

"Charming . . . cleverly told and uncommonly appealing." —People

# Katherine Center

New York Times bestselling author of  
*How to Walk Away* and *Things You Save in a Fire*

## THE BRIGHT SIDE OF DISASTER

A NOVEL

## A READER'S GUIDE



# Q&A: A CONVERSATION WITH KATHERINE CENTER

**Q: Random House Book Club: Reviewers and other readers talk about how authentic this novel feels. Is any part of it autobiographical?**

**A: Katherine Center:** Becoming a mother was nothing at all like I thought it would be. Better in many ways, and much harder in others. And I felt like I hadn't seen that shift—from being just yourself to being a mother—depicted anywhere. It's a big deal in a woman's life, and it changes you forever. It certainly seemed like a rich topic to write about. Much of what Jenny goes through with birth, breastfeeding, and the early days of motherhood is a lot like what I, and many of my friends, went through. I wasn't left just before I had a baby the way Jenny is, but I do remember feeling very panicky and alone early on. My husband would go off to work, and I'd think, "What do I do now?"

**Q: RHBC: Who is your favorite character in the novel?**

**A: KC:** I like them all. Even Dean. Even Dean's mother. Dean and his mother really make me laugh. Dean was never supposed to be as bad as he turned out to be. I originally wanted him to have been a pretty good boyfriend—until the plane crash throws him into a crisis. But once Dean came to life, he just started saying and doing all sorts of bad boyfriend things that made me laugh—or cringe—or at least rang true. But I retain a certain affection for him because I knew him way back—when he still had the potential to be a much better man. My favorite character, though, is probably Jenny's mom. I love sassy Texas women who tell it like it is.

**Q: RHBC: What is a typical writing day like for you?**

**A: KC:** I mostly write at night, when my kids are asleep. I have a window of time during the day, but I find that the phone rings and emails need answering and I don't get much done. I also find that I need to have open-ended blocks of time. I like to start writing after the kids' bedtime and know that I could write all night long if I really got into a groove. Once I get going, I need to write until I'm done. If I have carpool coming up, or a dentist appointment, it's almost impossible for me to get lost in the story. So I stay up late, get up early, and scramble around during the day looking for naps. It's not a great system, but I haven't been able to come up with a better one!

**Q: RHBC: You have a Master's degree in fiction writing from the University of Houston's prestigious program. How much of a role did graduate school play in your writing life?**

**A: KC:** I read a lot of great fiction while I was in that writing program. I studied with some amazing writers. I hobnobbed with other writing students who were passionate about what they were doing and believed that writing fiction mattered in some undeniable—if indescribable—way. I know I learned a lot from being there, immersed in that world. That said, I think I had to find my own voice and my own approach to writing fiction—and I was better able to do that once I was out making my own way.

# Q&A: A CONVERSATION WITH KATHERINE CENTER

**Q: RHBC: When you start a writing project, how do you face that blank page and begin?**

A: KC: I never really feel like I am facing a blank page. My stories always start as a voice talking in my head. I *hear* the story first. So by the time I open up a page on my computer, I already have a lot to work with. I do know that feeling of dread you sometimes get looking at a blank page, though. I've had it from time to time—with analytical papers in school when I just didn't know how to get started. And when that happens, I always just get going and write something. Once you have words on the page, then you have something to work with. With stories, though, I don't really worry about how to begin. The story usually begins itself, and I follow.

**Q: RHBC: Did you always want to be a writer?**

A: KC: I did always want to be a writer—but I was not always sure it would work out. I toyed with becoming many, many other things and felt certain it would be smarter to get a "real job." But I kept coming back to writing. I couldn't seem to *not* write. It's like that Lorrie Moore story, "How to Become a Writer . . ." that starts off, "First, try to be something, anything, else."

