



SERIES BOOK CLUB GUIDE



Discussion Questions for Readers

1. Why did Suki think that she should be leading the Cupid Cards project, and how did she feel when it didn't go the way she expected? How do you handle things when they don't go the way you want?
2. Suki loves dogs, even though she's never had one, and when she actually starts interacting with dogs, things don't always go exactly as she imagined. Have you ever been in a situation where the reality is more difficult than what you had predicted? How did you handle it? What advice would you give Suki about it?
3. Suki and JJ both had some good ideas and some not-so-good ideas to sell more Cupid Cards. What mistakes did they make, and how did they learn from them? If you were in charge of the cards, how might you sell more? What would you do differently?
4. How do you think Suki felt when she found out who really owned Cinnamon Bun? Have you ever felt that way? How did you deal with your disappointment?
5. Suki has some great besties, but she and her friends also get upset with each other at several points in the story. How do they work things out? Have you ever gotten in a fight with a friend? How did you work it out?



Q & A with Cinnamon Bun Besties author Stacia Deutsch

WHAT INSPIRED YOU WHILE WRITING THIS BOOK?

I have two dogs, an older dog and a crazy puppy. When I was writing about Suki and Cinnamon Bun, I was watching my puppy play. I knew I wanted to write a story about a girl and a dog, but wasn't sure what the main part of the story would be about. One afternoon, I went to my local animal shelter and wandered around. I watched families come looking for a dog or cat of their own. There was even a bunny that needed adopting. I talked to everyone about why they wanted a pet, and what kind of pet they were looking for, which was really inspirational. When I got home, I knew that Suki needed to not just visit to the shelter in her own town, but to find a dog she loved there. Her feelings for JJ just showed what a big heart Suki has, she was a wonderful character and in the end, a good friend to all.

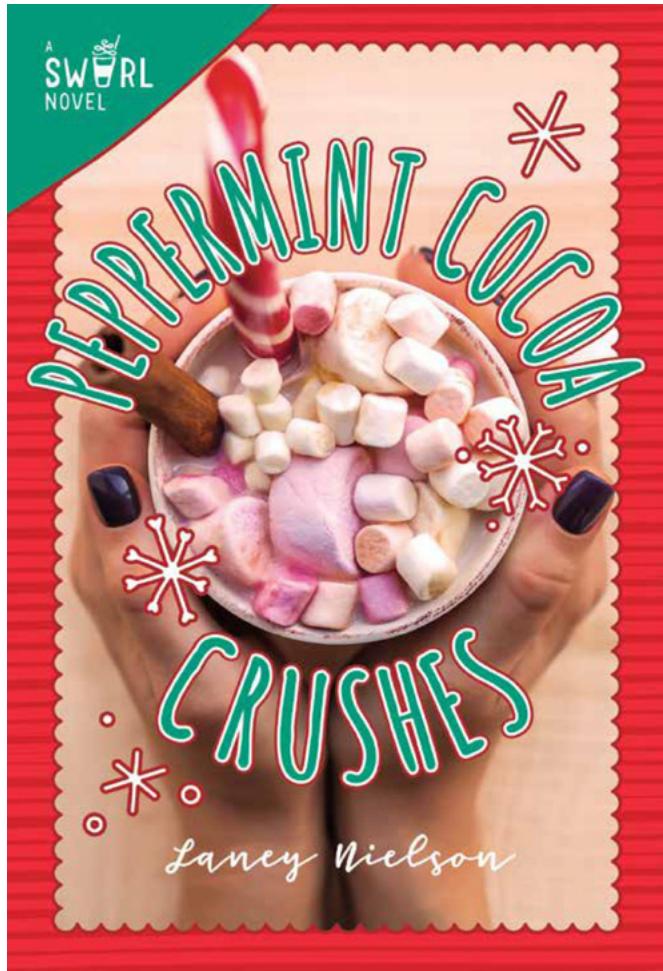
WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT WRITING REALISTIC FICTION?

I like writing books about the real world because I can take what I see around me and use it as material. Like watching my dogs play. Or talking to kids at the junior high. I helped with the Cupid Cards at my daughter's own school, so I knew how that project worked. I like to write characters that I "know," so most of the kids in the book remind me of kids in my neighborhood. I hope they remind you of kids you know, too.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG WRITERS?

Kids always ask me, what is the hardest things about being a writer? The answer: Sitting in your chair. I'm not kidding! There are so many other things that we can do with our time, from playing games to surfing the web. Sitting down and writing is hard. But, I also tell young writers to try to do one writing-related thing every day. It could be sitting and writing a letter. Or a poem. Or a story. Or it could be reading a book, because the best writers also read a lot. All you have to do is one thing, but do something, anything, every day. So find an hour, grab a comfy seat, and discover what treasures your imagination holds!

