



# READING GROUP KIT

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of  
*The Lost and Found Bookshop*



# SUSAN WIGGS

*a  
novel*

Everyone has a past. It's who  
you are now that matters.

## Sugar *and* Salt

*wm*



The background of the entire page is a light-colored wooden cutting board with a visible grain. In the top left corner, the handle and blade of a knife are visible. The handle is dark blue or black, and the blade is silver. In the bottom right corner, there are several green, pointed leaves, possibly from a herb like basil.

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# A Message from Susan Wiggs

**SUSAN WIGGS** is the author of more than fifty novels, including the beloved *Lakeshore Chronicles* series and the instant *New York Times* bestsellers *Family Tree* and *The Lost and Found Bookshop*. Her award-winning books have been translated into two dozen languages. She lives with her husband on an island in Washington State's Puget Sound.







# In Conversation with Susan Wiggs

**Q:** *Sugar and Salt* is releasing into the world at a time when women's rights and abortion laws, especially in Texas, continue to be top-of-mind in America. In these times of change, how do you see the novel fitting into this current cultural and political conversation?

**SW:** The storyline for *Sugar and Salt* touches multiple hot buttons in the current conversation. It depicts a Texas woman facing a barrage of devastating, seemingly impossible choices. She's dealing socioeconomic insecurity, sexual violence, incarceration, justice inequity, and firearms issues. In researching the novel, I discovered real-life stories that shook my faith in our leadership. Yet these stories also reinforced my faith in the power of a woman's strength and determination in the face of overwhelming adversity. Margot, the main character in *Sugar and Salt*, exemplifies the grace, humanity, and deep resolve that ultimately saves her.

Another unanticipated but very welcome current issue in the novel was a surprise to me—diversity in adoption choices. The situation in *Sugar and Salt* was inspired by some friends of mine, a gay couple who now have two children by surrogacy. What I didn't know as I was writing the book is that a number of high-profile couples have made the news in the happiest way possible. Anderson Cooper, Secretary Pete Buttigieg, and one of my favorite book evangelists, Jordan Moblo, all shared their baby joy while I was writing the novel. Real-life happy endings lift me up and buoy me toward my own happy ending.

**Q:** Readers flock to your novels for their emotional complexity and deeply felt truths about family, love, and ourselves. What do you hope *Sugar and Salt* will offer readers?

**SW:** As a reader, I'm irresistibly drawn to stories that reflect the things I hold in my heart. So when I write, I try my best to create characters the reader can relate to—people facing life choices, sorrows and joys, adversity and abundance—in the most authentic and entertaining way possible.

First and foremost, my goal is the same as it's been since 1987, when my first novel was published—to entertain and uplift the reader. If I fail at that, any meaning or message my story conveys will be lost. However, assuming I've done my job (and believe me, readers are not shy about letting me know), then *Sugar and Salt* will leave a lasting impression. I hope the novel offers readers an opportunity to take an unconventional and dramatic journey with Margot Salton, who is nearly crushed by adversity, and then pulls herself up by her



# In Conversation with Susan Wiggs (Cont.)

fingernails in search of a dream. I hope her story encourages readers to develop a greater understanding of the issues of poverty, violence, racism, misogyny, freedom of choice, and injustice.

**Q:** At the heart of *Sugar and Salt* is a sharp, honest tale of women's empowerment as Margot Salton strives for a second chance at love and life after an unimaginable, life-changing event. In what ways does her story reflect the challenges facing all women in America?

**SW:** Ida B. Miller, one of the wisest characters in *Sugar and Salt*, tells Margot (formerly "Margie" because yes, she changed everything about herself), "Everybody has a past. It's who you are now that matters." I didn't pull any punches with this story. Some of the things that happened to Margie might be hard to read. Believe me, these scenes were hard to research and hard to write. But I persevered because this character was so important to me. I want to believe that there is no mountain too high for a determined woman to climb.

