



Sarah Morgan

285: Character-Driven Holiday Romance

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Today's show notes are over at diydfa.com/285 because it's Episode 285. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, or you know, all the usual places. And please, also leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there discover the show as well.

Now, today I have the pleasure of interviewing Sarah Morgan, a USA Today bestselling author. Sarah writes lively, sexy contemporary stories for Harlequin. Romantic Times has described her as "a magician with words" and nominated her books for their Reviewer's Choice Awards and their "Top Pick" slot. In 2012, Sarah received the prestigious RITA Award from the Romance Writers of America. Today, we're going to be discussing the art and craft behind her latest novel, *A Wedding in December*. Welcome, Sarah. It is so great to have you here.

Sarah Morgan: Hello, Gabriela. Lovely to be here.

GP: I always like to start with the story behind the story, as it were. What inspired you to write *A Wedding in December* in the first place?

SM: Oh, I love that question. Sometimes, it's really easy to answer with every book. You know, the answer's really clear. Maybe I heard something, I read something, maybe something happened to someone I know, you know, general issue. In this case, there was no specific trigger, but it started for me with the character of Maggie, who is the mother of the bride. And her character just came to me really clearly from the beginning.

She's a woman in her 50s, who's, she's sort of at the crossroads in her life. I would say, she perhaps feels as if much of the good stuff is behind her. You know, she loved raising her kids, she had a job, but the job wasn't her priority. Her family was the priority, and that was her choice. Now her daughters have left home, her marriage is in trouble, and she's really at a point of great change.

So, she was the starter for me. I built the story really from Maggie, because there are certain elements, obviously, you always need in a good holiday book to give readers all the right feels. I want complicated family dynamics, warmth, humor, amazing snowy setting, and all that comes together with the wedding theme.

You know, it's a fantastic way of bringing family together, but Maggie was really the beginning; and then I threw in some twists. So, it evolved from the character and that's not unusual for me because I write quite character-driven fiction, and that's often really where I started my writing.



GP: That's really interesting that Maggie was the launching point because in many ways, even though the story does shift between Maggie's point of view and then those, the POV of her two daughters, at least to me, it feels very much like Maggie's story. Even though we have these two other very strong point of view characters. Did you see it as Maggie's story as you were writing it or do you think of it more as like a true split POV, like each character is the heroine of their own arc kind of story?

SM: You know, when I started it, I didn't see it as Maggie's story. I saw it really as the story of the family, of the White family. I really very much saw it as a family, and looking at it from everybody's point of view because that's what so fascinating about conflict, isn't it? Everyone has a different view on it.

That's in a way what I was trying to show, but I think once I got to the end of the book, and to be honest, it wasn't until I read some of the reviews that I thought, "Okay, Maggie is coming out as the central, almost the sort of solid center of the book." And I wouldn't disagree with that, but I think at the beginning, that wasn't the plan. It's just the way it's evolved.

GP: You know, that's so interesting too, because in a lot of romance, like, lately, we've had a lot of romance writers on the show, and I've been reading a lot of romance, both for the show, but also because I kind of like reading books that have happy endings.

[laughter]

GP: And so it's like one of those things, you're just guaranteed the happy ending.

SM: Yeah. We need that. We need that right now. [laughs]

GP: I know, we really do. What's interesting is oftentimes when you have that back and forth point of view, it's usually the hero and the heroine; and you kind of like go, you see sort of the way they see each other, and eventually, those things align and they get together. And here, it's definitely a very different format. Like at least, you know, as far as I've gone reading the book, I'm about a third of the way in, we don't get any of the guy point of view.

SM: No.

GP: I cheated and I looked at the table of contents; we don't see any of the guy—like, they never get a point of view. Was that a deliberate choice to make it just the women who carried the story?

SM: Yes, it was. And that's a good question, actually. I mean, I've written, am I on 87 books? I don't know, but it's about 87 books, and I have done a guy point of view in every single one until I started to write the standalone fiction, which still has romance, but perhaps more leaning towards women's fiction, and that's when, and the first book is about, was *How To Keep A Secret*, which was out the summer before last. So, actually, that's last summer.

[laughter]

SM: Not the one just gone. I can never remember when things came out, but yeah, so that would've been last year, I had to keep a secret. And that was when I first started focusing on the women. And you know, it's been a really interesting craft challenge for me. When you can show the hero's point of view, it's a little bit easier because you are in his head.

And so nobody's in any doubt about what he's thinking or feeling or why he's acting in a certain way, but what you have to do when you are speaking to the women is show the hero's point of views



through the women in other ways and through his actions. So, I found that more complex, something quite challenging and more difficult for me, but actually, I really, really love doing it that way.

And the cost of focus in this story was the relationship between the women. It felt right to do it. So, I'm not saying I would never do another male point of view. I think I probably absolutely will. That statement doesn't make sense, is it, "probably absolutely will?"

