

1. What was your first fandom you ever joined (if you were into a fandom). Did you read fic for it? Have you ever written fic?

I was so super into Otaia (Olivia and Natalia from *Guiding Light*). I didn't watch the full show, just their scenes religiously. I was a fan of Crystal Chappell (okay, I had a crush) from her *Days of Our Lives* era and heard she was part of a sapphic storyline on *Guiding Light* and sprinted over like I'd left the oven on. I couldn't get enough of those two. (Imagine my surprise when my crush transferred to Jessica Leccia and to this day has never left. Top of my list.) I'd record the show while at work and then fast forward to their scenes. I did not read any Otaia fic because I wasn't savvy enough to know it was out there. Travesty! I would have loved it! I did, however, find those YouTube compilations of them set to music—which were awesome, and of course followed them to *Venice* – on which the first scene is them making out (which they never got to do on GH). Praise Baby Jesus.

I wish I had written fic of some variety, but no, never have. It would have been fantastic training ground in an area I had a lot of passion for – but I just never landed in the fic world. I didn't even learn about it until I was published.

2. In many of your books (such as *Kiss the Girl*, *Sparks Like Ours*, and *Exclusive*) the conflict comes from a work-related struggle. What about this angle appeals to you as a writer?

Work crushes are real and powerful things! I've had them. I'd venture we all have at some point. So are work related rivalries, and when you put the two together, you have a really exciting layer of tension to play around with in the narrative. The possible storylines just blossom from there. That kind of built in chemistry/conflict is golden and makes me want to jump into the story feet first. Plus, there's a forced proximity that makes interactions so easy and plentiful. I do expect you'll see more books like those from me in the future.

3. What part of the writing process strikes you, first (a plot line, a single scene, the characters, etc)?

Honestly, it's different every time, especially because I don't plot in advance. At all. More often than not, it's the setting that comes to me. I decide if the book is going to be small town, big city, beach related etc and go from there. Sometimes, it's two different character types that I know would have conflict. For example, in *Sparks Like Ours*, I knew I wanted to write a rival surfers book. In *Strawberry Summer*, the title came before anything else and I constructed the story around what that title inspired in me. For *Waiting in the Wings*, I wanted to write about Broadway and filled in the details as I went.

4. Several of your novels (*Waiting in the Wings*, *To the Moon and Back*, and *First Position* just to name a few) involve characters who work in performance fields. Is this influenced by your own life/background?

Most definitely! Performance (and all the jobs that go into it) is what I live for. I'm a Broadway enthusiast and see as much as I possibly can. But I also have my MFA in theatrical directing. I've studied with The Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford Upon Avon and the

Globe Theatre in London. I was a performer first, then a director, and have also taught acting and directing for many years in secondary education and then at the university level. When I came upon sapphic fiction as a reader, I thought the performance based books I came across got a lot wrong which made me want to write my own. I remember writing Bold Strokes Books this overly insistent cover letter, pointing out to them that *Glee* was hot, *Wicked* was taking over the Broadway stage and they shouldn't be left out! In other words, "You need my little book! I Promise." Apparently, it worked, because I'm here. I'm published!

5. You've been publishing sapphic romance for over a decade now – which is fucking amazing! How do you feel the genre has shifted/changed over time? Do those changes influence your writing?

That's so surreal to hear! But I wrote my first book in 2009, so it's been 15 years now. The biggest change is how many books there are now to choose from. I do feel lucky that I got into the business when I did. I think it's harder to get a foot in the door these days when readers have so many options. I was lucky in that sense in that I was easier to discover with the space less crowded.

Secondly, the genre is so much more diverse now. Bisexuality, pansexuality, nonbinary identification were all considered taboo both on the page and behind the keyboard. The books were mostly full of lesbian characters and lesbians were supposed to write them and that was it. I didn't hide the fact that I was bisexual, but over time I learned to not announce it too freely. When I did, I'd receive hate mail. Some of my social media posts would be flooded with comments mocking me or telling me to go write straight books. I'm happy to say that I receive far less of those responses these days, and the books in our genre are now full of all different types of people, sexualities, and gender fluidity. I'm here for it! More, please!

