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CHRISTMAS IN WHIMSY TIP SHEET

What made you write *Christmas In Whimsy*?

I wanted to combine everything I love about TV holiday movies—those heartwarming, funny, light stories—with characters going through life experiences I could relate to. Inevitably—and I don't think I'm giving anything away here—you're going to end up with a happy ending in a feel-good holiday movie. I mean, you even get a happy ending in *Die Hard.* But I wanted to write a story where you don't quite know where the "happy" is going to come from, just like in life. When the three main characters, Lexie, Robin, and Margot, call on the legendary spirit of their town of Whimsy, and they each ask for help in their struggles with love or career (or both), they get swept up into their own adventures and you don't quite know for sure who's going to land where. All you know is that the clock is ticking, because after Christmas, any help the Spirit of Whimsy can give will melt away.

So then would you say *Christmas In Whimsy* takes the typical holiday story in a new direction?
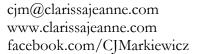
Not entirely new, no. I wouldn't want it to. I'm a huge fan of cozy holiday stories, and *Christmas In Whimsy* delivers that fulfilling, joyful embrace that fans like me have come to expect from those. There's a little sweet romance, a little humor, maybe a tearjerker moment or two. But I also love a little magic in any story, and I want my characters to be three-dimensional. I want my readers to be able to see themselves or someone they know in how my characters react to obstacles and grow. One reader in particular wrote that she's usually a sci-fi/fantasy enthusiast, but the characters drew her in to *Whimsy.* I think we as readers can get into just about any genre, even those outside our normal wish lists, if we can relate to the characters.

And what's on Clarissa J. Markiewicz's normal reading wish list?

Actually, this goes to the point I just made. Anything with good characters. Well, I'll amend that a little: good characters and a good storyline. A book has to be entertaining to keep my interest, but it also has to have some real originality, even if it's amid a few tropes. Tropes are okay, they're the roadmap. I just want a few uncharted surprises to turn me around and lead me off the main path for a while when I start walking the route. As a rule, I'm not a fan of fiction or nonfiction that wanders too close to true crime, and if I get a sense that an author is depending on sex, violence, or trends to carry subpar writing, their book goes back on the shelf. My favorite stories vary widely, from Lois Lowry's *Anastasia* series to *The Shining* to the short stories and novels of Jack Finney. Also I dig a good nonfiction title, like *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour,* and *Rise and Fall of the 80's Toon Empire.*

You said you write characters that are relatable. Do you ever base them on real people?

It's more accurate to say I imbue my characters with behavior I observe in real people, and I start with myself. Writers absolutely must be self-aware, and we can always be more so. We need to be observant,

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compassionate, and questioning. We may hate how a person conducts himself, but if we leave our personal feelings at the door and ask the question, "Why could he possibly be that way?" that's always going to lead to a better story than, "Once upon a time there was this guy, and he was a jerk 'cause I say so, and no one likes a jerk, the end." Characters should give us a way to better understand ourselves, as humans. Even the lightest story should give us a few "stop-reading" moments at least—those moments when the book you're holding dips a little, your wrist having gone a little slack, your eyes flip up to an empty spot on the wall, you think about the words a character just said, and you wonder, "How would I have handled that?"

If you weren't a writer, what would you be doing?

Having nightmares about high school. That's what inevitably happens if I can't write for some reason. It's based on a real story, actually. My junior year in high school, I went into IB English, advanced English. I was not, shall we say, a fan of doing my homework, and I learned my first week I couldn't skate in this class. I hadn't done the reading and I got called on, and the rest of the class had, like, deciphered every last symbol and metaphor. I never skipped another assignment in that class. When I'm not getting my writing done—the work I love passionately, the work that fills my soul and gives me meaning—my subconscious reminds me how lousy it feels to show up with an empty notebook. There have been and may be again times in my life when the bills demand I take on extra work, editing or teaching these days. But even if I never make another dime at it, I'll always write and try to sell my work as long as I have stories to tell.

"Editing or teaching these days": does that mean you've worked in jobs other than these?

I didn't come to full-time writing for a long time. I needed to find my voice, grow as a writer, as a person. In addition to editing manuscripts and publishing short stories, articles, and poetry, I've had paying gigs as an administrative assistant; a retail junior manager; a copywriter; a designer of promotional, marketing, and community relations materials, both web- and print-based; a singer; an actress; and a karaoke host.

Seriously? A karaoke host? What was your signature song?

"Son of a Preacher Man." It's a good karaoke song because it's short, it's in a good range, and there are no long instrumental breaks where everyone's staring at you and you're just standing there on this makeshift stage, bobbing your head all cool-like as you think up ways to kill yourself just to get out of this very uncomfortable moment. Fun job, but the hours were a killer. Plus, I was doing it just before everything went digital, so my used Pontiac Grand Am would be stuffed to the gills every few days with equipment and CDs. But, boy, did I get ideas for stories from the late-night set.

How do stories like that, stories inspired by your real-life experiences, go from an idea to a full-blown novel?

It depends on the story, but let's take *Christmas In Whimsy.* I keep a "story idea" file, as many writers do, and I got a spark of inspiration for a holiday story from a conversation I'd had with a friend over lunch one day. That went into my idea file. Then a few other holiday ideas got added, until I thought I might have a collection of

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three novellas. When I started fleshing out the ideas into three-page or four-page overviews, it felt like this could be one story, a novel. So from the overviews, I wrote one detailed, chapter-by-chapter outline. I'm an outliner, I have to do it. That took about four weeks, and then came the first draft, which I wrote furiously. I'd covered so much material in the outline, and I knew it all made sense since I'd, you know, outlined it, so that freed me up to just live in the story and find interesting ways to report on it. The first draft was followed by revisions, then revisions, and a few more revisions until it satisfied me, the reader. That meant I wanted to read it over and over, or I got started reading one section and just kept going. There was nothing that made me cringe and say, "Well, maybe no one will notice that." And when I started getting feedback from my readers saying things like they couldn't put *Christmas In Whimsy* down or they wished they had time off work so they could just keep reading, I knew that the little seed of an idea I'd had at lunch that one day was relatable enough to resonate with people. You never know at that seed stage whether that's going to happen. That's what's so fun about the journey.

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