



Summary

In the vein of the classic *84, Charing Cross Road*, this witty and tender novel follows two women in 1960s America as they discover that food really does connect us all, and that friendship and laughter are the best medicine.

When twenty-seven-year-old Joan Bergstrom sends a fan letter--as well as a gift of saffron--to fifty-nine-year-old Imogen Fortier, a life-changing friendship begins. Joan lives in Los Angeles and is just starting out as a writer for the newspaper food pages. Imogen lives on Camano Island outside Seattle, writing a monthly column for a Pacific Northwest magazine, and while she can hunt elk and dig for clams, she's never tasted fresh garlic--exotic fare in the Northwest of the sixties. As the two women commune through their letters, they build a closeness that sustains them through the Cuban Missile Crisis, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the unexpected in their own lives.

Food and a good life—they can't be separated. It is a discovery the women share, not only with each other, but with the men in their lives. Because of her correspondence with Joan, Imogen's decades-long marriage blossoms into something new and exciting, and in turn, Joan learns that true love does not always come in the form we expect it to. Into this beautiful, intimate world comes the ultimate test of Joan and Imogen's friendship—a test that summons their unconditional trust in each other.

A brief respite from our chaotic world, *Love & Saffron* is a gem of a novel, a reminder that food and friendship are the antidote to most any heartache, and that human connection will always be worth creating.

Courtesy of the publisher



About the Author

Kim Fay is the author of two historical novels, the Instant National Bestseller *Love & Saffron* and *The Map of Lost Memories*, an Edgar Award Finalist for Best First Novel. She has also written a food memoir, *Communion: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam*, a Gourmand World Cookbook Award winner. She created and served as the series editor for the innovative *To Asia With Love* guidebooks, and was a Hotel and Travel Editor for the travel, food, and lifestyle website, *Gayot.com*, for thirteen years. She is currently the Managing Editor for *The Animation Guild's Keyframe* magazine and website.

For the past twenty years Kim has been an active volunteer at [Alexandria House](#), a residence for women and children transitioning from homelessness to permanent housing. Alexandria House also serves as a neighborhood center. Kim plays an integral role in the neighborhood grade school and teen programs. She spent five years leading the weekly *Power of the Word* writing workshop for teens, and she currently leads a monthly writing workshop for Alexandria House past residents. She also works with the women individually on book projects such as Keanakay Scott's memoir of foster care and homelessness: [Viewer's Discretion Advised](#). Kim is a two-time recipient of the President's Volunteer Service Award for her work at Alexandria House through the National Council of Jewish Women Los Angeles.

Kim is working (as always) on half a dozen books at once! A mystery series set in L.A. in the 1970s. A novel about female friendship in Vietnam over the course of the 20th century. A middle grade adventure series in which the daughter of immigrants discovers her secret superpower: empathy! And another small novel that complements *Love & Saffron*—not a sequel, not another book told in letters (although there will be some letters and lots of food)—but a story that continues to explore women's relationships and also allows her to dive into other aspects of her family history.

Courtesy of <https://www.kimfaybooks.com/>

Discussion Questions

1. Were you surprised to learn that *Love & Saffron* is a story told in a series of letters? How do you think this writing style affected your read of Immy and Joan's story?
2. *Love & Saffron* takes place in the 1960s. Why do you think this time period lent itself to this particular story? If *Love & Saffron* was set in the present day, how do you think that would have changed the story?
3. Were there any recipes or meals in the book you were eager to recreate at home, or you wanted to eat? If so, what were they and did you end up trying them?
4. Have you seen food connect people or play an integral role in people's experiences? Share an example of how food has impacted your own life.
5. What do you ultimately think Immy and Joan learned from each other through their friendship? How do you feel that shaped who they became by the end of the novel?
6. What was your favorite scene in the novel, and why?
7. Discuss the importance of female friendship. Why do you think it's valuable, and what does it provide that other relationships might not? How has female friendship shaped your own life, or how have you seen it shape the lives of the women in your life?
8. If Immy and Joan had never met each other, where do you think their individual journeys would have taken them?
9. Share your thoughts on Immy's marriage and Joan's journey in love. Did you relate to either of their experiences, and if so, how?
10. Were you surprised by the ending?

A Conversation with Kim Fay

Love & Saffron feels quite different in nature from your first novel, *The Map of Lost Memories*. What inspired you to write this story?

