



Book Club Kit



Dear Readers,

Hibiscus Strong is the story of the women in my family. They were resilient, independent, and often ahead of their time. If you are familiar with the memes about “Florida Man,” you will know that Florida grows its share of interesting characters. That’s why I call the women in my book *Hibiscus Strong*. These women were like the flowers that thrive in tropical heat and come in vibrant shades of orange, yellow, red, and hot pink. They were sassy, strong, self-reliant, and with an extra dose of the Florida quirkiness that comes from knowing every time you take your garbage out—whether it is real or metaphorical—you just might encounter an alligator in your backyard.

The more I researched my family, the more intrigued I became. Some of the stories I had heard so many times in my childhood, they almost wrote themselves. Others were new to me. I learned more about my grandmother, Agnes, and her sister Helen, from some cassette tapes my mother had the foresight to record. They were made in the 1980s, and I didn’t know about them until I discovered in a drawer after my mother’s death. After having them transcribed into a current format that I could listen to them on my computer, I found they were so special—and so uniquely captured the three women: Verna, Helen and Agnes. I had not heard my grandmother’s voice in over thirty years. She sounded so much more southern than I remembered. I guess we all had southern accents, so I just never noticed. Verna tried to play schoolteacher and keep her mother and aunt on track—the track she wanted them to stay on. They, of course, kept going off and talking about other things, from the dolls they got for Christmas when they were eight and ten, to the bakery where my mother had purchased the lemon cake they were eating. I laughed and cried listening to them.

I hope you will enjoy my family stories and come to admire Molly, Agnes, Helen and the rest.

Karen

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Favorite Libations

Grandma Hodges' Sweet Tea

I don't know if every Southern grandma introduced their grandbabies to sweet tea like this, but if so, it's no wonder it is the national drink of the South.

4 cups water, boiled

4 bags of black tea—nothing fancy, just a basic tea

3/4 cup sugar Lemons

Boil the water and add the tea bags, let steep for about half an hour. While the water is still warm, add sugar and stir until it dissolves. When ready to serve, add ice to a glass, cut up one lemon into about ten tiny pieces, squeeze each one and add to the tea. Add a little extra sugar to the bottom of the glass so that the child can stir up the lemons and “make lemonade” out of the sugar, lemons and melted ice.

Whiskey Sour

My mama loved her cocktails. Here are a few of her favorites.

2 ounces bourbon 3/4 oz. fresh squeezed lemon juice
1/2 ounce simple syrup Angostura bitters

Simple Syrup

1/2 cup water 1/2 cup sugar

Boil the water, dissolve the sugar, let cool.

Whiskey Sour

Add bourbon, lemon juice and simple syrup together. Shake or stir. Pour over ice, garnish with a few drops of bitters and a slice of orange, and serve very cold.

Old Fashioned

Absolutely my mother's favorite cocktail

1 teaspoon sugar 3 dashes Angostura bitters

1 teaspoon water 2 ounces bourbon

Garnish: orange twist

Add the sugar and bitters into a mixing glass, then add the water, and stir until the sugar is nearly dissolved. Fill the mixing glass with ice, add the bourbon, and stir until well-chilled.

Strain into a rocks glass over one large ice cube. Express the oil of an orange twist over the glass, then drop into the glass to garnish.

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Family Recipes

Aunt Anna Mae's Red Rice

I always loved the red rice we had whenever we went to the Aunts and Uncles house. It's a classic Southern recipe.

4 slices bacon	1 medium onion, chopped
Celery, chopped	1 can tomato paste
1 can tomato sauce	1 cup water
Salt to taste	Black pepper to taste
1 tablespoon sugar	Bacon drippings
2 cups cooked rice	

Cook the rice. Fry four slices of bacon and save the drippings. To the pot of rice add the tomato paste, tomato sauce, onion, celery, and the water. Add salt and pepper to taste, along with sugar and bacon drippings. Cook for about an hour, chop up the bacon and add at the end.

Shrimp & Mango Salad

A cold salad is a classic any time of the year in Florida. Here's a simple one that combines sweet and savory. Combine:

1 pound of shrimp, boiled	1 head lettuce
1 mango, sliced and chopped into bite-sized pieces	
1 small onion	1 cup fresh broccoli, chopped
2 teaspoons capers	

Lime Dressing

½ cup fresh lime juice	¼ cup olive oil
Sugar to taste	A few drops tabasco sauce

For the dressing, squeeze the limes, add olive oil and sugar. Add just enough tabasco for a hint of spice. Chill until ready to serve. Layer the salad ingredients, and add the dressing just before serving.

CHEESE GRITS

What's a southern meal without grits? Grits can be eaten at breakfast, lunch or dinner. You can add salt and butter or try it Missouri-style with milk and sugar, like my grandmother Agnes. For a special meal, make cheese grits. It's almost as easy to make as the plain variety.

½ cup quick grits (you can use other varieties, but the quick grits are usually the easiest to find.)

2 cups water	1 cup sharp cheddar cheese, grated
2 tablespoons butter	Salt to taste

Make your grits according to the package directions. Add the cheddar cheese and stir until it melts and turns the grits into a creamy, cheesy mixture. Add the butter on top and stir it in. Serve immediately or the grits will congeal.

