sam needs to find a way to stop him—and stand up for the kids, the teachers, herself, and everything that really matters.

I'm extra excited about this story, because Duncan was a minor character—the annoying younger brother of the main character—in my novel *Happiness for Beginners*, and I've always wanted to give him his own story. *What You Wish For* is set ten years after *Happiness*, and Duncan has grown up a lot—maybe too much. It was such a treat to

hang out with Duncan again and get to know him better—and to get a little visit with Helen and Jake (the main characters from *Happiness*), too. I've always wanted to set a story on Galveston Island as well—it's the beach I grew up going to, and the place where I still do the majority of my writing.

I'm also just getting started on my next novel! It woke me up this morning—writing itself in my head!

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## *Recommended Reading*

### ***Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love***

**Helen Fisher**

This fascinating nonfiction read looks at the role of romantic love in human life. Researcher Helen Fisher put people in love in brain scanners and watched what happened when they looked at photos of their partners. The scans showed activity in the oldest parts of the brain—and Fisher takes a long, thoughtful look at what this means about who we are and the importance of love in our lives.

### ***The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human***

**Jonathan Gottschall**

This fascinating book tries to get at the role of storytelling in human life and describes stories as “the last bastion of magic.” For anyone who’s interested in how stories work and why they’re so powerful, it’s a great read.

### ***David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants***

**Malcolm Gladwell**

Of all of Malcolm Gladwell’s books, this one, for me, is the most moving. It looks at the phenomenon of strength—and how it can so often be misunderstood. Advantages can hobble us in unexpected ways, and disadvantages can work in our favor.

### ***Know My Name***

**Chanel Miller**

Chanel Miller is the woman whose victim





statement about her sexual assault by Brock Turner was posted online and went viral—read by millions of people in a matter of days. I was one of those people, and I read it with tears running down my face. At the time, she was known as Emily Doe. Here, in her memoir, she takes back her name and tells her story in her own voice.

***The Nightingale***

**Kristin Hannah**

For a page-turning read that really showcases both physical and emotional courage, you can't beat *The Nightingale*. A historical novel about two sisters in France during World War II who survive the occupation in ways that require courage of every kind. Very inspiring—and an absolutely gripping, up-all-night reading experience.

***Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last***

**John Gottman, Ph.D.**

One of the reasons the rookie is so dreamy, to me at least, is that he really appreciates Cassie. John Gottman is a researcher who looks at what marriages need to thrive, and one of the many things he talks about is creating a “culture of appreciation” in a relationship—where partners focus on and savor the things about each other that they love. I thought about this book when I was writing the rookie. I wanted him to be an absolute genius at the act of appreciation—for Cassie's sake, if nothing else.

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## Reading Group Questions

1. At the start of the story, Cassie pummels a city councilman onstage after he touches her inappropriately. How did you react to that? Did it make you like her more—or put you off? What did you think of that moment once you knew the full story?
2. Cassie spends the early part of the story avoiding a phone call from her mother—which turns out to be a plea for Cassie to move across the country and help her with her health issues. What did you think of Cassie’s reluctance to go at the time? What was Cassie afraid of?
3. After the debacle at the awards dinner, Cassie is called into Captain Harris’s office, and the captain gives her some pretty intense advice about how to survive in an all-male fire station that doesn’t want her there. Could you relate to some of her “rules” for Cassie? Have you ever been in a work situation where you had to monitor your own behavior in similar ways?
4. Cassie’s goal when she arrives in Rockport is to do her duty and nothing more. She doesn’t want to bond or be friends with her mother, no matter how much her mom might want to. Why do you think Cassie works so hard to keep her mom at arm’s length? What’s at stake for her?
5. Cassie’s captain has warned her that there’s one thing she absolutely *cannot* do in her new firehouse: Date firefighters. Cut to Cassie laying eyes on the dripping-wet rookie on her first day in the firehouse and feeling a powerful attraction to him. As the story



progresses, he becomes one of her favorite things about her workday—and, at the same time, the biggest threat to her job. When she goes with him to his parents' anniversary party, she knows she's putting herself in danger. Why does she do that? Is it a total mistake—or is there some wisdom there, too?

6. Cassie is better at firefighting than the rookie is. Nothing fazes her, but he passes out taking blood, goes pale riding out to calls, and throws up after his first fire. What did you think of this dynamic? How is the rookie good for Cassie? How is she good for him?
7. The guys at the fire station have a lot of mixed feelings about Cassie being there, and yet it's not the outright hostility she'd feared. In what ways do their attitudes make things harder? Are there any ways that they help her? It takes them a while to get past their assumptions about her, but it also takes her a while to do the same thing with them. In what ways did the firefighters surprise you?
8. Cassie is a master of physical courage—but her movie to Rockport forces her to explore emotional courage. Diana insists, "Choosing to love—despite all the ways that people let you down, and disappear, and break your heart. Knowing everything we know about how hard life is and choosing to love, anyway . . . That's not weakness, that's courage." How does falling in love with the rookie help Cassie learn about emotional courage? How does falling in love with the rookie impact her relationship with Diana?

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9. As cruel as DeStasio is toward Cassie, he's got a tragic story of his own. Why doesn't he want Cassie's forgiveness? Why does Cassie forgive him anyway? Would you have forgiven him? How do you manage forgiveness in your own life?
10. Cassie's dad says, "The best revenge is forgetting," and Cassie says, "The best revenge is marrying a kindhearted guy with a washboard stomach who brings you coffee in bed every morning." What *is* the best revenge? Does Cassie get her revenge in the end?