Discussion Questions for Readers



1. What are some of the recent changes in Sasha's life? How does she handle those changes? How do you think they influence her actions?
2. On page 53, Sasha says, "I hated that Karly's good news felt like bad news for me." Have you ever been in a situation where you felt conflicted over a friend or family member's good news because of how it affected you? How did you handle it? When Sasha becomes angry with Karly, do you think she's justified?
3. Sasha and her mom disagree about which extracurricular activities Sasha should be involved in and how much time she should spend on dance. How do you think this makes Sasha feel? Why do you think her mom feels the way she does? Do you agree or disagree with Sasha's mom?
4. At what point in the story did you realize things might not go as Sasha hoped with her "Kevasha" project? Have you ever been in a situation where you were so focused on the outcome, you didn't see what was actually happening? What was the outcome?
5. When Kevin tells Sasha he likes Ryan, she struggles to respond. Why do you think that is? How do you think Kevin experiences that moment? On page 224, Claire tells Sasha, "...what Kevin told you isn't about you. It's about him. He shared something really important with you, about who he is. That's not easy." Do you think Claire is right? How do you respond to a friend sharing something important? What are the qualities you look for in a friend? Do you think Sasha and Kevin possess those qualities?

Q & A with Peppermint Cocoa Crushes author Laney Nielson

WHAT INSPIRED YOU WHILE WRITING THIS BOOK?

I loved writing about a tween who wants to make her community better. Whether she's organizing a food drive or volunteering at the senior center, Sasha is all about solving problems and connecting people. In real life, I'm totally inspired by the young people I know who are deeply involved in community service. Whether it's through Scouts, charity leagues, a religious organization, school, or an independent project, every day I see tweens and teens engaged in making a difference. They see a need and they respond. That's inspiring!

I also wanted to tell a story about being accepted for who you are. Sasha wants her mom to accept her passion (dance) and in turn Sasha needs to accept her best friends—Kevin and Karly and the paths they are on. Middle school is tough. It's even tougher if you feel like your family or friends don't see you for who you are or they discount what matters to you. While I was writing the first draft of Peppermint Cocoa Crushes, I knew how I wanted the main characters to feel at the end of the story. There is both a sense of freedom and a sense of belonging that comes when those we love see us fully, not for who they want us to be but for who we are. I definitely wanted Sasha and Kevin to experience that. The story is about getting them there.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT WRITING REALISTIC FICTION?

When I was in middle school, I read mostly realistic fiction. (Thank you, Judy Blume!) Those books were a huge comfort to me. Reading about relatable characters and knowing what I was feeling had all been felt before was incredibly reassuring. Although these stories entertained me (first and foremost), they also acted as guidebooks—so this is how you handle a

shifting friendship, so this is how a first crush feels etc. And now, that's my favorite part about writing realistic fiction: knowing a reader might see themselves in the story or identify with a character's experience. Middle school can be such a confusing time—full of new experiences, conflicting feelings, strong emotions and lots of change. Reading about how a character handles a situation or knowing you're not alone can help. It's an honor to be a part of that in some small way.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG WRITERS?

I do love giving advice (it's the mom and the teacher in me)! That being said, what works for me might not work for you. But here are a few suggestions:

- Observe everything, from the crack in the sidewalk to the taste of sugary gum in your mouth.
- Write down what you see and hear and feel and smell and taste.
- Read. Read a lot!
- Imagine.
- Ask questions like: what if and so what and why?
- Study stories—both the ones you read and the ones you watch. Pull them apart, asking what makes them work? Or if they don't work why not? What decisions could've been made to make the story stronger?
- Write. Write a lot!
- Share your writing with the goal of receiving feedback.
- Listen and think about the feedback you receive. What makes sense to you? How can you deepen your story?
- Revise, revise, revise! This is where the best writing happens. Trust me!
- Share and celebrate! You are a writer who builds worlds with words, who creates characters, and who makes a path for readers to follow. You are a teller of tales, a maker of stories, and that is definitely worth celebrating!



Discussion Questions for Readers

1. Elvie, Maddie's older sister, tells her that "sixth grade is all about the transition from elementary school to middle school." Do you agree with her? What sorts of ways can kids prepare for such a transition?
2. Maddie and her best friends have a "code" that they live by. Do you think these sorts of rules are helpful or restrictive? Why or why not? If you had to create your own friendship code, what would be the first rule?
3. Maddie ends up effectively lying to Jana because she's trying to follow the BFF Code. Do you think how she acted was right? How would you have acted if you were in her shoes?
4. Maddie must participate in debate even though she dislikes public speaking. Do you think it's important for students to learn how to speak in front of others? Why or why not? How have you dealt with doing something you feel uncomfortable with?
5. In her class debate, Maddie and her teammate Jacob must argue against school security cameras, while Jana and Fiona must argue for school cameras. These students don't necessarily agree with the positions they must argue. What value could there be in researching and arguing a position that you disagree with? Can you explain the problems as well as the benefits?