6. What is your favorite idea that you haven't yet written?

It's harder to write a secret baby book when both characters are women, but I do plan to do it someday. I love that trope! I've seen Ali Vali do it nicely, and I want in. I just need to find the perfect scenario to make it my own. Mark my words. It will happen! I've also never written fake romance, so that's on the list as well.

7. What is your favorite meal?

I have three. I spent several years in Europe growing up and love a good Rahm schnitzel with German potatoes! On the American side of things, garlic parmesan wings with ranch is a favorite comfort food. But the one item I can't live without is popcorn with butter! Movie theatre fare is my favorite. Nothing tops popcorn in my life.

8. You've written several series, including the Soho Loft series, Seven Shores, and Tangle Valley. When you start one, do you know it's going to be a series/what characters are going to be featured?

Yes! On all three series, I knew how many books there would be and which character from the core friend group was going to be featured in which book. However, I did not know who that woman's love interest was going to be until I sat down to write that specific book. (The exception being Hunter and Sam in the Soho series. I knew they were

going to be a pair, and thereby there would only be three books.) The covers for Soho were designed one at a time, however, so you'll notice there's less branding for those books, which is a shame. However, the Seven Shores and Tangle Valley covers were all designed at one time, giving them a uniformity.

9. If you had to pick two of your main characters (from different books/series) to be best friends, who would they be? And who, if any, would be enemies?

I think Hadley Cooper (*Seven Shores Series*) and Elizabeth Draper (*Beautiful Dreamer*) would really hit it off. They have similar outlooks on life and would definitely head out on some quirky, sunshiny adventures together, probably full of compliments. They would likely need Spencer (Hadley's GF) and Devyn (Elizabeth's) to keep them grounded, or maybe not! Maybe they would pull them along in their fun bubble.

10. Who is your own personal favorite character in any of your books?

I think I have to go with Brooklyn Campbell from *Kiss the Girl*. There was a wonderful chaos to her that came with a core of sincerity. It was a nice combo to write. She'd been through some difficult times in her life and I loved getting to write her happily ever after. She deserved it, and she also deserved someone as hot (and kind) as Jessica.

Runner up: Aster Lavender

11. What book got you into reading?

In life? That would be *The Sweet Valley Twins, Book One!* I was in the third grade and it was the first chapter book that got me really excited to get home and find out what was going to happen next. I was hooked after that. I understood what an escape a book could be.

Later, in terms of romance, it was *Star* by Danielle Steel which was amplified by *Paradise* by Judith McNaught. I fell in love with romance, specifically, forever and always.

12. What book got you into reading sapphic romance?

Ohhh, this was a game changing moment for me. The first sapphic book I read in the genre was *Behind the Pine Curtain* by Gerri Hill. I was floored that books like that one existed and couldn't wait to get my hands on more. My head practically exploded. All I wanted to do was read. Second book was *When Dreams Tremble* by Radclyffe and third was *Too Close to Touch* by Georgia Beers. The book that sold me on the genre for good was *Playing the Role of Herself* by KE Lane. It still has my heart.

13. If you could pick one song to epitomize your characters, what would it be? One song each, for as many characters as you'd like to answer with.

Lavender Haze by Taylor Swift would be the perfect underscore for Aster Lavender. (Marigold, too!) They could have a family dance party.

You know, rather than individual character songs, I tend to lean into more couple songs. I remember Emory and Sarah from Heart Block (in my head) had the song, *Helplessly, Hopelessly* by Jessica Andrews. Jordan and Molly from *How Sweet it Is* had *Come Away with Me* by Norah Jones.

14. What is your favorite Taylor Swift song and/or lyric?

I'm a *Folklore* Girl, but *Midnights* and *Lover* are right there, too!

