



SUSAN MARQUE, MFA '14, TALKS TO JENNY FELDON, MFA '06, ABOUT KARMA GONE BAD (SOURCEBOOKS, 2013)

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When **John Reed** asked if I would like to interview one of our recent graduates, **Jenny Feldon**, MFA '06, I couldn't wait. Selfishly I wanted to find out more about **Karma Gone Bad (Sourcebooks, 2013)**, and her experiences living abroad, and what it was like writing about it....

Susan Marque: I love **Karma Gone Bad**, and you mention that you were working on a fiction novel in it. How did your experience differ in writing this memoir from the fiction you have written?

Jenny Feldon: As a blogger, I thought I had the whole nonfiction thing figured out when I sat down to write this manuscript. But blogging and memoir are really, really different! I had to draw out the narrative arc, just like in fiction, but without the freedom of creating my own characters or being able to manipulate the plot. Searching for the story within my own story while remaining honest to the experience was challenging. On the other hand, not needing to create everything from scratch was liberating, too. Writing this memoir has helped me grow as a fiction writer, and I am really eager to continuing exploring and building my skills in both mediums.

SM: How long did it take to write *Karma Gone Bad*?

JF: The book was sold on proposal. I spent eight months working on that proposal, first on my own and later with my literary agent. It contained chapter summaries, an extensive outline, and sample chapters, so a good deal of the work happened during that process. But I wrote the actual manuscript on a super tight deadline. I completed it in just under three months...something I do NOT recommend to anyone, ever ;) After that first submission, my editors and I went through another four rounds of revisions before I turned in the final draft. So, from proposal to publication ("research" not included!) it was just over two years.

SM: Do you think writing the blog helped in writing the book?

JF: Absolutely. It was such a gift to look back, several years later, and have a detailed set of notes on my experiences written in the exact frame of mind I'd been in at the time. There are conversations that I would never have remembered otherwise, details that would have been forgotten. Helen Schulman's number one piece of advice to me before I left was "take good notes!" and the blog became exactly that. She was right, and I'm very lucky I listened. I don't know if I could have written the book without them!

SM: Have you taken Tucker to other countries besides India?

JF: He's been to Mexico :)

SM: What is your writing process like?

JF: Wherever, whenever, however. Most of *Karma Gone Bad* was written between 8pm and 1am, and between 4am and 6am. My kids are still young and I don't get a whole lot of writing time. I'll take whatever moments I can get, even if it's ten minutes at a Starbucks or scribbling in a notebook while I'm waiting in line at carpool. Longer blocks of time are luxuries and I try to make the most of them. Juggling it all is challenging, but in some ways it makes me a better writer--I don't have time to waste on distractions. I'd rather write ten terrible pages at 4am and delete them all later than stare at a blank page for hours in the afternoon. "Writer's block" feels like a luxury now too. Every minute counts, so I write whether it comes out right or not. Revisions are a beautiful thing :)

SM: Is coffee still your steady sidekick? Coffee is practically a character in this book.

JF: Isn't it? And one of my favorites...I'm pretty sure coffee will be my sidekick for life! Yep. It's a problem, but I've come to terms with it...there are worse addictions to have (I hope.) Little kids plus writing plus a day job means I go to bed at night already craving my first cup! Thanks to India, though, I love tea now, too. But never as much as coffee.

SM: What has been your proudest moment with this project?



SM: What was the most difficult?

JF: Reading bad reviews. I know I'm not supposed to, but it's hard to stay away completely. And people are mean! Someone last week called me "the worst main character they'd ever read." I wanted to jump through my computer screen and yell "I'm not a character, I'm a PERSON!" This story isn't all roses and sunshine, and I had a lot of growing up to do—but this is the story I lived, and it's the only one I could write. I know part of putting myself out there in this way means being vulnerable to a lot of criticism. I'm trying to learn from it without letting it define me.

SM: Has finishing the this book changed the way you see yourself or your writing in any way?

JF: Writing this book was truly the final chapter of my journey to India and back...I never would have understood the true meaning of the experience and how it changed me if I hadn't put the story down on paper. It's given me a lot of clarity on the person I was, who I am now, and who I'm trying to become. As a writer, it helped open up the path in front me...the kind of writer I want to be, the kind of book I want to write next, the challenges I'll need to overcome. I also discovered I'm a ruthless murderer of the Oxford comma...my editor made me put back hundreds of them. So I guess I need to work on that.

SM: What have you learned that you wish you had known before?

JF: Not to try to write an entire manuscript in three months. If I'd had a little more time and a little more distance, it might have changed things. I'm still proud of the book I wrote, but next time around I want to extend the process and give myself a little more time to breathe. And sleep.

