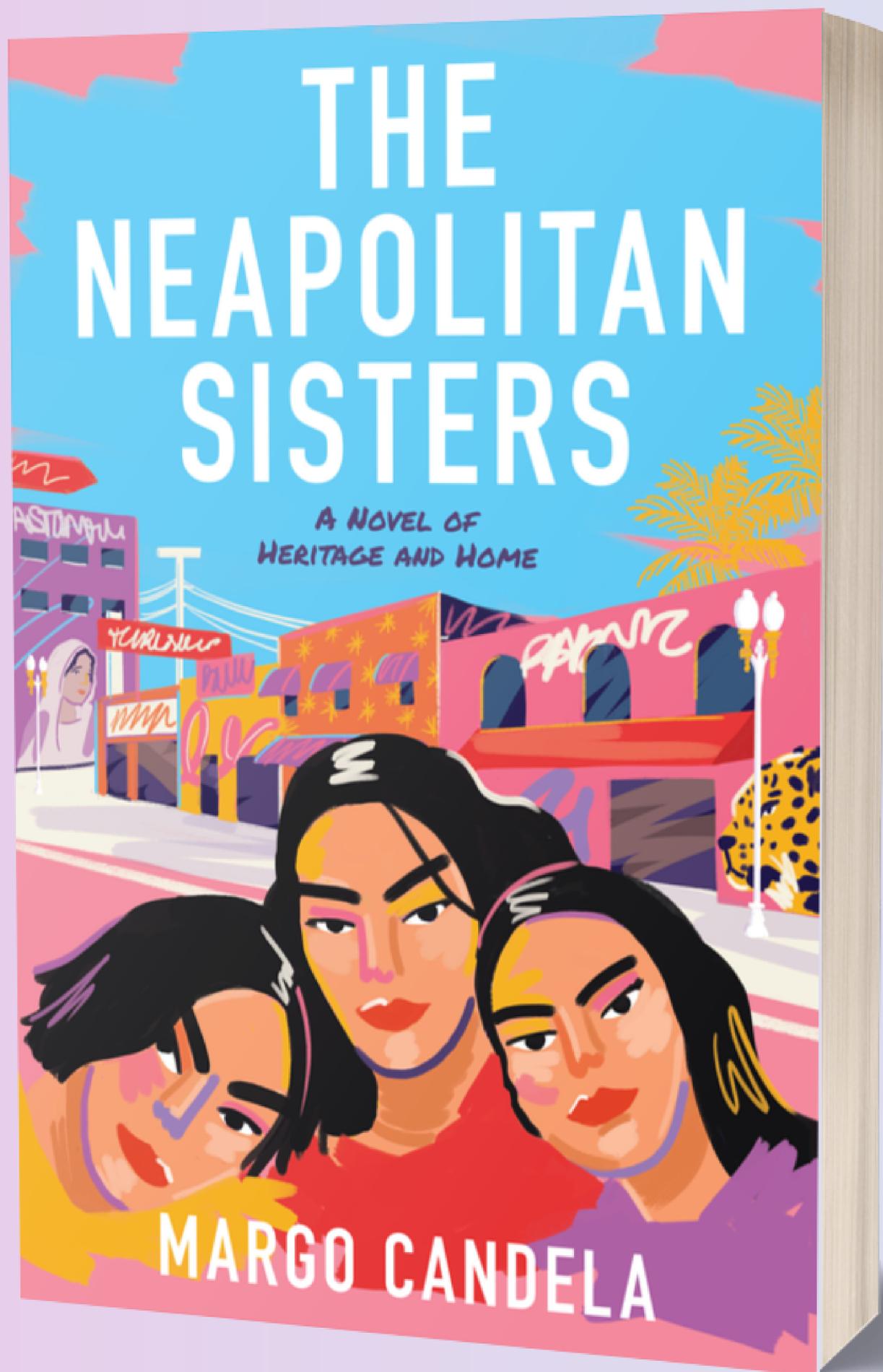


Book Club Kit



Discussion Questions

1 The book's title comes from a very specific memory from the Bernal sisters' childhood that isn't a happy one. Their childhood was marked by many forms of abuse, not only by Mr. Bellani, but from their mother who continues to be verbally and emotionally abusive. Their father, while kind and loving, was and remains largely passive as a parent, choosing, instead, to pacify his wife over advocating and protecting his daughters. As a result of the abuse and neglect they suffered, the sisters come to rely on each other, and on Claudia in particular.

