



## Muffins and Mayhem

In *Muffins and Mayhem*, Suzanne Beecher, creator of DearReader.com, combines her life stories with 30 of her favorite recipes. With striking candor, Suzanne takes readers on a journey from her lowest moments to her greatest joys and personal victories. Suzanne writes about personal successes and failures and what each taught her about life, love, and her capacity to persevere.

Scattered throughout Suzanne’s memoir are favorite recipes, and each is accompanied by a personal anecdote. Suzanne believes that recipes are more than just a mix of ingredients: They’re food for the soul, and she doesn’t leave readers hungry. From humorous tales about avoiding her mother’s liver dishes as a child (and Mom’s Thanksgiving meals as an adult!) to a reverent account of how a childhood hero touched her life through Frosted Meat Loaf, Suzanne’s food-filled memoir warms the heart as well as fills the stomach.

### For Discussion

1. In “Pretending My Way to Success,” Suzanne writes, “. . . when you have to *convince* people you’re in charge, it doesn’t work” (page 46). Her solution was to change the way she dressed in order to change the way others perceived her. The result was an inner self-confidence that eventually led her to shed the “power suit” without losing any authority. Do you agree with Suzanne’s belief that clothes can, in a sense, make the person? Have you ever had a similar experience where your outward appearance caused an inner metamorphosis?
2. In chapter one, Suzanne writes about her mother’s “truths” and quirks and how, despite her best efforts, every now and then when she looks in the mirror she sees her mother looking back. Is adopting some of our parents’ idiosyncrasies inevitable? Why or why not?
3. From failed marriages to unsuccessful business ventures, Suzanne journeys through many “live and learn” experiences. Even situations such as her restaurant folding ultimately lead to personal growth and insight. Would you consider her unsuccessful endeavors failures? Why or why not? How do you define failure? Did any of Suzanne’s stories make you reconsider the value of some of the failures in your own life?
4. There’s an old adage: “Dance like no one’s watching and sing like no one’s listening.” In the story about Suzanne’s hotel room performance of Irene Cara’s “Flashdance

(What a Feeling),” she does just that—except she accidentally winds up with an audience. Have you ever experienced a similar situation? Was it comical like Suzanne’s, or more embarrassing?

5. When describing her own quirky personality, Suzanne quotes Leonard Cohen’s “There’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” How do you think Suzanne’s embracing of her individuality and pride in being “a little strange” (page 74) has affected the way she interacts with others? How can embracing one’s uniqueness help overcome life’s obstacles?
6. An illness or injury can be one of life’s biggest setbacks. Suzanne experienced such a setback when she was diagnosed with benign essential blepharospasm, a rare, incurable neurological disorder. Determined to overcome her disability, Suzanne learned to love her illness in order to live with it. Do you think her “love the illness” strategy could help others suffering from chronic conditions? Have you ever experienced a similar situation? If so, how did you learn to live with your condition?
7. In talking about the meaning of life, Suzanne writes, “I’ve always thought my job, my purpose here on earth, certainly must be something more dramatic than simply loving and taking care of the people around me. So I’ve strived to be clever, artistic, and talented in business. But . . . I realize I’ve been looking at life all wrong. It’s not complicated, there’s nothing to prove. My mother was right. It’s really very simple. What’s really important is love.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. After her mom passed away, Suzanne discovered a short poem that her grandmother had given to her mother. The poem is just a silly anti-theft ditty written on an index card, but she cherishes the keepsake and makes an index card of her own because, as she says, “Sometimes a little bit of silliness is the recipe I need to get me through the day” (pages 78–79). Of all the values Suzanne carries, why do you think maintaining a sense of humor is so important? Are there any special pick-me-up tokens or rituals in your life that you use to help you through rough patches?
9. One of the book’s main themes is family traditions. Holiday traditions are particularly important to Suzanne, so much so that she has trouble parting with antiquated rituals like buying pecan pies at Christmas. She also recognizes the importance of maintaining traditions now that she’s responsible for holiday dinners. How important is tradition in your family? Did you experience a similar “passing of the torch” when you became an adult?
10. For a long time Suzanne was ambivalent about going home to visit her parents, even to the point of becoming physically ill. But through Mrs. Creswick’s meat loaf and other recipes and stories from her recipe box, Suzanne discovered a way to go back home. What does going home mean to you? Has it been an easy journey or, like Suzanne, have you had to find a way to give yourself the home you never had when you were growing up?
11. Suzanne recounts the day when she was sitting in Starbucks and a man came over to her table and asked, “Are you a writer” (page 224)? After stumbling through an