Q & A with Pumpkin Spice Secrets author Hillary Homzie

WHAT INSPIRED YOU WHILE WRITING THIS BOOK?

Honestly, I wrote this book for my younger self, someone a little bit afraid to speak up to their more confident and outgoing friends. Okay, I'll admit it: I didn't just write this for the middle school me; I wrote *Pumpkin Spice Secrets* for myself right now. Basically, I hate conflict and I would rather fold laundry for ten hours than face telling a friend that I was upset with her or that I hold a different opinion. But the truth is, the fear of speaking up and facing something is far worse than actually just doing it. Since I'm a chicken when it comes to debate, I knew I had to learn more about it and research how it works. I thought debate would be a wonderful vehicle for Maddie to learn how to embrace confrontation and to learn how to express herself. She learns a lot throughout the story in *Pumpkin Spice Secrets*, and I think she could teach me a thing or two!

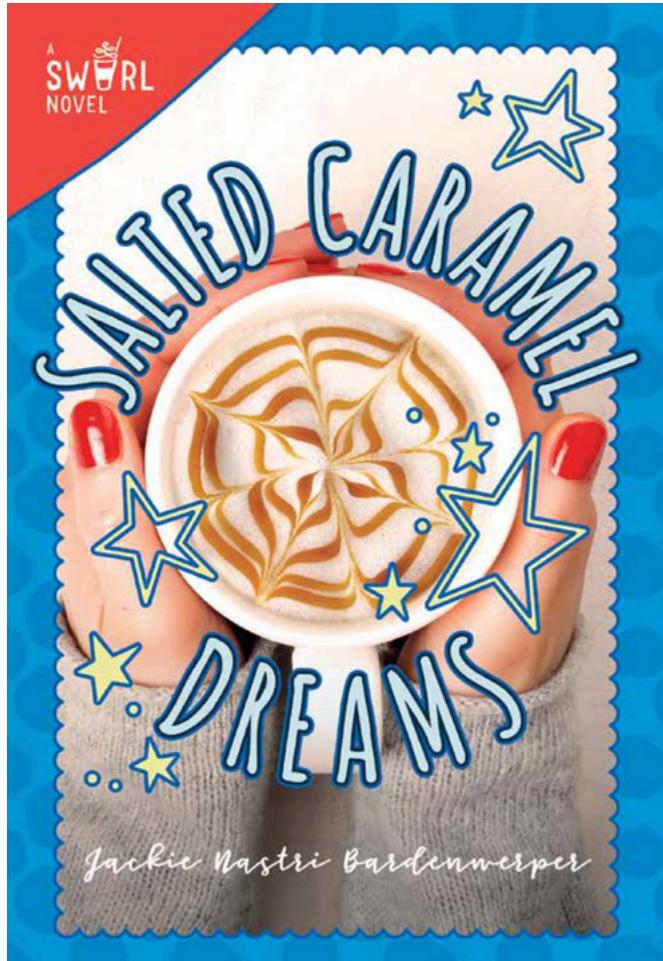
WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT WRITING REALISTIC FICTION?

I love that it challenges me to dig in deep and face some of my greatest fears and weaknesses. It's pretty much therapy for me!

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG WRITERS?

Read. Read a lot. Sure, read widely, but also read what gives you pleasure. And then when it comes to writing, you should write the sort of story that you would want to read. The kind of story that you'd race into bed with and binge-read.

Also, don't write what you think will impress others or what you think you should write. If you love zombie romance stories, write one of those. If you love adventure novels about girls rock climbing, write about that. And then when you sit down to actually write, don't overthink it—just let it pour out of you. Later, you can use the critical part of your brain to edit and revise it. But on a first draft, you want to invite the muse into the room by letting go of expectations and judgment. Oh, and having a nice cup of tea nearby really helps—I love adding pumpkin spice almond milk into mine!



Discussion Questions for Readers

1. When Jasmine overhears Kiara talking about her new bag, instead of confronting Kiara, she runs away from her. Why do you think Jasmine does this? Would confronting Kiara immediately have made things better or worse? What would you have done in Jasmine's situation?
2. Jasmine is shocked to hear about Kiara's family's problems, especially since Kiara seems so happy at school and on her FriendChat profile. What does this tell us about both Jasmine and Kiara's characters? What can this teach you about your own friendships?
3. Kiara eventually admits that she chose her basketball friends over Jasmine. Why do you think she did this? What do you think would've happened if she'd stood up for Jasmine to her basketball friends? Have you ever been in a similar situation? How have you acted? Is there anything you would do differently?
4. Over the course of the story, Jasmine ultimately forgives Kiara. Do you agree with her decision? Why or why not? What would you have done in Jasmine's situation?
5. In the last scene, Jasmine grabs the new Parks and Rec flyer, telling Joseph she may be interested in taking summer singing lessons. Do you think Jasmine would have reached for that flyer a few months earlier? Why or why not? How has she changed over the course of the story?