[laughter]

SM: But I probably absolutely will. [laughter] I think I'm not saying I would never do it again, but I think it's the best way to tell a story, does the story improve, whose story is it? And this was really very much the women's story. The heroes are there, there's romance and there's plenty of romance, but really it's the women's story. And therefore, they were front and center stage, but yeah, in a different book, I might have done it differently.

GP: That's really interesting. When you say that you've done the hero's point of view is it just his point of view, or is it him and the heroine and back and forth?

SM: Oh yeah, both. I've always done back and forth with every book up until, as I say, the standalones last year. So, I've done every—Yeah, every book it's been back and forth. Yeah, and that was fun to write. I loved it.

GP: You know, it's interesting. I love what you said about how, the back and forth, when you see what the hero is thinking, it does kind of, for the reader's perspective, it kind of gives us a little bit more of a relaxing feeling because we, like you said, we'll know if he's into her.

And so the heroine might not realize it, and kind of the fun is that we're seeing both the hero's side and the heroine's side, and we're kind of like, "Why can't you see he's in love with you?" You know, it's that kind of dynamic, where the reader knows all and the characters are kind of figuring it out. Whereas with this, it's very different because like you said, there are a lot more clues.

And even the things that we see of the male characters, of the heroes, it's all filtered through the way the women are interpreting it. So, it's going to have a little bit of their slant, their perspective. They're going to see what they want to see and not necessarily what they need to see, if that makes sense.

SM: Yes, and that also makes it interesting when you're reading it. I mean, I think for straightforward romance, that's just romance with nothing else around the edges, no other family relationships or I think that that makes perfect sense to do it from male and female point of view because it's the central relationship between the couple or male and male, you know, whoever your central couple are. It makes perfect sense to give both points of view.

But with this, although, I mean, obviously, there is a lot of romance. I mean, in fact, there's three romances. The real conflict is the family. It's about family dynamics really, and what happens when they're thrown together. So, it's from their point of view, the three women, because they are really very much central to the story.

GP: Love it. I got to ask, because here, at least here in the States, it's like, it's turned into Hallmark Christmas Movie central, like—

[laughter]

GP: It's like the minute November 1st hits, it's all of the Hallmark-type channels all have like Christmas romance movies. It got me thinking Christmas and romance are kind of like, you know, hot cocoa and marshmallows, like go together.

SM: Oh, they do.

GP: What is it about the holidays, but, in particular, Christmas, and that lends itself to romance, to romantic storytelling, that kind of thing?

SM: Wow. That's a really good question. I mean, I love that Christmas has started. Funny enough, I was into my UK publisher in London yesterday and I got into the cabin, and he said, "Oh, I've just seen my first Christmas decorations." [laughs] He thought that was far too early. But I think with holiday romance, I think it's just that lovely, cozy winter feeling. It's a particular type of escapism.

I think it's slightly different from your romance set in the summer, or you know, I think readers who love holiday romance want that extra something. I think it is an extra layer of comfort. And the funny thing is, of course, you know, we throw in—I mean, my book is set in Aspen and it's beautiful and snowy; and in a book, that's absolutely fabulous. It's not necessarily that readers love winter and want to experience it. I mean, we don't want to be stuck in a traffic jam. We don't want to be cold, you know, all the things that happen in the winter.

But what we want to do, there's something cozy about the thought of being curled up in the warm and the safe with snow falling outside the window that you don't have to go out in. It's just something about that season, I think that, and it induces warm feelings. And, of course, we all know that the reality is often quite stressful because you have huge gatherings, you're in the kitchen, you are, you know, particularly in the UK. I know probably your biggest holiday is Thanksgiving, isn't it?

GP: Well, my family is weird because we're from South America, so Thanksgiving is one of those holidays that kind of puzzles us. Christmas is actually the big one for my family.

SM: Oh, well, there we are then, so you are the same. Christmas. I mean, it can be for a lot of people really stressful. It's about running to buy presents, and et cetera, et cetera. Sometimes I think the gulf between your expectations of that festive holiday season and the reality is so big. I think sometimes what a book gives you is your sort of dream Christmas. And that's really lovely. It's just very nice.

It's just a relaxing way to spend a few hours, really. I think it's all about atmosphere, you know? When people buy a holiday romance, they want to be wrapped in that snowy, wintry, sparkly, magical, festive feeling. And they want the whole winter Wonderland feeling. That's what you are giving them really in this type of book. It's the same with the Hallmark Movies.

You just want to feel some certain warmth and you know it's going to have a happy ending, but of course, there's a certain reassurance in that, which is nice. You can just relax and not worry that your favorite character's going to be dead in the end. [laughs]

GP: Right, or heartbroken, or gruesomely injured or whatever—

SM: Yes, exactly. Exactly. No, no, no, just occasionally, it's nice when life works out, isn't it?