Margie's story feels both timeless and of-the-moment. She faces the challenges women have dealt with from the beginning of time—seeking security through a deep emotional bond and finding the heart's home, and the day-to-day work of making her way in the world. Yet there is an immediacy to her challenges that feels particularly relevant now. In this moment, women are actively seeking new levels of empowerment and meaning in their personal and work lives.

**Q:** *Sugar and Salt* is filled with irresistibly sweet and savory descriptions of cooking and dining. Similarly, readers will treasure its scenes of romance, newly forged and long-lasting. Food can do more than fill a hungry stomach; it can fill a hungry soul. In what ways does *Sugar and Salt* explore the personal and profound relationship between food and romance?

**SW:** Before I wrote a word of this story, I knew I wanted the title to be *Sugar and Salt*, and I'm grateful that my editor and publisher went with it. Preparing and serving tasty food is an elemental expression of caring, a running theme throughout the book. This is where Margot excels and finds meaning in her mission. In a way, it's one of the key elements that saves her, particularly during her most painful and challenging times. When she first meets Jerome Sugar, the admittedly delectable love interest, she lacks the emotional vocabulary to express her feelings for him. But she can feed him. And feed him she does, letting her culinary arts convey her ardor.







# In Conversation with Susan Wiggs (Cont.)

**Q:** What was the initial inspiration and writing process for *Sugar and Salt*? Did it start from your own relationships and experiences, or was it driven by a desire to explore certain themes?

**SW:** For me, inspiration is a process, not necessarily a single lightning-bolt moment. I'm more like a magpie, collecting lots of little bright, shiny objects because they interest me. I can tell you that a key element of this novel—the "Sugar" portion of *Sugar and Salt*—came to me as I was writing my previous book, *The Lost and Found Bookshop*. The bookseller in that story gets her supply of pastries for the in-store cafe from Sugar, the bakery across the street. I started wondering who the baker was, and what made his specialties so delicious.

And then the other bits came to me. I read the harrowing real-life story of Brittany Smith, an Alabama woman who shot and killed her rapist—and was forced to plead guilty to murder. My fictional story is radically different (admittedly, much more tidy because—fiction), but it led me to learn more about the life-and-death situations faced by women who are marginalized by socioeconomic insecurity, sexual violence, lack of body autonomy, and injustice.

Ultimately, all my novels are inspired by my stubborn belief in the sturdiness of the human spirit in the face of adversity. I wrote *Sugar and Salt* in a white heat, rushing to get the story out in a matter of months. I hope that creative energy is reflected in the pages of this novel.



# Recipes Inspired by *Sugar and Salt*



## *RECIPES FROM THE KITCHEN OF SALT*

### *Welcome to Salt*

#### *INGREDIENTS*

1 part lime juice

smoked sea salt

1 part smoky mescal

1 part Cointreau or Grand Marnier

1 jalapeño slice

#### *DIRECTIONS*

Dampen the rim of a glass with the lime juice and dip it in smoked sea salt. Put the glass in the freezer to frost it. Combine the ingredients in a shaker with ice and shake well. Strain into prepared glass, garnish with the jalapeño slice, and serve.



# Recipes Inspired by *Sugar and Salt*

## RECIPES FROM THE KITCHEN OF SALT

### Brisket Kaisers

*Pro tip: Do not skimp on the not-so-secret ingredient of crushed barbecue potato chips.*

#### INGREDIENTS

4 seeded kaiser rolls, buttered and grilled	1 large onion, caramelized with
1 cup barbecue sauce	butter and salt in a heavy skillet
1 pound brisket (or grilled portobello mushrooms, for a vegetarian option)	½ cup remoulade
	4 pepperoncini peppers
	barbeque potato chips, coarsely crushed

#### DIRECTIONS

Brush the tops and bottoms of the rolls with barbecue sauce. Then layer on the meat or mushrooms, caramelized onion, remoulade, and peppers. Add a layer of crushed potato chips and top with the seedy bun.