**Q: RHBC: Who or what are your biggest writing influences?**

A: KC: Charlotte Brontë has my eternal devotion for writing *Jane Eyre*—the way Jane is absolutely alive in those pages, and talks to you in such a close and tender way. I love Nora Ephron, too. *Heartburn* is so funny and conversational and smart. And *When Harry Met Sally* absolutely defined the romantic comedy for me—that it's not about pratfalls or over-the-top things, but rooted in what's real about the characters. I love David Sedaris for the way he tells it like it is—and for the way he makes you laugh and breaks your heart at the same time. I love writers who don't put on airs. I love writers who tell a plain story and sneak something magnificent in before you've even noticed. I'm influenced by all kinds of things, though—poetry, song lyrics, screenplays, TV shows, essays, children's books, personal essays, and, maybe more than anything, listening to the way people talk.

**Q: RHBC: *The Bright Side of Disaster* takes a good, hard look at those early weeks of motherhood. Is it a book that's only for moms?**

A: KC: Not at all. I think moms certainly have a lot to relate to in *Bright Side*. But it's my hope that the basic story—about a girl who has to overcome difficulty, and triumph on the other side—is broader than that. I've heard from lots of readers who don't have kids that they really loved watching Jenny come of age and figure out how to live a better life.

# Q&A: A CONVERSATION WITH KATHERINE CENTER

**Q: RHBC: What do you think of happy endings?**

A: KC: Love 'em! If they're appropriate. If they happen within a broader context that acknowledges the richness and complexity of human experience. We all have low points and high points in life, times when things are looking bad and times when things are looking up. I confess I like drawing a novel to a close at a hopeful point in the main character's life. It's a very appealing way to end things. And it's a challenge as a writer to create a story that's complex enough to incorporate all sorts of subtleties, even if the basic trajectory of the story is positive. I don't think all happy endings have to be false, or that a book with an optimistic ending can't have a range of meaningful things to say about life.

**Q: RHBC: What has the experience of publishing your first novel been like for you?**

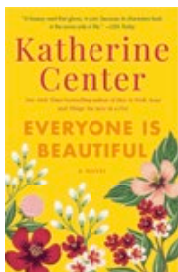
A: KC: It's been a Cinderella story. I wrote *Bright Side* when my daughter was eighteen months old. And then I didn't know exactly what to do next. I literally had on my to-do list: buy milk, get gas, find agent, sell novel. But I had no idea how to find an agent or sell a novel. Then I got pregnant again, and *Bright Side* wound up in a drawer. Almost a year later, I'd practically forgotten about it when I ran into a local novelist in the park who offered to read it and then liked what she read so much, she offered to send it to her agent. Her agent read it and offered to represent me. Next thing I knew there was an auction for the book—and Random House won. And they have been so excited about and supportive of the book. I feel grateful beyond words. People ask me how to get published and I still don't know. I think you just have to stick with it long enough to stumble on some good luck.

**Q: RHBC: What's your next novel about?**

A: KC: My next novel is about a woman with three boys under the age of four who decides she needs to bring herself—and her marriage—back to life. It has a voice and sense of humor that's very similar to *Bright Side*. The main character, Lanie, has to find a way to change the things that need changing in her life without jeopardizing the things that don't. She needs to carve out a little space for herself in a busy life that really doesn't have room for it—and she winds up risking everything in a way that she never intended to.

# QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why on earth would Jenny Harris want to marry a guy like Dean? Do you know good women who fall in love with bad men? Or is Dean not as bad as he seems? Why do women stay with men like Dean, in your opinion?
2. Jenny has three men in her life: Dean, Gardner, and her dad. In what ways are these guys alike or not alike? Do they echo one another in particular ways? Do you find that the men in your life resemble one another in important ways?
3. What do you think of Meredith's actions after the baby is born? Have you ever lost a friendship because of a monumental change in your life?
4. Jenny's birth plan turns out to be pretty worthless—in more ways than one. Giving birth and becoming a mom were nothing like she expected them to be. If you're a mom, was that true for you? What was the biggest surprise about motherhood? If you're not a mom, has there been something in your life that was nothing at all like what you'd expected?
5. Were you rooting for Jenny's dad as he pursued her mom? He certainly left her in a horrible way all those years before. Do you think he's changed now and become a better man? Has he become a better dad?
6. Does becoming a mom help Jenny herself grow up? In what ways does motherhood enrich women's lives? In what ways does it hold women back?
7. Jenny starts an antiques business within a year of Maxie's birth. Do you think Jenny would have opened up her shop if Dean hadn't left—if everything in her life had gone as planned?
8. Jenny's mom is a sassy lady. Should she have tried to talk some sense into Jenny about Dean earlier? Was it harsh of Jenny's mother to stay away after Dean came back? Was her tough-love policy too tough?
9. One *Bright Side* reader commented that all new mothers are single moms in a way. Do you agree?
10. Jenny likes Gardner, but she sets him up on a date with Meredith, anyway—or tries to, at least. Why does she do that? Have you ever tried to do the right thing and given up something—or someone—that you really wanted for yourself?
11. Jenny is not at her best for much of the book, to put it mildly. She's not taking care of herself at all—and she looks terrible by her own admission. What does it say about Gardner that he's drawn to her anyway?
12. Gardner's wife left him in a pretty brutal fashion. What kind of impact did his divorce have on him?
13. Jenny is both lucky and unlucky that she has people willing to help support her financially after Dean walks out. What are the pros and cons of taking help from Dean's mother? Is staying home all it's cracked up to be? Why do you think Jenny's dad offers to help her out, even though he believes people should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps?
14. Who is your favorite character? Why?
15. Have you ever had a disaster that turned out to be a good thing in the end?