GP: What I love about what you said was also that idea of the Christmas expectations, the holiday expectations and that layer of stress, because what's really interesting—I wanted to circle back to



talk a little bit more about Maggie. She loves that. She lives for that, which is a little bit bizarre. I'm one of those people who kind of dreads the whole Christmas shopping thing, and if we can do it all via ordering stuff online as much as possible, that makes me happy. The thought of going out into those crowds in New York City, can be a little bit terrifying, but Maggie lives for this. She loves the baking. And in the beginning that's sort of, she's like almost obsessing over that right at the start of the book—

SM: Yeah.

GP: —and the preparation. Can you talk a little bit about how that kind of gets to be at odds because we've got two sides to this conflict? There's the fact that she loves the Christmas thing and now it's getting upended with this wedding, and the fact that you're throwing it together, not only her family, but now her daughter's husband-to-be's family. So, you get family dynamics on steroids, which adds to complication.

[laughter]

SM: And that's why it's so fun to write, you see? And you're absolutely right; it is an absolute focus for her. And if you think about her character, because she is so family-focused, she loves it. If she was running a company, she'd be the best. She'd want the highest sales and the happiest workforce. That's how she treats her family, her role with the family, because she didn't have a great family background herself.

She wants to create this magical thing, if you like, the magical Christmas, so, she's always done that. It's terribly important to her because it's, and because the children have left home now. I say children, her two girls because they're both at college—well, the older one is a doctor and has been for a while, and has been away from home for a while. Christmas is even more precious because this is the time when they have a family gathering, so it really, really matters. And she wants it to be everything you see in the movie. She wants it to be beautiful Christmas tree and smells of baking. She wants all that. So, she gets excited about it, and she can almost elongate that feeling for the couple of months before Christmas in her planning.

And so when she gets the call out of the blue from Rosie, the younger daughter saying, “Hey mom, I'm getting married, by the way, over here in Aspen. And you need to come here.” Her initial thought, although she's a very unselfish person, she tries to put family first, her initial thought is, “Oh my goodness, Christmas is ruined,” because she can't do all the things she loves. She enjoys spoiling people and making Christmas, you know, this fantasy Christmas for everyone. And suddenly, she's not needed. She's flying out to Aspen, where somebody else, her daughter's boyfriend's family are doing all the organizations, so she's kind of redundant. And so that's a double whammy for her really, you know? [laughs]

GP: Yeah.

SM: Poor Maggie, poor Maggie. [laughs]

GP: It's interesting also—I mean, one of the things that I love is the fact that she is very much unapologetic about how being a mom and being there for her family, for her kids, for her husband is her first priority.

SM: Oh yeah.

GP: And these days, I think with a lot of stories where it's all about like empowered women and career and this and that, and don't get me wrong, I'm a career person, but it's refreshing to me to have a character who is like—I don't know. I feel like a big part of showing diverse lives is also showing people who choose—

SM: Exactly.

GP: —to be there for their families, and that is their first priority. If that were my first priority, my children would starve and never be clothed. But [laughs] that's a me-problem because I'm a delinquent parent, but you know, for her, when Maggie's the one in charge, things apparently function beautifully. And so I just—I don't know. I remember reading that and being like, really admiring Maggie and being like, "Yeah, she owns it. That's awesome."

SM: Yeah, she does own it. She does own it. And that was an absolutely conscious decision that, you know, Maggie, I mean I knew her so well by the end of the book. I knew she would never apologize from, and she is empowered and this is her choice. And so in a way, and this is partly the pivot of the book, because this was her choice, you know, nobody made her stay at home. It wasn't a default. It was her dream. Maggie actually was living her dream. And then, of course, the children go, and I think the final straw is when her daughter says, "Hey, I'm getting married. And by the way, it's a guy in North America."

And she's thinking, "Oh my goodness." There's a big difference between your daughter being in college in another and your daughter actually, maybe living there forever. It's as if she's lost her job, and her purpose, and all the things that she really loves. So, you know, it is a real turning point.

And to begin with, she does, as I said before, she does feel as if, "Oh my goodness. Everything good has finished. All the bits I love are behind me. The children aren't little; they don't need me. The family stuff I love, I chose to do, I can't do it anymore," because, of course, you might move on in a job. You know, you lose your job; you hopefully might find another one. It might be better. But once your family grows up, if your family is your focus, then what do you do then?

GP: Yeah.

SM: And that's very much her journey, really. And of course, at the same time, she's actually, in the trope, she's separated, which the girls don't know because she decides she doesn't want to spoil the daughter's wedding. And obviously, had a lot of fun with that, like a lot of fun because there are quite a few sort of tropes in this book and sort of, you know, marriage reunited and all sorts of things.