## RECIPES FROM THE KITCHEN OF SALT

### Texas Sheet Cake

*The ultimate happy ending*

#### INGREDIENTS

2 cups all-purpose flour	2 eggs	4 heaping tablespoons
2 cups sugar	2 sticks butter, melted	cocoa powder
¼ teaspoon salt	4 heaping tablespoons	6 tablespoons milk
½ cup buttermilk	cocoa powder	1 teaspoon
1 teaspoon baking soda	<i>For the icing:</i>	vanilla extract
1 teaspoon vanilla extract	1-¾ sticks butter	1 pound powdered sugar

#### DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 350. Combine the flour, sugar, and salt. In a separate bowl, mix the buttermilk, baking soda, vanilla, and eggs. In a medium saucepan, melt the butter and whisk in the cocoa. Bring 1 cup water to a boil and pour it into the pan, allowing it to bubble; then remove from heat. Pour this mixture into the dry ingredients and stir. Add the egg mixture and stir. Pour into a rimmed 10 x 13 cookie sheet and bake for 20 minutes. Meanwhile, make the icing. Melt the butter and add the cocoa powder, then the milk, vanilla, and powdered sugar. When you remove the cake from the oven, pour on the warm icing while the cake is still hot. Cool before serving. [Source: Handwritten by my friend Janece]





# *Sugar and Salt* Reading Group Guide

1. At the start of the novel, Margot thinks “She tried to feel her own worth. Sometimes the self-talk and self-care worked. A little bit. Other times, the effort simply drew a wall of loneliness around her.” Do you think Margot’s traumatic history is responsible for this feeling? Is it something that many women experience in our society?
2. Ida tells Margot early on that “my heart’s stuck in the past.” Why did her youthful romance with Frank have such staying power? Was it unfair for her to marry Douglas Sugar? What would you have done in her situation?
3. Why are Jerome and Margot attracted to each other despite being from very different backgrounds? What personality traits do they share? How do their differences complement each other?
4. Margie’s experiences in the criminal justice system were inspired by a number of real-life stories, including that of an Alabama woman named Brittany Smith, who was incarcerated and faced life in prison after murdering the man who violently raped her, leaving her terribly injured. Were you surprised by the fact that Margie wound up in jail? What do you think should have happened to her after she shot Jimmy?
5. In prison, Margie is desperate to terminate the pregnancy that resulted from being brutally raped. Despite the fact that abortion was legal at the time the scene takes place, she’s unable to have one while in jail, and her own lawyer refuses to help her due to his anti-abortion views. What did you make of her dilemma? Should her experience have been different? How? And how would the situation have played out differently today?
6. Why did Margie choose Lindsey and Sanjay as her baby’s adoptive parents? How did that decision help change the course of her life?
7. Running from one’s past is a recurring theme in *Sugar and Salt*. We see it with Margot, running from her her experiences in Texas, and Frank, living under an assumed name after dodging the draft. Do you think that they have successfully reckoned with their earlier lives by the end of the book? What does that look like for each of them?



# *Sugar and Salt* Reading Group Guide (Continued)

8. Was Margot right to speak to Buckley Hunt for the Texas Monthly article? What were the potential risks and rewards of telling her story publicly? Would you have done it?
9. How does the Hunt family use their money and power to manipulate every aspect of Margot's life? How do you think they would have justified their actions, even though their son was obviously a rapist and a criminal?
10. Margot doesn't take offense when Jerome's ex, Florence, says she doesn't want her sons around a woman who had committed murder, saying "...you're a good mom, I imagine you'd do anything to protect your kids and I respect that." What did you make of that response? Were Florence's concerns valid?
11. At the end of the book, Margot tells Queen and Cubby that "I guess I'm about as happy as I deserve to be." What do you think she means? Do you think Margot finds the happy ending she deserves? What do you think the future holds for her, and Jerome?
12. On the front cover of *Sugar and Salt*, Susan Wiggs chose the line "Everyone has a past. It's who you are now that matters." Do you agree? Why do you think the author picked that phrase for the cover?





# Further Reading from SUSAN WIGGS