- Why do you think the sisters choose not to discuss their shared history of abuse with each other?
- How has not talking about their childhood trauma impacted their lives as adults?
- How has their mother's continued verbal and emotional abuse impacted their relationship with each other?
- Do you think Claudia was justified in threatening their mother with an unspecified reprisal if she continued to mistreat Dooley and Maritza?
- What role do you think their father's alcoholism has played into the sisters' development of self-harming behaviors?
- Is one parent more at fault than responsible (and vice versa) for what happened to the sisters as little girls?
- Is there a difference between fault and responsibility?

2 Each of the Bernal sisters refers to their parents in her own way—"my mother/Mamá" and "Daddy" for Maritza, "Mom" and "Dad" for Claudia, and "our mom" and "our dad" for Dooley.

- What does this say about their individual relationships with their parents, and to each other as sisters?
- Who do you think has the healthiest relationship with their parents?
- Which sister do you think each parent favors and why?

3 Dr. Potter, Mr. Bellani's physician, is aware that both Dooley and Claudia are using the same pseudonym and aren't related to Mr. Bellani. He also mentions to Dooley that her "uncle" has proven himself to be a problem for some of the staff.

- Why do you think Dr. Potter tells her this about Mr. Bellani but doesn't elaborate on the type of problems he's creating for the staff?
- How do you feel about both Claudia and Dulcinea using "Neapolitan" as a surname to visit Mr. Bellani at Moonrise Meadows?
- Why does Dr. Potter allow Dulcinea to continue to visit his patient even though he knows she isn't who she claims to be?
- Do you think it's wrong of Dulcinea to exact her revenge on Mr. Bellani in the way that she does?

4 Their shared but independent use of the name “Rachel” stems from a childhood incident when Dulcina used her wits to keep herself and her sisters safe from a predator. Both Claudia and Dooley go by “Rachel Neapolitan” at Moonrise Meadows and Dooley tells the hotel clerk her name is “Rachel,” even though he could easily check the register to confirm her true name. Maritza also uses the name “Rachel”, but presents herself not as “Rachel Neapolitan,” but as “Rachel Cartland” when she shows up at her fiancé’s office to whisk him away for an afternoon to a local hotel.

- Why do you think the sisters have continued to use the name “Rachel”?
- Are they hiding behind the name so they can distance themselves from what they’re doing?
- Does Maritza choosing to identify with her favorite romance author, Barbara Cartland, mean she’s moved on from her childhood or that she’s decided to not to think about what happened the same way she has when it comes to her short marriage to “that person”?
- What does her signing as "Rachel Cartland" reveal about how Maritza feels about her plans to make amends for the prewedding argument she had with Augustino?
- Why do you think Claudia stopped keeping tabs on Mr. Bellani around the time she met Ethan?

5 Dooley has been sober and celibate for a year and a half. After Claudia tells her she needs to come home for Maritza’s wedding, she quits her job at The Clap Trap and sleeps with Todd. On her way to Boyle Heights, she has sex with a hotel clerk and then starts hooking up with Christy, the receptionist at Ethan’s production company.

- Why do you think Dulcina decides to end her celibacy?
- Was she being impulsive, or was it because she knew Todd had a crush on her?
- Why do you think she chooses to spend the entire night with Todd instead of leaving right after like with her past sexual encounters?
- Do you think she might be using sex as a distraction from, or as a replacement for drugs and alcohol?