With that trope with her, the people not knowing that she's actually separated. So, they have to go along. They have to pretend to be married in order to get Rosie through the big day, because that's what Maggie would do. She puts her daughter—Her daughters are her priority, so, if that means keeping her own heartbreak quiet just until her daughter is happily married, she's not going to spoil anyone's day. So, they pretend that they're still married, and that leads to much hilarity. Well, I laughed when I wrote it anyway, Gabriela.

[laughter]

SM: I hope people laugh when they read it.

GP: I hope also—Right now, I'm at the scene where she arrives in the airport, and Rosie and Dan are there to meet her; and we don't need to give spoilers, but it is just hilarious.

SM: Oh, good.

[laughter]

SM: I had fun writing it.

GP: That was such a good scene.

SM: Yeah.

GP: But, you know, I'm glad you mentioned the idea of the marriage falling apart because it's also an interesting—as I've been reading it, we sort of have two relationships and you've hinted that there may be a third. I haven't quite gotten there yet, but you've got Rosie and Dan getting married, you've got Maggie and Nick that are pretending to be doing well, but they're not.

And that's interesting. You've got sort of two opposite trains, and yet we know going into this with the happily-ever-after, that, of course it's going to have to end well for everybody. Like, it can't just be a happily ever after for Rosie. So, there's that feeling of "Okay, I know that it's going to be okay." Like, I don't know. Can you talk a little bit about that conflict between the two?

SM: Yeah, but that's interesting. Yeah, I can. You know, you say it's going to be okay, but okay isn't necessarily ending up in being married. I haven't said that Rosie actually, because, as you know, if you've read the beginning, Rosie's now having second thoughts.

GP: Yeah.

SM: So, you know, will she end up getting married or will her happy ending actually be going off with deciding that she's better off single, that this is an impulsive decision because it's a very quick whirlwind romance; and maybe Maggie will decide that actually, you know, getting divorced is not the end of the world and her happy ending is doing something by herself? So, I think it isn't necessarily relationship. I can tell you, it will end happily.

I think you will love the way it ends, but I think it's very interesting to sometimes keep that open because you're asking just as—Actually, you made a very good point, you know, it's very unusual to see somebody choosing family so unapologetically, and you know, very empowered and she did make a choice. So, she's a very strong woman.

GP: Yeah.

SM: She's not a default. And it's the same with the ending. You know, you might decide it's about choosing what you want. That's what makes it happy ending, going after what you want and not, you know, following your golden, your dreams. And that does happen. [laughs] That's all I'm saying.

GP: It's interesting. One of my favorite books is *Pride and Prejudice*—

SM: Oh yeah.

GP: That is one of those books that I actually hated when I first read it in high school. And then the more I've revisited it, the more I fall in love with it every time. What I love about that book is that it's actually not really about Lizzy and Darcy getting together. It's about Lizzy claiming her own happiness. And if you look at the arc of the story, really the pivotal climactic moment has nothing to do with her and Darcy getting together.

It's about her standing up to Lady Catherine and claiming her happiness. And it's all about Lizzy saying, "I am going to claim my—" Like, she says it from the very beginning of the book. It's funny,



every time I read it, I almost, like, it takes a while as a reader to get it, that that's what the story is really about. And yet, that's the happily ever after. The fact that Darcy happens to be the happiness for her is kind irrelevant.

SM: That's right. You want to see the characters getting what they want, you know, what they deserve. Yeah, and if it's a crime novel, what they deserve might be something different.

[laughter]

SM: But this isn't, this isn't. Nobody's going to get murdered even under wedding stress, so you can relax. [laughs] Nobody's going to use the knife to cut anything other than the cake.

[laughter]

GP: It's interesting that you mentioned the character getting what they want. When I often talk about endings, this is going to be tricky for us to discuss because obviously, we don't want to do spoilers, but when I talk about endings with my students, I talk about how it's sort of like a two-by-two matrix. And on one across, the question is, do they get what they want? So, yes or no. And then the vertical is, do they actually still want that thing? Yes or no.

SM: Exactly. Exactly. And, and what they need.

GP: Yeah.

SM: And in this what they want, what they wanted at the beginning of the book, because it may not be the same thing.

GP: Exactly. Like, they may have shifted. Yeah. And so I feel like romance lives in the "Yes" column for both. It's either, yes, they get what they want or they get what they want, but it's not what they originally wanted. Like, it's a new thing.

SM: Yeah.

GP: Whereas I think in other genres that's where the do they get what they want? No, that's a tragedy. You know, so it's interesting how it breaks up in terms of the genres too. That, because happily ever after is so baked into romance, you kind of have only, you know, you have fewer options in terms of where the story can end up because you need to satisfy that do they get what they want?

SM: Yes. I think with a straight romance, you know they're going to end up together.

GP: Yeah.