Q & A with Salted Caramel Dreams author Jackie Nastri Bardenwerper

WHAT INSPIRED YOU WHILE WRITING THIS BOOK?

Gosh, so many things! Probably what stands out most is this experience I had in sixth grade where I didn't make our town's All-Star softball team, but my best friend did. While I never had to contend with hurtful gossip like Jasmine does, it seemed that overnight my best friend had new friends, a busy schedule, and way less time to hang out. Like Jasmine, I was devastated, until my mom signed me up for something new—not drama, in my case, but sailing. And it was so rewarding that I stuck with it for years, even sailing in college. That experience taught me so much about the importance of being open to new activities, friends, and opportunities—even when they're different from the ones I initially imagined.

And this is what I really wanted to show in Salted Caramel Dreams—how sometimes it's the situations where things don't go our way that provide us with opportunities that actually bring us even more happiness than we had before. Which is probably why my favorite part of the story is the last scene, where Jasmine and her new friends are cheering on Kiara at her basketball game. When Jasmine first overheard Kiara gossiping about her, she never could've imagined this scene—forgiving Kiara, going on a date, hanging out with new friends. And while this doesn't excuse what Kiara did, it does show that a lot of good came out of Kiara's betrayal—all because Jasmine used the situation as an opportunity to try something new.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT WRITING REALISTIC FICTION?

Wow, that's a tough one. Can I say everything? Ever since I was young, I have always been drawn to stories where I can relate to the characters' troubles and imagine what I would do if I were in the same position. As a writer, I love being able to provide young readers with stories that mirror the very real struggles they deal with every day. From issues with family and friends to the pressures of social media, today's teens and tweens are dealing with a lot. I think it's so important there are stories out there that honor this, while showing the many different ways some of these challenges can be tackled, and hopefully overcome.

And then there's the added benefit of getting to learn about so many different cool things that my characters are interested in—like fashion design and theater in Salted Caramel Dreams. Writing realistic fiction allows me to imagine what it would be like to be an actress or singer or basketball star. What could be more fun than that?

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG WRITERS?

First of all, write, write, write! Write at school, write for fun, and seek out clubs or groups that let you write some more. And when you're not writing, read! Writing is like anything else—it is a skill that must be learned and practiced. One of the best ways to do this is to read widely and regularly—novels, nonfiction books, magazine articles. The more you read, the more you will learn about how to perfect your writing style.

And lastly, if you want to be a writer, then you must believe in yourself and never give up. Learn from the critiques you receive from readers, celebrate every small victory, and don't be afraid to keep trying, even when things don't go your way. Because being a writer might be challenging, but it's also incredibly rewarding—and worth all the hard work along the way.

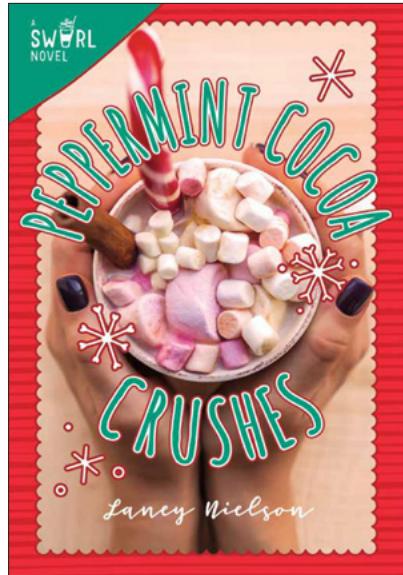
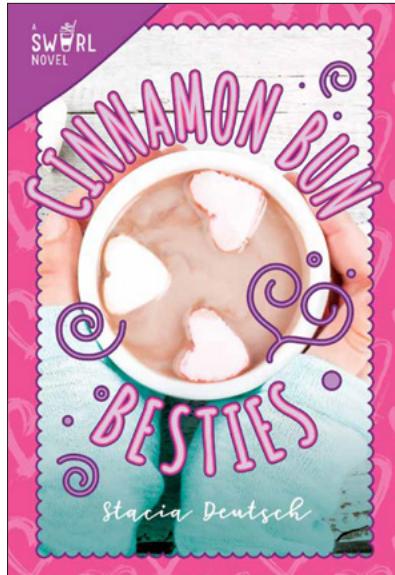


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