

Katherine Center: On “The Spirit of Service to Readers”

Katherine Center’s (MA, 1999) novel *How to Walk Away* hit the New York Times Bestseller List when it was released in May 2018. Her other novels include *The Bright Side of Disaster*, *Everyone is Beautiful*, *Get Lucky*, *The Lost Husband*, and *Happiness for Beginners*. Center was the fiction co-editor at *Gulf Coast*. We caught up with her after a packed live conversation with Jodi Picoult, where topics ranged from American incarceration rates to chick lit as a genre. Most recently, Center presented a TED talk on “We Need to Teach Boys to Read Stories About Girls.”



Alumni Spotlight

Your novels are wildly popular—*How to Walk Away* hit the NYT hardcover bestseller list in its first week of being released. Did you feel a pressure to provide your reader with a certain type of reading experience? If so, what kind?

We kind of made up a category for the novels I write. We call them ‘bittersweet comedies.’ The characters always have to struggle, but they do it with lots of jokes. The stories are equal parts heartache and joy. There’s darkness, but the darkness doesn’t black out the light. I write my novels in the spirit of service to readers—hoping to create for them what I, myself, love to find in fiction: inspiration, pleasure, wisdom, connection. So it’s not pressure I feel when I write a novel. It’s opportunity. The opportunity to follow my own compass and craft the kind of story that I long to read. Lucky for me, lots of other people long for those types of stories, too.

Did you get support from specific people at UH while you were a student (and afterwards)?

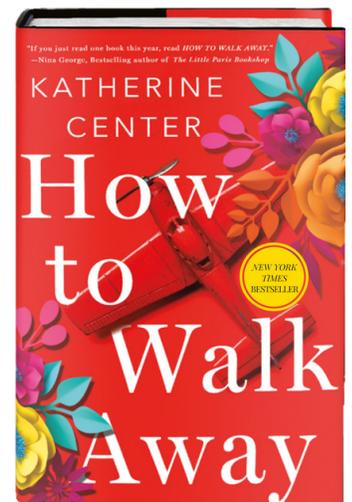
I had some great friends at UH. Poet Cate Marvin, who co-founded VIDA, Rebecca Wolff of *Fence Magazine*, and fiction writer Greg Oaks are some of my favorite people ever. I also got to feed Mary Gaitskill’s cats.

What was your favorite part of being an editor at *Gulf Coast*?

It was instructive to see the other side of the submission pile. It was encouraging, in a way, to see how very many submissions literary magazines were getting. It made the rejections seem a lot less personal. That said, it was discouraging, too—all those stacks and stacks of stories. Mostly what I remember is hanging out with the other editors, working late at the kitchen table with a great sense of camaraderie.

What does “chick lit” mean to you?

Well, I guess I’d define it as accessible stories about plucky heroines geared toward a female audience. It’s kind of a dismissive sounding term, isn’t it? It seems to take its marching orders from lots of unquestioned cultural assumptions that what men do is important and literary and what women do is silly and cartoonish. Sometimes my books are categorized that way, but more often they’re called “contemporary fiction” or “women’s fiction.” (Don’t get me started on why we don’t have the term, “men’s fiction.”) I guess it’s a useful term if it helps people find the books they like—and less helpful if it turns people off before they’ve cracked the spine, but I’m not sure how much readers truly rely on broad categories like that to guide them. I certainly don’t. I’m much more likely to be swayed by a great title, or an evocative premise, or a friend’s recommendation.



We know that your seventh novel is in the works, on top of another deal with St. Martin’s for two more novels in 2020 and 2021. How do you negotiate the business of all these book projects?

I just take it one book at a time. I find that writing—swimming around in the depths of your own imagination—is a wildly different thing from promoting, which is more like floating on the surface. I like them both in different ways. I do a lot of speaking, and it’s always fun to get out of the house and see people. It’s a pretty great life. I feel astonishingly lucky.

Should you have queries or wish to support the cwp: cwp@uh.edu