SM: The real, the challenge and the thing that keeps you turning the pages is seeing how on earth that can happen. And you know, a great romance, you won't be able to see how on earth they can possibly get together. And that's what keeps you turning the pages, its emotional tension, isn't it? Emotional tension.

GP: One of the things that you mentioned earlier in this conversation is also the sort of the Christmas environment as being a place to throw characters together. Like, this is a family reunion, obviously, sparks are going to fly even more so if it's a wedding. Can you talk a little bit about the role of the support characters in the story, and how that adds to tension and humor, and how they come into play?



SM: Well, from a crowd point of view, as a writer, you want to challenge your character. You're putting them in a position that's hard for them, and then you try and make it harder. So, I took away Maggie's Christmas. I made her fly to the other side of the country facing the fact that actually her daughter may be moving away, and indeed making a mistake because Rosie's very impulsive.

And also the fact that somebody else had taken over the wedding and the mother-in-law-to-be was sort of organizing everything. She's terribly excited. This is her only son, and she's really excited. She adores Rosie. She didn't have a daughter of her own, so she's almost sort of sucking Rosie into her side of the family. So, there's that tension for Maggie as well.

But Katherine, the supporting characters, not only challenge the main characters, but they, with the relationship, it forces them to grow. So, actually in the end, Katherine—I mean, again, I say this without spoilers, but let's just say that the relationship with Katherine does not end up being what Maggie thinks it will be. I think it's the same with the other secondary characters, the best man, Jordan, I mean, he drives Katie, the older sister up the wall. Is that an American Phrase, driving up the wall?

GP: Yes.

SM: Driving them crazy, okay. So, they're driving—I mean, that's a very classic, oh my goodness, I can't stand you, relationship. And he really challenges Katie, but not just on a superficial level, but actually he's challenging some of her beliefs as well, you know? "Where did you get that from? Why are you thinking that?" And that's good for Katie because she's a doctor and she's really competent.

She makes decisions in a split second, she doesn't spend ages thinking about things because she's expected to know what to do in a moment. So, she very rarely sits down and ruminates over her actions, and the best man, again, sort of challenges her to think about that. That was an interesting dynamic. So, the secondary characters, I mean, obviously, they should all have a purpose. They're not just thrown in there like Aspen trees to add this color. [laughs] They're not another snowfall. They should actually add something.

I would say as well that the setting, I would feel particularly in a Christmas book is another character. The setting has to add something. You couldn't take this story and just put it anywhere. It has to be in this particular place because that adds to the story, challenges the characters, and it's important.

GP: I'm so glad you mentioned the setting because after I read the description of the tree houses at the lodge, I had to Google tree houses in Aspen —

SM: Of course, you did. [laughs]

GP: —to look, because I wanted to...like, is this a real thing? And how do I get there? It was just so amazing.

SM: We all want to book it, Gabriela. Trouble is actually nobody built it yet. Well, that's not quite true. I did spend a happy day searching for tree houses, and what I did in the end was a sort of amalgam of all the things I found. And obviously, I didn't find the thing I described, but there were a couple that were fairly close and doable. I looked at everything really from very luxury tree houses that top hotels sort of rented at. It was a few of those in the UK, and then, you know, snowy cabin. So, it was a kind of amalgam.

I do like, when I'm doing a setting, I do like to try and make it fictitious really, because that way, I can manipulate it in any way I like. And obviously, the place itself is real, but I like the actual resort or hotel or house or sometimes even village, I just like to make that fictitious because then I can do what I like.



I don't want somebody saying, "Oh no, you put a library on Main Street, and that closed down three years ago." You know, I just— [laughs] Because it pulls people out of the story, and you want—I mean, you've just said to me, "Oh, where is this place?" That's the biggest compliment because you were in the story, and that is the biggest compliment. So, you know, you don't want somebody saying, "Oh, wait a minute. You know, I've stayed here, and it's nothing like that." [laughs]

GP: Yeah. It's interesting, you mentioned that Aspen is, obviously like the lodge and the city, the town is very much almost like a character in its own right. I would also argue that Honeysuckle Cottage is a character in its own right.

SM: Yeah.

GP: I mean, we only see it at the beginning of the book, but it feels so real to me. I, again would want to Google and be like, where is this cottage? And how can I live there?

SM: I know. There are all actually—I mean, you know that again, it's fictitious, and I wasn't specific about which, but in the villages around Oxford, there are absolutely beautiful villages and cottages exactly like that. So, lots of honey-colored stone and village greens, and cricket in the summer.

I mean, that again was fictitious, but there's a lot of that in the area I wrote about. So, that's authentic and you want it to have an authentic feel, even though it's not somewhere specific. You know, you don't want to write somewhere that's completely out of context because then somebody who knows the area will say that this just wouldn't happen here, you know?

GP: Right.