6 Claudia and Ethan’s relationship has been able to happen in relative privacy, as she’s kept him a secret by not revealing she is seeing anyone, much less an international movie star, and insisting they only meet at her townhouse. Claudia is also very averse to attention and much more attuned to being a watchful observer, something she learned in childhood. On the other hand, Ethan is comfortable in his own skin and self, which Claudia both admires and is confused by.

- Do you think their differing attitudes toward fame and “being seen,” is what attracted them to each other?
- How do you think Claudia and Ethan’s relationship will evolve as a couple, and later as parents, once they step out into the public eye?
- How does the novel taking place in 2003, instead of in the present, influence and affect their relationship?

7 Maritza is determined to be a bride and have her wedding take place before she turns 30, which only gives her weeks to make both happen. As her big day gets closer, her ambivalence toward her fiancé and marriage become more obvious when reality hits that a wedding is more than just looking beautiful in the perfect dress.

- Do you think there was a time when Maritza really wanted to marry Augustino, or was it always about being the center of attention for her?
- Was it wrong of her to stage what is, essentially, an elaborate costume party with a wedding theme for herself?
- Does she owe Auggie, not only an apology, but also repayment of the money she spent on her faux wedding?

8 Boyle Heights has a rich and diverse history the Bernal sisters embody through their parents' heritage (their father is Jewish and Italian, and their mother is Mexican), but express in different ways. Maritza believes it would be easier if their last name was Suarez, mostly so she can avoid "rude questions" about what she is. Claudia identifies as a Latina, while not disclosing she's also Jewish and Italian. Dulcina, a recovering addict and bisexual woman, seems to be the most comfortable not labeling herself.

- How does each sister handle the complex issue of identity?
- Was Claudia more hurt than offended after a supposed friend and mentor told her that she "presents well"?
- Do you think the sisters would have an easier time fitting in if they had an easily identifiable Latino surname like Suarez?
- Is there a right way to be a multi-hyphenated person, or do parts of oneself have to fall by the wayside for the sake of fitting in?

Author Bio

Margo Candela was born and raised in Los Angeles and began her writing career when she joined Glendale Community College's student newspaper. She transferred to San Francisco State University as a journalism major, and upon graduation began writing for websites and magazines before writing her first two novels, *Underneath It All* and *Life Over Easy*. She returned to Los Angeles to raise her son and wrote *More Than This* and *Good-bye to All That*. *The Neapolitan Sisters* is her fifth novel and her first after a decade-long hiatus from writing. She now lives in San Francisco. Learn more at MargoCandela.com.

Author Q & A

What is *The Neapolitan Sisters* about?

I can answer this question in one of two ways—either by repeating the book’s official description or by being honest as to what the book is about for me as the writer of it. I’ll go with the latter. *The Neapolitan Sisters* is about three sisters, Dulcina, Claudia, and Maritza Bernal, who find love and compassion for each other after many years denying themselves that same compassion and love. Each sister experiences and then processes this disconnect differently and individually before they’re finally able to reconnect to themselves and with each other.

What inspired you to write *The Neapolitan Sisters*?

I realized some time ago that a family isn’t just made up of parents, siblings, and extended relatives. It’s also who you work with and who you invite into your life. Centering the story on three sisters made sense to me, as I like things in threes and I find birth, work, and by choice families interesting as a writer and in real life. These sometimes interchangeable, conflicting, and complimentary components allowed me to explore the various forms of families through Dooley, Claudia and Maritza’s distinct but intertwined stories. Their lives as individual women couldn’t be more different, and just like with real siblings, their shared experience of being raised under the same roof means they are more similar than they are different, but each is very much her own woman. Dulcina, Claudia and Maritza are, first and foremost, sisters and find frustration, alienation, and sadness as well as strength, acceptance, laughter and, ultimately, love in and through their sisterly bond. This was the overarching theme I wanted to explore not only for the story, but for myself as one of four sisters in a family of five siblings.

What did you find most challenging about writing *The Neapolitan Sisters*?