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Key Lime Pie

Everyone in Florida knows how to make this Florida classic. It's an easy and quick recipe, and every person has their own secret ingredient to try and make their pie special. My secret is a little almond flavor in the crust. My niece never adds sugar to her crust—she swears there is enough sweet in the pie not to need it. You can make it both ways and decide who has the better recipe.

Crust

2 cup crushed graham cracker crumbs

½ cup sugar

½ cup butter

1 teaspoon almond extract.

If you can't buy graham cracker crumbs, by the crackers, place them in a plastic baggie and use a rolling pin to crush them into fine, even crumbs. Melt the butter. Add the butter, sugar and almond extract to the crumbs and stir with a fork (or your fingers) until the crumbs are thoroughly coated with the butter. Place in a pie pan and press until the crumbs are firmly packed.

Filling

1 can Eagle Brand Sweetened Condensed Milk (Try to get Eagle Brand, I've had trouble with other brands not being thick enough to set)

3 eggs, separated

½ to 1 cup key lime juice

Whipping cream

For the filling, pour the condensed milk into a bowl. Separate the eggs and save the whites. Add the eggs one at a time to the condensed milk, stirring them in completely. Slowly add the lime juice, a few spoonsful at a time, and mix thoroughly as you add. The more lime juice, the tarter the filling. I like mine very tart. Place the filling in the pie shell and cook at 350 for 30 minutes. Remove and let cool. When the pie is cool, whip the cream and spread it on top. The pie is three layers of goodness, a sweet bottom crust, a tart center, and a cool, creamy top.

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Discussion Questions

Hibiscus Strong is about women who are “like the flowers that thrive in tropical heat and come in vibrant shades of orange, yellow, red, and hot pink. They are sassy, strong, self-reliant, and with an extra dose of the Florida quirkiness that comes from knowing every time you take your garbage out—whether it is real or metaphorical—you just might encounter an alligator in your backyard.

1. Which characters in the book are “hibiscus strong?” Mary, Molly, Alma, Esther, Verna. What makes them strong? If you don’t think a character shows strength, why not?
2. “The Carpetbagger’s Granddaughter” (chapter 33) is about love and pride. Esther puts away her pride and accepts Wright’s proposal when he returns. Would you have done the same? How do you feel about Wright? Was he a weak character or a strong character? Would you choose love or pride?
3. Think about the men in the book, Herbert, Bert, Ed, J.W., and John. Which of the characters do you think were strong? Which were weak? Why?
4. J.W. is dismissed by most of his family, but in “Savannah” (chapter 34) the narrator says, “maybe Grandpa, the man everyone dismissed, the man who wasn’t good with money, the man who had courted a woman who hadn’t wanted him but loved her dearly for more than fifty years, was the wisest one of all.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. Floridians have a way of dismissing all but the worst hurricanes. The people who celebrate a storm with a hurricane party are as common as those who follow all of the hurricane rules. Which type of person are you? Would you follow all the rules? What would make you go out in the eye of the storm? Would you check on loved ones even though you knew you were putting yourself in danger?
6. Helen is always looking for luxury. From what you’ve read about her in the book, do you think she made the right choices?
7. John’s PTSD shaped both John and Verna in different ways. How does John’s PTSD change Verna? Do you see her as hibiscus strong?
8. Family stories and family history are the basis of the book *Hibiscus Strong*. Some of the stories are happy, some sad, some are about important events, and others are just vignettes that show a person’s life. What stories are important in your family? Share one.
9. How do the women in the book reflect the women of today? In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different?

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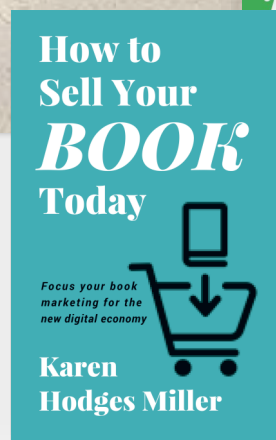
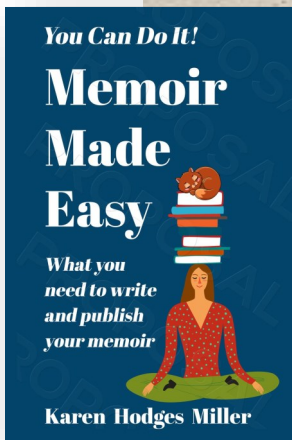


About Karen



"I've spent half my life in the tropics, and the other half trying to get back there," says Karen Hodges Miller, a proud third-generation Miamian. She planned only to leave Miami long to see snow, so she chose Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA, for her college education. What was supposed to be a quick four years away from Miami, ended up as a lifetime of living around the country in several states and in Puerto Rico. Family brought her to the Raleigh, NC, area, where she currently lives with her husband Sam, her two cats Felix and Olive, and very close to her son and daughter-in-law.

In addition to writing her own fiction and non-fiction, Karen is a publishing consultant who helps authors navigate the world of self-publishing. While *Hibiscus Strong* is her seventh book, it is her first about Miami's history. Her other books are focused on helping others write and self-publish their books. Her next project is a book on writing memoir, which will be published in the late summer of 2024. You can find her at HibiscusStrong.com, OpenDoorPublications.com, and on [Facebook](https://Facebook.com/KarenHodgesMiller), [LinkedIn](https://LinkedIn.com/KarenHodgesMiller), and Instagram.



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