SM: Again, it's about keeping the reader in the story and painting something that feels authentic.

GP: And in a way, the fact that it is fictitious, the fact that you can control the minute details, like even though you have to be familiar with the bigger setting, because you can make it very specific and you don't have to rely on like Google Earth or something to be able to do a Google version of research. You can actually make it feel, I think in some ways, more real to the readers, because you're able to really paint a picture as opposed to being limited by what you're able to glean through research.

SM: Yes, that's true. That's true.

GP: I want to shift gears a little bit. There's one other theme that comes up a lot in this book. It's the theme of secrets, and each of the characters kind of has secrets. They have something that they're keeping from the other characters. Like Katie's got something that's happened to her. We don't yet know what it is, at least I don't. Maggie and Nick's relationship is on the rocks, and they're pretending that it's not. And then Rosie has her second thoughts that she's kind of trying to play down and struggling with.

So, this obviously, raises the question of, when they have these secrets and that question of, how well do you really know someone? They're sort of questioning that each and their own way, the three main protagonists, the three female characters, the female leads. Can you talk a little bit about how the secrets play out? Obviously not revealing them, but like, how that theme plays out and also how they sort of come to grips with their own, "how well do I know myself or know another person?"

SM: Yeah. That's interesting, isn't it? Because I think that sometimes what a family knows a bad person, isn't—I mean, we all probably see a different side of a person, don't we? So are your friends

and maybe your spouse and your children and your parents, they will all see a different side of you. I think that's really interesting. You know, there are some friends, you might say one thing to and another, but you might not confide in another friend.

I think it's unusual to have somebody that knows everything about someone. You would think that even with a close family, and this family is a close family, that they would know everything, but also because there's a lot of love there, they're often protecting each other. "Oh, I don't want to say that, I don't want to worry. I don't want to worry this person."

Not Maggie. This is not a spoiler because it's right from the beginning of the book. You know, Maggie, they separated, but she hasn't yet told the girls because she's waiting for the right moment. It's not that she's sort of thinking, "I'm going to keep this a secret." She knows she's going to have to say, but she knows it will be difficult because they're a close family. She's waiting for the right moment.

And then Rosie says she's getting married, and she thinks, "Well, this is not the right moment. I can't start talking about separating and ruining everybody's happiness at a wedding." So, she ends up keeping the secret. It's almost by accident, really. I mean, obviously, it's a choice, but she's not thinking, "This is a secret that I'm never going to tell anyone." It's just about protecting family, really.

I think Rosie is a bit the same. She doesn't want to say, "Oh, I'm having second thoughts," because she's not quite sure if they're real. She doesn't, once she starts telling people, things become real and they can grow, and she doesn't want that to happen. You know?

Yes, Katie is keeping a secret, and she's not telling because she knows that it would worry her parents. She doesn't want to worry her parents. She's older now, she should be a mature adult. She shouldn't have to lean on the parents.

That's another interesting thing. At what point do you lean on family, when do you protect them? It becomes a very interesting as a writer exploring those issues. And of course, it allows lots of scope then for having lots of issues that different family members knows something, but not all of them; and that's really fun. [laughs]

GP: Yeah, especially when you're moving from different points. I think the multiple points of view really helps with that as well because we can see their perspective of the secret when we're in their head. But then we also see the repercussions of it, like this—I'm thinking again, the scene in the airport where we're seeing Rosie, and Rosie is like, "What the heck is going on?" And Maggie is behaving in a certain way, which totally makes sense to the reader, given what we know about Maggie and what she's trying to keep from Rosie. But from Rosie's perspective, she's like, what the—Yeah.

SM: The reader's very much in on that. The reader is very much in on that, but the girls are not, the two daughters are not, and that's where some of the fun comes really because the reader knows more than they do.

GP: And the humor too.

SM: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Well, I had a lot of fun with that.

GP: You mentioned that this was a bit of a departure in terms of the structure, the point of view, and whatnot. Did your process change at all with this book, or was it similar to past books? And if so, what did it look like?



SM: My process is quite a messy thing, as many writers will say. [laughs] It's quite, I'm very intuitive instinctive writer, so, of course, I do have a basic outline in mind. I mean, my publisher needs that. I understand that. So, I will write my outlines. I have a very rough idea of where it will go, but really it's only when I start writing it that the book gets better, basically. I'll think, "Oh no, she wouldn't do that," because you get to know your characters. And then, you talk about Maggie owning the fact that, the family is so important to her, and as you write the book, you realize there's no way she would do certain things. And it's when you know your characters that well, that the book starts to really feel real, I suppose.

So in terms of process, it's probably just that it's the same process, but just more of it really. I've got more characters that I've got to get to know, and I've got these intersecting, almost the matrix of relationships. So little just about looking at straight romance between two people.