SM: How did your lessons of forgiveness that you got in India keep growing back in the U.S.?

JF: Gratitude is a huge part of my life every single day. The lessons I learned in India were profoundly life changing—as hard as they were for me to learn and as embarrassed as I am to have needed to learn them in the first place. I look at the world differently now, and it's changed everything...my relationships, my experience as a mother, my approach to every day life. Every moment feels like a gift, and I'm determined not to waste any of them being negative or closed off to new experiences. It's a work in progress, always, but I wake up every day feeling grateful for another chance to live life better—as a wife, a mother, a writer, a person.

SM: You chose to concentrate a large portion of the story to your first six months in India. Was that a choice in your outline (do you outline?) or when did you make that choice in your editorial process?

JF: The heart of this story for me was always in the struggle and the transformation. I'm still a believer the "only trouble is interesting" writing dogma (who wants to read the story of someone who went to India and did everything right?) David Gates taught me to never stop throwing rocks at my "characters" and I'd like to think I did that part well enough! The troubled parts were where I was able to pour my heart and soul onto the page and try to communicate a part of the human experience I believe is universal. Even if you never travel farther than the end of your own street, you can still screw up your marriage or make a million bad choices and need to start again. The happier parts were harder to write, maybe because without the pain I didn't feel as compelled to put them into words. And yes, I outline...the outline for Karma Gone Bad was written in three parts that my dad referred to as "Shock, Despair, Revelation." In terms of experience, those three parts feel equal, but I can see why on the page it might feel unbalanced. Also, because the "revelation" part, the Mango Season of the book, is still happening, that stage still feels more like a work in progress than anything else.

SM: The book really speeds through time towards the end. Did you detail more of the later part of the two years you spent in India in your blog or elsewhere?

JF: The later part of my time in India, happily, was spent enjoying the experience more and writing (and complaining!) about it less. The blog tapered off as I focused on my day-to-day "real life" experiences. I didn't begin blogging regularly again until a year and a half or so after we'd returned to the US. I do have lots of journals from that time and hope, someday, to write that story too.

SM: Have you kept in contact with Venkat, Anjali, Diane, Ken and the others?

JF: Most of the people in the book remain good friends, some of whom were instrumental in helping me tell this story. Sadly, we've lost track of Venkat and have tried in vain to find him...none of our connections in Hyderabad have been able to track him down for several years. I'm fairly certain, though, that's he's happily married to Swapna, raising his beloved goats and surrounded by a whole gang of kids with amazing hair.

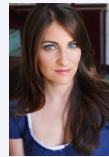


JF: I miss New York City every single day! Jay's company transferred him to LA at the very last minute...we moved here right after India, when I was eight months pregnant with my daughter. I love our life here--we have wonderful friends and jobs and a house with a little tiny backyard--but New York is where my soul will always call home. Writing in New York came second nature, and here I feel stuck sometimes...it's hard to dig deep creatively when it's always so damn sunny outside! Right now it's January and 80 degrees and I'm desperately wishing for snow. Most people I know on the east coast think I'm crazy, but there's something gritty and dark and beautiful about Manhattan that just doesn't exist anywhere else.

SM: What's next for Karma fans?

JF: I'm looking forward to focusing on the blog again, which has been sadly neglected during the publication process for the book. I miss writing about our daily adventures there, and the community of readers who have stuck by me through the years. I'd love to write the sequel to Karma Gone Bad (working title: Baby Karma) which would detail my first year post-India. Jay went back to live in Mumbai for a year after our daughter was born, so our India story continued in a different way as I navigated that ever-challenging "baby's first year" experience and adjusted to life in the US again on my own. I'm also working on a new novel. Really, all I want to do is raise my kids and write more books, and however that happens is fine with me!

Jenny Feldon was born in California and grew up in Newton, Massachusetts. She completed her bachelor's degree in English literature at Boston University and earned her MFA in creative writing from the New School University. Her work has appeared in nonfiction anthologies as well as many online and print publications, including Parenting magazine, Parenting.com and the Huffington Post. She writes the popular blog [Karma](#) and was named one of BlogHer's Voices of the Year in 2012. Jenny lives in Los Angeles with her family, where she balances writing, motherhood, and giant cups of coffee...mostly all at once. Her first book, Karma Gone Bad, a memoir about life as an expat housewife in Hyderabad, India, was published by Sourcebooks in November 2013.



Susan Marque is a second year writing student in the M.F.A. program working on a screenplay and her own memoir.



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