Although *Love & Saffron* came to me in a kind of blur at the start of the pandemic lockdown, I feel that this book has been inside me ever since I knew I wanted to be a novelist when I was twelve years old. That may sound strange since obviously I didn't know this story then. But for as long as I can remember, I have wanted to write about my family and people I love and admire. I just didn't know how. Then the pandemic arrived, at my ripe old age of fifty-three, and something inside me said: Kim, you are ready to reach into the depths of your heart and write about what is most important to you. As for concrete inspirations, nearly every detail of Joan's childhood and food-writing life is pulled from the life of Barbara Hansen—from the former Miss America friend who arranged Joan's freighter trip around Asia to Helen Gurley Brown sharing the name of her agent. And while Immy's inspiration, my Great-Aunt Emma, was not a magazine columnist, she was a secretary for the Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs. She and my Great-Uncle Frank had everyone out to the Camano Island cabin during the summer for crab feasts. And most important of all, she was a curious, generous, and loving woman. I've also managed to squeeze in my Grandma Lahoma, who was a Sally Brown at Best's Apparel. It's been so much fun to have my mom reach out every time she rereads *Love & Saffron* (which is often), as she pulls out yet another little treasure about our family. Most recently it dawned on her: Am I the niece who loves horses and can't cook? Yes, Mom, you are.

Why did you decide to write a novel told in a series of letters, and how has letter writing played a role in your own life?

I've been fascinated by the intimacy of letters nearly all my life. In our family mementos there is a letter, written in 1907, from my Great-Grandma Hattie to my Great-Grandpa Daniel while he was away working. Most of the letter is about family this-and-that, including mention of their son Frank (Francis), who suffered migraines even as a child. But the letter begins, "My Own Darling Boy," and comes to a close with, "I just freeze every night without you. My legs get so cold . . . I do want you." 1907! Wow! I read that letter so many times over the years, imagining their life together—a life cut short when Hattie died of a burst appendix when her youngest son, my gramps, was just three. Whenever my dad traveled for work, he sent letters written in symbols that my sister and I had to decipher. When I was in the seventh grade, I moved across the state, and my best friend and I spent the summer exchanging letters of our undying devotion to one another. In junior high, another friend moved to London, and I haunted the mailbox for her pale blue airmail stationery and descriptions of her magical new adventures. Traveling through Europe after college, a crush on a handsome Dutch boy led to years of correspondence that developed into a lovely long-distance friendship—and introduced me to Miles Davis! Then, when I moved to Vietnam to teach English, with scarcely any phone access and email nonexistent, letters were my only means of connection, with family, with friends, and with my dear friend Janet Brown who had moved to Thailand. To make this long story short, I wanted to pay tribute to the letters I have been exchanging with Janet for more than twenty-five years, and I wanted to capture the intimate, immediate way letters reflect life as it is being lived. They are a kind of diary—mine certainly are. I've saved them all, and when I reread them, portions of my past return in full bloom.

Courtesy of the publisher

A Conversation with Kim Fay cont'd

The two main characters, Immy and Joan, are both strong women with a passion for food. Who were your inspirations?

I do not come from a gourmet family. My mom couldn't boil water when she got married. This is not an exaggeration. She was raised by her dad—mostly on TV dinners. But my Gram, great-aunts, and aunts were (are) the kind of home cooks who put solid meals on the table—meals remembered not always for what was eaten (although our pancakes are notable!), but because the tables at which they were served were always bright with conversation and laughter. Then there is pioneering food writer Barbara Hansen. I had never met a woman so curious and passionate about exploring every kind of food imaginable. Driving with her one time, I marveled at the way her eyes darted from one side of the road to the other, paired with small exclamations, “Oh, that looks good” and “I wonder what they serve there.” Every time I look at her Instagram, she is diving deep into ingredients or international cuisines. When it comes to food, Barbara is the woman I wish to be.

The main characters in *Love & Saffron* live in Los Angeles and on Camano Island near Seattle, and the novel features lush descriptions of the places and their culture. Why did you decide to set your story in these regions?

I will start with Camano Island, the site of some of my earliest memories. I was so young when Great-Aunt Emma and Great-Uncle Frank had their cabin there, and my mind holds beautiful flashes: the sweet salty taste of crab, the haze of cigarette smoke while the adults sat around the card table and I flipped the pages of a magical magazine called National Geographic, the radiant love I felt in my Great-Aunt Emma's presence. Many, many years later, cousins on my dad's side of the family all moved to Camano, and on a visit in 2018, I decided I wanted to visit the spot where the old cabin had been—I was certain it was long-gone. But when I arrived, there it sat, exactly as it had been when I was a girl five decades earlier. A neighbor was standing outside, and he called the owner, who arrived and told me his parents had bought the cabin from my family. Then he opened the front door and let me inside, and I burst into tears. My earliest years flooded back to me. The love I had felt there washed over me. So much remained, right down to pine paneling in the kitchen and the winch my Great-Uncle Frank had made out of a Model T transmission in the boathouse. I have never been able to separate that cabin from the island where it resides, and that is how Camano became essential to *Love & Saffron*. There is a tiny connection between my Camano Island memories and Los Angeles—one of those National Geographic magazines had an article about the exciting city of L.A., and I was so fascinated that I kept the issue and still have it to this day. I moved to Los Angeles just over twenty years ago, and once I got my footing—and got past the Hollywood stereotype—I discovered one of the most fascinating places on earth. Los Angeles contains nearly every country in the world, in both its people and its food. Not a month goes by that I don't discover some new, intriguing corner and flavor—just as my friend Barbara Hansen has been doing since the 1960s. Los Angeles begs to be written about in so many different ways, and my hope is to honor the city's particular spirit that has enriched my life.