It's about looking at these different relationships, as well as romance—and there is plenty of romance. I'm looking at sister-sister relationship, I'm looking at sister-mother, I'm looking actually at the change in relationships, which really interests me in a family over time. Rosie's always been the baby, she's always been impulsive, so people see her through that lens. Whereas perhaps people she's meeting now have only ever known her through in the last six months. Yeah, they know Rosie now. They didn't know her when she was a toddler, so they don't bring any of that past the relationship. I think that also affects how you see a character, how you see a person. I think that's really relevant.

GP: As you're getting to know the characters, is that like when you're writing actual things that end up in the finished version of the novel in some form, or is it more like character sketches or backstory? Is it like writing in the trenches of the novel, or is it writing sort of around the novel that helps you then get into it?

SM: No, totally in the trenches for me, because I get so excited about the idea, I dive in, and then I'm writing and writing and writing; and then I think, "Oops." I immediately know when something's not quite right, and that's almost always because there's something about my characters that I don't know. Then I have to sit down, have a good old think, what would they actually do in this situation? And how can I make it harder? It's always about making it that little bit harder for them. Definitely for me, it happens on the page. I do not do an awful lot of—And I do keep notes as I think of things because I want to make sure I don't forget anything. So, I'll use a lot of sticky notes on the walls—

[laughter]

SM: —with little bits of dialogue. And then I make sure at the end of the book that I've included everything. But other than that, no, I don't do great big, long interviews. I just dive in, I get to know them by writing, really. And that's just the way that works for me. I've learned over the years that that is my process, and I might want of it to be more stretched and perfect, but it's not going to be. [laughs]

GP: I love that because I think oftentimes, especially newer writers tend to do a lot more of that around the writing writing as opposed to in the novel writing. And obviously, you're not going to publish a character sketch. You have to, eventually, it has to become writing that's in the actual novel. So, I love that that's where you explore the characters.

You mentioned if you're writing along, and then all of a sudden, something's not quite right, what are some of the warning signs that you've learned to notice in your own work, that signal to you that this is not working?

SM: Well, when I don't know what's happening next, if I get stuck and I don't mean writer's block, I just mean sort of looking at the page thinking, "Oh, I'm not sure what happens next," it's because

something's gone wrong in the chapter. If I've not got, scene objective, if I don't know what the change is going to be in that chapter, on that page, then I've not thought it through. I just have to sit down and work it through, and come up with a few various options, and then pick the one that's the least likely, really, because you don't want people to know what's going to happen in every book. But, as you say, everybody does it differently, and I don't think there's a right and a wrong way.

I think whatever way works for you is absolutely fine, but you're right, that eventually, you do have to write the book, it's no good having loads of notes, but I know people who wouldn't dream of setting a single finger on the laptop until they've plotted out every single chapter.

GP: Right.

SM: I couldn't possibly do that. I just couldn't do that. If you told me my career was over, I couldn't do it. That just is not the way my brain works. So, and I've accepted that now. I get there, we all get there in the end. Some of us go by horse and carts, some of us fly, some of us walk, but we all end up in the same place at different times.

[laughter]

GP: I love that. And that idea that we all get there in the end, and we get there our own way is very much a DIY MFA mindset. I also love the idea of the self-awareness. And so for you, that signal of self-awareness is when you don't know what's coming next, and that then tells you, "Okay, I need to rethink things." Other writers, it might be a different signal.

SM: Absolutely.

GP: But if we have that self-awareness, then not only are we aware of what process works for us, but we're also aware of when there's breakage in that process.

SM: That's true.

GP: What's next for you? What exciting things would you like to share with our listeners?

SM: Well, it's exciting. I've just turned in my next, I would call it a summer book, even though it's actually in April, but it is a summer book, really. And I'm really excited about that. I literally just sent that in. It's funny, isn't it? Because when you're writing, when you're published, you're usually working on, at least three books at the same time, because *A Wedding* in December has just come out. So obviously, I'm working on that, and got some very exciting publicity and fun things like today. But then at the same time, I've just finished the summer book and I've just finished doing the proofs, checking them through. I've sent that off while I've actually started my Christmas book as well.

The summer book's just gone off, and that's *Family for Beginners*, and that's out in 2020. And yeah, I had a lot of fun writing that too. It's about somebody who gets involved with the widower with two children. So, you can't just date the man, you're really dating the whole family. And how does that work out? And I had fun with it. It was really fun. That's next May, and then I've just started the Christmas book for next year, and I'm—Yeah, it's making me laugh, so I hope it will make readers laugh too.

[laughter]

SM: I can't tell you about it yet, though. I'm really still very much at the exploratory stage. [laughs]

GP: Love it. I also love how you gave us that behind the scenes look of what it's like to be a published author and the fact that you are juggling books simultaneously. When it comes to the logistics of juggling, were you already drafting the Christmas book for 2020 while editing the May book? Or do you kind of compartmentalize a little bit to keep it more sane?