Two big challenges—the subject matter and having to wait for the right time to be able to tell this story. The idea for *The Neapolitan Sisters* started taking shape in 2001. I was a new mom and was freelancing for websites and pitching magazines, but my main priority was my son. Once he started preschool, I was able to focus on writing but I set this story off to the side. When I came back to it between *Life Over Easy* and *More Than This*, I got some pushback from the agent I was working with at the time and I wasn't ready to advocate for this book. It was always on my mind, though, and I knew once I sorted out some pretty major life changes, I'd come back to it. I'm very proud of *The Neapolitan Sisters*, while very aware of how uncomfortable it might make some people feel. I had a conversation with my friend Jeff about how honesty can be very dangerous and this is something I've had to contend with both professionally and personally. I'm grateful to finally be in a place in life where I can explore uncomfortable truths through fiction. Getting here took patience and time as well as many challenges and sacrifices. All of this has made me not only a better writer, but also a better woman and mother.

You took a decade-long hiatus from writing. How has your writing changed since your last novel, *Good-Bye to All That*?

I'm much more comfortable with being uncomfortable with what I write. Some of my books have touched on the feelings of alienation that results from dysfunctional family dynamics, but in *The Neapolitan Sisters*, I didn't shy away with revealing how harmful these patterns of behavior can be. I'm also in a place where I can be much more honest through my writing even if what I write is fiction. This is something my sister Martha encouraged me to explore after she read the original draft of *The Neapolitan Sisters*. Thanks to her, it's how I plan to approach all my future writing.

What are your plans for your next novel or writing project?

The last year-and-half has been all about *The Neapolitan Sisters* and re-establishing myself as an author. It's been exciting, stressful and a whole lot of work. I've had to be honest about my own strengths and weakness, so I can do the best job I possibly can. I'm lucky to have a great support system in place and that I've been able to reconnect with good friends and make new ones in the world of publishing and in my own personal life.

As proud as I am of *The Neapolitan Sisters*, I'm really looking forward to the next novel. I have a stockpile of ideas as well as a couple of half finished manuscripts. I'm not sure which one I'll settle on, but I do know I'll approach the writing of it with much more compassion for myself as well as for my characters. These next novels will also feature much more candor when it comes to sex and sexuality, as I believe these are vital components for characters.

I'm very grateful this is what I get to do with my life. I stepped away from writing for all those years to focus on what will always be the most important part of me—being a good mom and parent to my son. Now that he's well on his way to building his own life, I can devote myself to my second love—writing.

The Neapolitan Sisters Playlist

All writers have a unique way of preparing themselves to do the actual work of writing. For Margo, an important part of her writing process is music. Music not only sets the mood, it also serves as a reminder to get up from her desk which is why she keeps her playlists as close as possible to an hour long.

She listened to a dozen carefully selected songs throughout the revising, editing and polishing process. It's still one of her favorites and she'll always be grateful to the artists for helping her write her way to 'The End'.

Here are the songs Margo listened to, in order, as well as personal notes as to why she picked each one for *The Neapolitan Sisters* playlist. You can find and listen to this and other playlists from Margo on Spotify. Scan the QR code at the end to listen to *The Neapolitan Sisters* playlist, or visit: <https://spoti.fi/3SwauXv>

● "Please" by Chris Isaak

I'm a huge Chris Isaak fan and have been for years. All of his songs are about sexy heartbreak and "Please" has an edge of real frustration to it. Starting off the playlist and my writing hour with this song helped set the tone and tension between the sisters and in the characters themselves.

● "De Cara a la Pared" by Lhasa De Sela

This song by Lhasa De Sela was a wonderful and sad find. I heard it while listening to *The World* on my local NPR station. She had just passed away and they ran a lovely tribute to her and her music. This is another song about heartbreak, frustration, and deep sadness. It helped me focus and reach a place where I could write some of the more difficult parts of the novel like when Dooley confronts Mr. Bellani.

