

Q&A with Debbie Johnson

What was your inspiration for *A Gift from the Comfort Food Café*?

The book is part of a series, and although each story can be read on its own, there are always characters in there that I intended to explore at some point. Katie has been on the periphery of village life since she first arrived in book two, *Christmas at the Comfort Food Café*. There's always been a sense of mystery to her, she has held herself apart, dedicated to her son, a busy and slightly aloof single mum. This is something that I wanted to explore – how someone can be technically part of a loving and caring community, but still be alone. I think we've all felt that at some time or another – as they say, there's nowhere lonelier than a crowded room. It's all about how you feel, not where you are or who you're with. Katie has her reasons, as most of us do – her childhood, her relationships, the expectations she's come to have of life. This book was all about unravelling that – finding out why she is the way she is, and sending her on her way to a happy ending – because this is fiction, and everyone gets that in my books, even if the road is rough on the way there!

Have you always wanted to be a writer?

Yes. When I was four I wrote a story called *The Lost Puppy* that made me cry. I've always lived in my imagination – I was raised as an only child and we often have a rich internal life! However, in the real world, the one that involves kids and bills and work, I didn't start to seriously try and become an author until I was forty.

How do you find time to write? And where do you write when you do?

I now write full time – it's my job, as well as something I love, so I am extremely lucky. I know many writers have their own den, or an office, but sadly I don't. I write on the sofa in the living room, surrounded by children, dogs, mess and chaos!

What would you like readers to take away from *A Gift from the Comfort Food Café*?

Mainly the Café books are intended to give readers some escapism – laughter, romance, love, and a world they can identify with but which is so supportive and kind that it ultimately overcomes all the pain and suffering that we know is out there. With Katie's story, it's mainly about courage – finding the bravery you need to take risks, to view the future with hope and optimism rather than judging it on your past experiences. I think that's something we all struggle with.

Who are your favourite authors and have they influenced your writing in any way?

I have a lot of favourite authors – I read a very varied catalogue of books, including crime and fantasy as well as women's fiction and historical fiction. The author I probably admire the most, and who I'd most like to emulate, is Nora Roberts, who writes wonderful romance, romantic suspense, fantasy, and, as JD Robb, futuristic crime thrillers. She's so versatile and always engaging. I was definitely also influenced by a writer called Sue Grafton, who sadly recently passed away – she created a lady sleuth called Kinsey Millhone who I adore.

If you could run away to a paradise island, what or who would you take with you and why?

I'd take my family – not an original answer I know, but life just isn't as much fun without them along for the ride! Also, my dogs – I'd love to see them running around in the sparkling Caribbean sea – and a whole suitcase full of books.

What are you working on next?

The next *Comfort Food Café* book – *A Wedding at the Comfort Food Café* – is out in March and I'm working on the final version of that.

What is your comfort food and why?

My friend and I have this phrase we use – 'the pies of childhood'. We were talking about how people of our generation grew up with a local bakery that made pies, and those pies still taste like everything simple and good in the world! So for me it's Wrights Pies, which sadly aren't even available where I live now. So I'll settle for any form of Cadbury's chocolate instead!