- awkward and embarrassing response, Suzanne realized it was finally time to face her moment of truth. Was she going to accept and acknowledge her writing talent, or let self-doubt continue to steal it away? The words in an old folk song proclaim, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.” Have you been able to freely acknowledge the talents you’ve been blessed with, or do you hide your light under a bushel?
12. Toward the end of the book, Suzanne writes about having the courage to “deviate from my comfortable routine” in order to discover new opportunities to touch other people’s lives (page 216). So many of her projects required her to trust her instincts and take a chance. For example, when she took it upon herself to essentially create her own job description at Sunny Hill Nursing Home. Have you ever found yourself in situations where you had an opportunity to take similar chances, and how did you react? Do you regret your decision?

### *A Conversation with Suzanne Beecher*

*You end your book with the same line you end your blog posts and website entries, “Thanks for reading with me. It’s so good to read with friends.” Is there a special significance to this phrase?*

When you grow up in a small town like I did, the feeling of belonging to a community of friends comes naturally. Whenever I’d go for a walk, or ride my bike down the street, frequently I’d stop to say hello to a neighbor. So even though more than 365,000 people read at my book clubs every day, when I’m working on my column it feels like I’m writing to one single person. Just sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, and chatting with a friend. The ending for my column, “Thanks for reading with me. It’s so good to read with friends,” wasn’t planned. It’s simply the sentiment this small-town girl feels in her heart each day when she finishes writing her column.

*In the preface of Muffins and Mayhem, you write about how you have only four childhood memories. Did writing your book help you recapture any additional memories, or do you still draw a blank when the topic of childhood memories comes up in conversation?*

Writing *Muffins and Mayhem* definitely helped me recall other childhood memories. Antique stores have become another trigger for helping me remember the past. Whenever my husband and I walk through one, he’s amazed at how many times I’ll see something and comment, “Ah, look at that! It looks just like the one Grandma Hale used to have in her kitchen.” Every old cookie jar, potato ricer, or serving bowl for sale, reminds me of another childhood memory that I’d tucked deep away.

*You’ve had a range of jobs, from publisher of In Business to volunteer coordinator at Sunny Hill Nursing Home. Which one of your past jobs is your favorite? Why?*

That’s easy. Meals for Madison, my free lunch program in Madison, Wisconsin. My life was in crisis when I started the meal program. *In Business* magazine was losing huge amounts of money, so in a way it was kind of crazy for me to start a program that gives away free food.

Yet I knew in my heart I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing. The lesson I learned from the meal program is that helping other people with their problems also helps me with my own. Meals for Madison didn't solve my financial problems with the magazine, but the experience of helping someone else brought joy and peace into my life. Now, whenever I'm consumed with my own problems, I'm reminded it's time to do something for someone else.

*In Muffins and Mayhem you talk about the importance of role models and the impact Mrs. Creswick, one of your role models, had on your life. Can you think of another adult figure from your childhood who was as influential as Mrs. Creswick?*

Two people immediately come to mind: Grandma Hale and Andy Griffith. I realize mentioning my grandmother probably doesn't come as a surprise, but why Andy Griffith?

Mayberry, the town depicted in the Andy Griffith television show, was much like the one I grew up in, and Andy Griffith was the father I wished I had. To this day, watching reruns of the *Andy Griffith Show* while I'm cooking is one of my favorite pastimes. I think I know the story line of every single episode by heart, but that's okay, because it makes Mayberry feel even more like home to me.

I spent a lot of time at my Grandma Hale's house when I was young, and even though Grandma was on the quiet side, she cared for me as I always wished my own mother would have. It's the little things that stand out in my mind. At my house when I wasn't feeling well, my mother actually got angry with me, sort of suggesting somehow it was my fault that I was sick. So I was pretty much left to take care of myself. But if I wasn't feeling well at Grandma's house, things were different. I remember one time when I was visiting Grandma and I was up in the middle of the night sick to my stomach and throwing up, Grandma Hale loved me anyway and never left my side all night long.

*You and your husband have collaborated on numerous projects and business endeavors throughout your relationship. Do you still work closely together now that DearReader.com has become so successful? How have the time demands of running the online book club and blog affected your business partnership?*

My husband and I continue to work together, and we couldn't imagine it any other way. But we don't work on the exact same project—that's a bit too close. I think my husband and I work well together because we trust each other completely. Consequently, we never feel like we're in competition, but rather a working team. Of course, sometimes our relationship does get off course, and when that happens the sentence that brings harmony back into our conversation is, "We've been here before, let's start again." It's our cue to reevaluate the dynamics of what's really going on.