● "Cut Dead" by The Jesus and Mary Chain

"Haunted When the Minutes Drag" by Love and Rockets

My sister Martha had a huge influence on my musical life. She was into alternative music from an early age and was something of a punk in her late teens and early 20s. When I was in the 7th grade, she traveled to Europe for a few months and came back with a bunch of records including albums by Love and Rockets and The Jesus and Mary Chain. These two songs, "Cut Dead" by The Jesus and Mary Chain and "Haunted When the Minutes Drag" by Love and Rockets, were perfectly suited to the book, and made writing while they played a much more evocative experience for me.

"The Beast Lives in the Same Place" by Corrina Repp

Corrina Repp is a relatively new find for me and she immediately became one of my favorites. This song, "The Beast Lives in the Same Place," provided some much-needed energy and forward motion when the sisters are each making decisions and choices (Dooley buying her first car and driving through Big Sur, Claudia proving to herself and her boss that she's not just garnish, Maritza showing her sisters the house she bought). Personally, I resonate with lyrics, "...take my fist and high five it..." In the last few years, I've been living my life like this and it feels so damn good.

"It's No Good" by Depeche Mode

Most of my playlists have at least one song by Depeche Mode on it. I grew up with them (thanks again to my sister Martha) and their music has all sort of tones and textures, from light to really dark. *The Neapolitan Sisters* is, for me, a dark book about love, happiness, sadness and frustration. "It's No Good" is a very sexy musical version of these feelings.

"Kingdom of Rain" by The The

I can't imagine my life without The The. Matt Johnson is a genius. His music is cinematic, his lyrics paint complete stories. When I read he has issues with procrastination, it made me like him all the more. This man gets it on all sorts of levels. "Kingdom of Rain" was all Claudia to me. She's in conflict with herself and in denial as what Ethan means to her. Even if it may have not been playing, it's what I heard when I wrote her interactions with him and when she thought about him and their relationship.

"All in My Mind" (acoustic version) by Love and Rockets

This version of "All in My Mind" served as something of a writerly palate cleanser for me. It's great storytelling in a song, with a languorous tempo that puts me into an almost meditative state. You don't have to actively listen to it to hear it and, as it turns out, it's also a really good song to write to.

"Pattern the Cut/Calm Ass Mofo" by Corrina Repp

The second Corrina Repp song on this playlist is a powerful one. She really lays it all out into the open and I admire her for being able to give voice to the anger and frustration women have to contend with in romantic relationships. This is a BIG song and a great one to listen to when making life changes that require real bravery and listening to your gut. All three of the Bernal sisters have to do this throughout the book, and this is the perfect song for each of them during those instances.

“Running Up That Hill” by Chromatics

I vividly remember Kate Bush’s “Running Up That Hill” playing on KROQ when I was a teenager and when I saw the video, I was even more intrigued. When I was putting together this playlist, I tried her version, but it took me way too far back into my own life and it proved to be too distracting. I poked around Spotify and happened upon the cover by the Chromatics. It felt right for the book while allowing my own feelings to remain off the page, so I could focus on writing what each of the Bernal sisters needed to say and experience.

“Drive” by Britta Phillips

Here’s another cover of a song I grew up with. It’s a very feminine, atmospheric take on the original by The Cars. I didn’t deliberately decide for two covers to follow one another—I like to space things out—but these two songs go together for me and the book. That they come at the tail end of the playlist, is an unconsciously conscious choice I’ll have to think about when I have a long moment to listen to this playlist just for the sake of enjoying it.

“Release Me” by Corrina Repp

This was my first Corrina Repp song. I was introduced to it and her via a Better Things episode where it just plays from beginning to end. It’s a great use of music that drives great storytelling that also happens to be free of any actual dialog between the characters. “Release Me” is not only the end of *The Neapolitan Sisters* playlist, but also is what I listened to on a loop while working on the final chapters for each of the Bernal sisters. Maritza, Claudia and Dulcina do rise up as sisters, even as they remain complicated and difficult women. *The Neapolitan Sisters* might not have a typically happy ending, but it ends full of hope and like Claudia says, “It’s all the same but different.”