SM: No, no, there is no choice, I end up overlapping. So yes, absolutely, because my publisher wants to see an outline. I completely understand that. They've got a big list. They need to make sure that you are not writing something that's ever so close to something else, which one hopes is unlikely. And I have to say has never happened to me, but it could do, you know?

They have to make sure that it's in line with what they want to be publishing. And I have to get that off, and because obviously, it takes a while. I have, you know, the UK, because I've got a global audience, The UK team look at it as well as the US, and people are busy, so I have to give them enough time to do that. I break off writing the book before in order to get the outline of the next one ready, and then they're looking at that while I finish off. So, Family for Beginners, I would've got off the outline for the Christmas book while I was finishing off Family for Beginners.

And much as I would absolutely love to compartmentalize, I think when you are a published author, and I'm very fortunate with that, you just can't because you are always being given things on different—You know, I might be working on the Christmas book now and I'll be sent a cover for Family for Beginners to look at, or I might be looking at an Italian cover for a different book all together, the Christmas Sisters, which is now out in Europe. I'm doing some promo for France and Italy, and for the Christmas Sisters in Germany. It's really, you're jumping about all over the place. You do have to make sure you're talking about the right book.

[laughter]

GP: Definitely there's that. I think the other thing too, that can help ground listeners is that it sounds to me that while even though there is a lot of interlocking of these different tasks, they're kind of drawing on different pieces of your creativity. Like drafting a book from scratch is going to be very different than giving feedback on a cover or managing publicity or that sort of thing.

SM: Yeah.

GP: They may be happening in tandem, but they are still sort of tapping into different parts of your brain.

SM: Yeah. And sometimes those things, things like social media and some blogs and interviews and covers, you can do while maybe we're going somewhere in the car. I mean, not while I'm driving, obviously—

[laughter]

SM: But if I've got someone else driving, I'll often be thinking through doing, working, but doing that kind of work. I don't usually write the book in the car, but I would be doing those sorts of things, social media, doing interviews. I would do that. So yes, it's about good time management really, but I think it can be very hard when you are really trying to get deep into a story to constantly be pulled out to do other things. Because I think, your brain, although it is using a different part of your brain, it's still demanding you think about something else.

I think this is why some writers go away on retreat, lock themselves away for months and just do nothing, but write. I don't do that, but there are certainly times when I try and focus entirely on the book.



GP: That makes a lot of sense. Well, as we wrap up, I always end with the same question. You've already shared so many awesome insights, but I was wondering, what is your number one tip for writers?

SM: Do you know, so can I have one and a half?

GP: Yes.

[laughter]

GP: Yes, you may.

SM: So, my half is keep going, keep writing, no matter what, because if you don't do that, none of the other tips matter, you just—You know, sometimes when it's hard, when you get disheartened about your own book or the market or anything else, you just keep going, no matter what, keep writing. That's my half-tip.

GP: Okay.

SM: And then my number one tip is stay focused on your own work. Publishing and wanting to be published, it can all be quite stressful as well as exciting. And you look around and it's so easy to be distracted by what everybody else is doing, by the market, by trends, by so-and-so's deal, so-and-so's placing on the list. I think it's really important that you focus on what you do, what you love writing because in the end, that's the bit you can control.

And it's no good you're trying to be like author X who writes something different. Don't rush off and suddenly write that, think about you and be you. Keep your eye on your own goal, don't do that casting of keeping watch all around you with your neck up to see where the threats are, and that's just going to cause stress. So, keep focused on your own goals, your own writing and keep going.

GP: Love it. When you were saying, keep your eyes on your own goal, I immediately flash back to high school when our teachers would say, "Eyes on your own paper." It's kind of like that though. Like, we kind of have to keep head down, look at your own paper and just ignore everything else.

SM: It totally is. You know, I have never thought about that before. That's exactly right. And you know, when the person next to you, that really annoying person, gets up and says, "I need more paper. Oh, I'm on my seventh sheet."

GP: Yes.

SM: And you just want to kind of smash them over the head with something.

[laughter]

SM: Because it makes you think, "Well, I've done no good." You immediately start to think why are using six pieces of paper? Why have I not needed that? And in the end, you're much better than theirs. And I think that's a reminder that you don't look at the person next to you because it'll just freak you out.

GP: Exactly. [laughs]

SM: Unless you're more mentally balanced than I am, and then you might be fine. In this case, ignore my number one bit for writers and just you do you. [laughs]



GP: I totally agree, and I love it. Thank you so much, Sarah, for being here today. This was an absolute blast.

SM: Well, thank you. I've really enjoyed it, Gabriela. It's great to talk about, talk to you, talk about writing, talk about the books. Thank you so much.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing, and keep being awesome.