*You talk very candidly about learning to live with benign essential blepharospasm, and how you learned to love your illness. Do you still have a good relationship with BEB? Can you offer any advice for others who are currently learning to love their own illnesses?*

Yes, my disorder and I are still buddies, but we continue to discover new things about each other's personalities. In some ways my eye disorder is kind of like living with a roommate. I'm an only child who still prefers her own space, so periodically my BEB and I get into a disagreement. My eyes get tired, my nervous system needs a nap, but Suzanne wants to keep going. I'm upset that I can't do what I want, when I want, so I say some unkind words about how my stupid eye disorder slows me down. But my "roommate" doesn't appreciate my choice of words, or my stubbornness. So my disorder retaliates with a one-two punch in return, which completely drains my energy, and then I have no choice but to rest in bed for a couple of days. Eventually we both come to our senses and negotiate a way to live peacefully together again.

*If there's one personality trait that readers of Muffins and Mayhem learn about you, it's your entrepreneurial spirit. Do you have plans in the works for any future projects outside your DearReader.com program?*

I've never planned any of my new business ventures; opportunities just seemed to show up and I simply jumped on board. So I don't have any plans at the moment, other than to continue creating new ideas for my online book clubs, and I'd like to become more personally involved with libraries around the country. I do have plans for a second book. But as far as launching another new business venture, I think I may have exchanged some of my entrepreneurial spirit with the desire to spend more time with my four grandchildren. I'm amazed at how they've affected me. I have such fond memories of the time I spent with my Grandma and Grandpa Hale, and I sure hope I'm creating those kinds of memories for my grandchildren, too.

*You run multiple websites, including the DearReader.com book club and your own blog. Have you always been so web-savvy? Do you have any advice for someone just starting a blog or web-based business?*

My website is one of the survivors from the early Internet boom, when folks had the attitude, "If you build it, they will come—and you don't have to worry about making money." That kind of thinking remains a mystery to me. I guess I'm old-school, because to me it doesn't matter where the business is located—you need to have customers and you need to find a way to make money. If you're going to start a web-based business, don't quit your day job until your new business is bringing in income. Having said that, I do believe if you love what you do, the money will follow—at least enough money to live a joyful life.

*What's your favorite recipe in Muffins and Mayhem?*

Skunk Beans. This is going to sound a little strange, but whenever I make Skunk Beans, I remember as a kid singing this little ditty:

*Beans, beans, the musical fruit  
The more you eat, the more you toot.  
The more you toot, the better you feel,  
So eat more beans with every meal!*

Pork 'n' Beans were frequently on the dinner table when I was a kid. After saying grace and before we started eating, I'd sing the bean song out loud. Each line with a little more emphasis than the last, so by the time I reached the crescendo at the end of the song, my arms were waving high up in the air and I'd be laughing. There wasn't a lot of laughing in my house when I was a kid, so the little girl inside of me loves the Skunk Beans recipe the most. But not to worry, these beans are toot-proof! That confirmation comes from experience, because I've served these beans to my family for years and we've never had a toot outbreak yet!

*How different was the process of writing Muffins and Mayhem from your online writing? Do you prefer book writing to writing your daily blog column?*

There's an art to writing a column for the DearReader.com book clubs because space is limited, and in my case there's a daily deadline. The ideal number of words is 360. That's not a lot of words when your goal is to tell a story, including a laugh or a tear that you hope will touch someone's heart, and then wrap it all up neatly in the end. I love what I do, but it's a pretty big assignment every day. Since I only have a few words to tell a story in my column, there's not much sauntering allowed. I have to stay on track with my original idea. But in a book, there's room to wander, as long as it's an interesting journey. I don't know how most authors approach a book, but since it was all new to me, I had no choice but to let the book take charge. I can honestly say that I never knew for sure what I was doing until it was all over. Looking back I'm amazed at where some of the chapters took me. Writing a book was a magical journey for me and I'm ready to begin again.

### *Enhance Your Book Club*

1. Plan a book club smorgasbord! Have everyone prepare his or her favorite recipe either from the book or from Suzanne's recipe blog (DearReader.com) and bring it to your book club meeting. Or prepare one of your family's favorite recipes and share the story behind it.
2. One of the most inspiring experiences Suzanne writes about is her role as volunteer coordinator. Give back to your own community by volunteering in your neighborhood.
3. Visit the author's website, DearReader.com, and see firsthand how Suzanne's free online book clubs work!
4. Visit Suzanne's website MuffinsandMayhem.com, and create a cookbook of recipes and stories with your reading group or family members, or make one for yourself.