I knew if I took this lyrics question too seriously, I would lose hours, so I went with a couple of lyrics that popped into my head first without overanalyzing! (Below)

I think I've seen this film before / And I didn't like the ending / You're not my homeland anymore / So what am I defending now? – Exile

And you wanna scream, 'don't call me kid, don't call me baby / Look at this godforsaken mess that you made me. – Illicit Affairs

*I wake in the night, I pace like a ghost
The room is on fire, invisible smoke
And all of my heroes die all alone
Help me hold onto you* – The Archer

15. Have you ever read a book – or fanfic – that is *criminally* underrated? Now is your chance to advertise it:

Hmmm. Let's see. I was surprised more people weren't buzzing about *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. That one really touched me. Conversely, though, there are times when I'm surprised by a book getting tons of buzz and not living up. That tends to happen more often, but I also realize it's a matter of style. Very Icy Ice Queens are harder for me to root for, and they have a HUGE following in our community. I prefer the ice queens that melt rather easily. ;)

16. What would you title your auto-biography?

Probably, *Melissa, Take Your Hand off the Stove*. It's the thing I say to myself more often than anything else. When something (even minor) happens that gets me down, I tend to dwell on it. Let it get to me as I examine all the ways I could have done the thing differently, or it could have played out another way. I leave my hand on the stove, so of course it continues to burn. I keep that phrase in my back pocket as a gentle reminder to take my hand off that stove and keep walking. That's another possible title, *Keep Walking*. Write a not so great book? Keep walking and write another one. Someone sends you a mean email? Don't reply and keep walking. There are plenty who appreciate what you write. Etc Etc. It's a good phrase. Or maybe it should be a lighthearted title like *Melissa Brayden: Bisexual Bowler at Large*. So many options!

17. Your books include a wide variety of tropes – do you have a favorite to write? Is it the same as your favorite trope to read?

Yes, to read and to write. Definitely. Happily.

Small town is the runner up, but reunion/second chance is my absolute FAVORITE. Gah. I just love it when those first loves come back together. My heart can't take it! (in a good way). The initial tension! The healing! The celebration! The relief! Don't get me started on the steam – because they know each other's bodies already, but they're matured, gotten even better at ...everything.

18. Finally – where would you put these characters on this seating chart:

Jessica Lennox from *Kiss the Girl* by you

Charlotte Thompson from *Those Who Wait* by me

Joan from *Letters Never Sent* by Sandra Moran

Evelyn Hugo from *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid

Robyn Ward from *And Playing the Role of Herself* by K.E. Lane

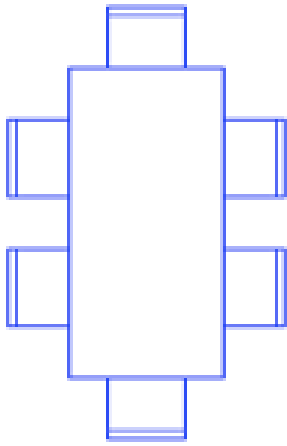
Syd Murphy from *Jericho* by Ann McMan

So, I'm starting with Jessica and Charlotte and seating them at the ends of the table because they likely organized the meal and made sure the menu, location, and details were all in place. They're born leaders and would throw an awesome dinner party.

Next, I'm going to put Robyn and Evelyn next to each other in the bottom, middle chairs side by side. As industry folk, they'll have a lot to talk about when it comes to Hollywood. Maybe Evelyn can offer Robyn some of her best war stories or advice. Robyn would certainly be in awe of such a legend.

Joan will go across the table from Evelyn because she likes to investigate things from the past and Evelyn has been a mystery to many for years and years. Maybe Joann will have a shot at cracking the surface! Though I doubt (knowing Evelyn) that she would make it very far.

Lastly, Syd can sit next to Joan because she's a librarian and would surely share Joan's penchant for the written word and all it can uncover. Like dueling Nancy Drews. Bam! Now, can I come to the dinner, too?



Explain your reasoning :)