## READ ON FOR A PREVIEW OF KATHERINE CENTER'S HUGELY ENTERTAINING AND ENDEARING NOVEL *EVERYONE IS BEAUTIFUL*

The day I decided to change my life, I was wearing sweatpants and an old oxford of Peter's with a coffee stain down the front. I hadn't showered because the whole family had slept in one motel room the night before, and it was all we could do to get back on the road without someone dropping the remote in the toilet or pooping on the floor.

We had just driven across the country to start Peter's new job. Houston, Texas, to Cambridge, Massachusetts. I'd had the kids in our ten year-old Subaru the whole drive, two car seats and a booster across the back. Alexander kept taking Toby's string cheese, and the baby, except when he was sleeping, was fussing. Peter drove the

U-Haul on the theory that if it broke, he'd know how to fix it.

On the road, I was sure I had the short end of the stick, especially during the dog hours of Tennessee. But now Peter was hauling all our belongings up three flights of narrow stairs, and I was at the park, on a blanket in the late-afternoon shade, breast-feeding Baby Sam. Peter had to be hurting. Even with our new landlord helping him, it was taking all day. And I was just waiting for him to call on the cell phone when he was ready for us to come home. Or as close to home as a curtainless apartment stacked high with boxes could be.

## *EVERYONE IS BEAUTIFUL* EXCERPT CONTINUED

We'd been at the park since midmorning, and we were running low on snacks. Alexander and Toby were galloping at top speed, as they always did. I'm not even sure they realized they were in a new park. They acted like we might as well have been at home, in Houston, the only place they'd ever lived. They acted like the last five days of driving hadn't even registered. I, in contrast, was aching with loss.

I didn't like this park. Too clean, too brand-new, too perfect. The parks at home had character—monkey bars fashioned like cowboys, gnarled crape myrtle trunks for climbing, discarded Big Wheels with no seats. And we'd known them backward and forward—every tree knot, every mud hole, every kid.

This park, today, felt forced. It was trying too hard.

I surveyed the moms. Not one of them, I decided, was a person I wanted to meet. And just as I was disliking them all and even starting to pity them for having no idea what they were missing, park-wise, Toby—my middle boy, my sandy-haired, blue-eyed, two-year-old flirt—watched a younger kid make a move for the truck in his hand, and then, unbelievably, grabbed that kid's forearm and bit it.

The little boy screamed as Toby pulled the truck to his chest. "My truck!" Toby shouted. (He always pronounced "truck" like "fuck," but that was, perhaps, another issue.)

And then, of course, all hell broke loose.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Katherine Center is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *What You Wish For*, *How to Walk Away*, *The Bright Side of Disaster*, and five other bittersweet comic novels about love and family. Her novel *The Lost Husband* is now a movie that hit number one on Netflix. *BookPage* calls her “the reigning queen of comfort reads.” She lives in Houston with her husband and two sweet kids.

Learn more about Katherine—and sign up for her newsletter—at [katherinecenter.com](http://katherinecenter.com)

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