A Conversation with Kim Fay cont'd

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A Conversation with Kim Fay cont'd

Immy and Joan build a powerful bond over time through their letters. Why were these two women drawn to each other, and why did you decide to write a story about such a strong female friendship?

I am burned out on movies, TV shows, and books where women are at odds. I want more relationships like the ones I know. My female friends nurture and uplift me. During the pandemic, they were the rock that kept me steady. My life has fallen into deep darkness at times, and my ladies, dames, and BFFs lifted me back out into the light. We laugh and cry and celebrate and mourn with one another. We are connected because we are made of the same substance—which is why I feel Joan and Immy came together. Their lives on the surface may be different, but at their cores, they are women of integrity, humility, and loving-kindness.

When did your passion for food writing start, and what food journalists have influenced your writing?

After university, working at the Elliott Bay Book Company in Seattle, I was given the cookbook section to tend. Devoted to my job, I borrowed books to read so I could recommend them to customers. During this time, I encountered Laurie Colwin and M. F. K. Fisher. I felt my life shift. The way they wrote about food and life as if one could not be separated from the other. The way that all of life could be examined through the lens of food. After living in Vietnam for four years, when I decided I want to write about the country in a substantial way, I knew there was only one approach for me—food. Ever since the publication of *Communion: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam*, which explores the country's history and culture through its cuisine, I have longed to write fiction in which food (and all that it represents and reveals) played a central role. Voilà—*Love & Saffron*!

Why did you decide to set *Love & Saffron* in the 1960s, and what role does the time period play in the book?

I was the most nostalgic child. I never lived in my own era. In my childhood daydreams I played with Laura Ingalls Wilder, I was a 1920s flapper, I was Pinky Tuscadero in *Happy Days*. I love writing about the past, but when I sat down to write *Love & Saffron*, I did not choose the time period—the story chose it. The early 1960s was an in-between time. The idyllic (at least insofar as Madison Avenue was concerned) 1950s still lingered, and the earthshaking late 1960s were simmering on the back burner. To me that makes it the perfect backdrop for Joan and Immy, whose story together is one of nuanced transitions between who they had been and who they were becoming.

A Conversation with Kim Fay cont'd

The characters in *Love & Saffron* discuss many different types of foods in their letters to each other, especially Mexican and French cooking. Why did you decide to write about such a wide array of recipes, and did you have to do any research before you started writing?

I started backpacking around the world my first summer out of university. Those first years, my adventures spanned from Sweden to Borneo. No matter where I was, food was always a connector, as well as being the most fun and appetizing way to learn about a new place—and as a result, new people. Put four strangers around table and serve them a good meal, and they will know each other in fresh ways by the time dessert is served. If that food is unfamiliar to some or all, it steers conversations in wonderful directions. Because Joan is based on Barbara Hansen, and her setting is L.A., it was only natural that her side of the story would include a smorgasbord of international flavors. As for research, I have wanted to write about Barbara in my fiction for years (I've constructed a whole mystery series around her!), and in addition I am a member of Culinary Historians of Southern California and the Los Angeles Conservancy, so I had a lot of research in my back pocket to start with. And when I was writing, if I needed to, I referred to my collection of vintage cookbooks and L.A. guidebooks, as well as the L.A. Times and Seattle PostIntelligencer archives.

If you had to choose, which was your favorite storyline to write in the novel— Immy or Joan's—and why?

That's like asking me to choose my favorite child. Impossible!

What's next for you?

I am always working on half a dozen things at once. These past years it's been two middle grade novels, a mystery series, and a historical novel about Vietnam (don't get me started about my nonfiction projects). But next: another small novel that complements *Love & Saffron*. Not a sequel. Not another book told in letters—although there will be some letters (and lots of food). But a story that continues to explore women's relationships and also allows me to dive into other aspects of my family history.