

DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Piece of Cake
by Cupcake Brown

BOOK GROUP

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Cupcake Brown was not born into a life of privilege, intellectual stimulation, or professional dynamics. Her younger years were not a model for achieving success; her youth interrupted by violence and emotional turbulence. At 11, she regularly engaged in prostitution, drugs, and alcohol. By age 13, she had graduated to gang activities and street crime. Unfortunately, life would get much worse before it got better as Cupcake spiraled into a life that hovered somewhere above state prison, at best, and death on the mean streets, at worst.

Cupcake's story is about system failure, societal ignorance, and a little girl who, as a result, resigned to degradation, depression, deprivation, and defeat. Her story is also about choices -- good ones and bad ones -- and about the possibilities that are there if only we "Pray, trust, work hard, and grab hold!" Most people would have been daunted by the hurdles she faced. Yet, despite enormous fear and grave self-doubt, Cupcake grabbed a hold, prayed, and held on for dear life as she learned that there was another way -- a better way. She sensed a Guiding Hand and discovered that, over time, a network of people were being formed to encourage and guide her along the way. Leaning on this network, Cupcake climbed the long, difficult, and steep ladder to transformation, sobriety, positive change, self-improvement, and triumph.

As an author, attorney, and advocate, Cupcake speaks all over the country, using all of the years of negative experiences, coupled with the positives, to share with others how -- even though it seems impossible -- the hopes and dreams of anyone really can come true.

After law school, Cupcake was an attorney for one of the 25th largest law firms in the nation.

Besides graduating college *magna cum laude* without a high school diploma or G.E.D., Cupcake has received many scholastic awards including, the University of San Francisco School of Law's Judge Harold J. Haley Award for Exceptional Distinction in Scholarship, Character and Activities; the McAuliffe Honor Society; the National Law School Dean's List; and San Diego State University's Donald Leiffer Outstanding Alumni Award for Distinguished Service.

In addition to her numerous accomplishments, Cupcake has served as a judicial extern to the Honorable Joyce Kennard, California Supreme Court, and to the Honorable Martin J. Jenkins, U.S. District Court, Northern District of California.

BOOK SUMMARY

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There are shelves of memoirs about overcoming the death of a parent, childhood abuse, rape, drug addiction, miscarriage, alcoholism, hustling, gangbanging, near-death injuries, drug dealing, prostitution, or homelessness.

Cupcake Brown survived all these things before she'd even turned twenty.

And that's when things got interesting....You have in your hands the strange, heart-wrenching, and

exhilarating tale of a woman named Cupcake. It begins as the story of a girl orphaned twice over, once by the death of her mother and then again by a child welfare system that separated her from her stepfather and put her into the hands of an epically sadistic foster parent. But there comes a point in her preteen years—maybe it’s the night she first tries to run away and is exposed to drugs, alcohol, and sex all at once—when Cupcake’s story shifts from a tear-jerking tragedy to a dark comic blues opera. As Cupcake’s troubles grow, so do her voice and spirit. Her gut-punch sense of humor and eye for the absurd, along with her outsized will, carry her through a fateful series of events that could easily have left her dead.

Young Cupcake learned to survive by turning tricks, downing hard liquor, partying like a rock star, and ingesting every drug she could find while hitchhiking up and down the California coast. She stumbled into gangbanging, drug dealing, hustling, prostitution, theft, and, eventually, the best scam of all: a series of 9-to-5 jobs. But Cupcake’s unlikely tour through the cubicle world was paralleled by a quickening descent into the nightmare of crack cocaine use, till she eventually found herself living behind a Dumpster.

Astonishingly, she turned it around. With the help of a cobbled together family of eccentric fellow addicts and “angels”—a series of friends and strangers who came to her aid at pivotal moments—she slowly transformed her life from the inside out.

A Piece of Cake is unlike any memoir you’ll ever read. Moving and almost transgressive in its frankness, it is a relentlessly gripping tale of a resilient spirit who took on the worst of contemporary urban life and survived it with a furious wit and unyielding determination. Cupcake Brown is a dynamic and utterly original storyteller who will guide you on the most satisfying, startlingly funny, and genuinely affecting tour through hell you’ll ever take.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. How do you think Cupcake and Larry’s trail through the foster care system would have been different if they’d been close? Do you think it would have helped either of them later in life?
2. On page 10 Cupcake says, “That was one thing about me. I didn’t have many people in my life, but those I had I loved fiercely.” Do you think this changed as she moved through the foster care system, and then on to drugs, drinking, et cetera? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the adult figures Cupcake had in her life while she was growing up—Daddy, Jr., Mr. Burns, and Diane Dobson. With these role models, could she have found a better way out of her situation than turning to drugs and alcohol?
4. Why do you think Cupcake was so easily swayed by the thinking that “nothing comes for free”? How did she make the leap from applying this thought to material items and food to less concrete realities like love and acceptance?
5. Do you think Cupcake would have changed her ways earlier if she had been able to complete her first pregnancy? Or like Kelly, would the partying, drinking, and drugs have won out over a child?

Do you think having someone to look after the baby for her would have influenced her either way?

6. Why do you think Cupcake had several abortions after her first lost pregnancy? Was it simply a matter of wanting to live a fast life, or do you think she was afraid to let herself love and be responsible for another person?
7. Cupcake finally admits to not liking herself, and begins the long road to developing self-acceptance, self-worth, and self-love. Have you ever struggled with your self-image or self-worth? If so, did Cupcake's story help you in any way?
8. On page 308, the cop "Preacher" says to Cupcake, "Now don't get me wrong. Nobody *belongs* out here. But some people . . . well, they need to be here. They don't want anything better for themselves. They're too far gone. They don't *want* to come back." What do you think "Preacher" saw about Cupcake that convinced him she wasn't one of the people who "don't want to come back"? Do you think Cupcake began to listen to him at this point?
9. On page 326, Cupcake says, "I'd quit talking to Daddy and Jr. because all we did was argue: they fussed about how I was fucking up my life, and I wanted to know if they had any money I could borrow. In my mind, unless they had money to give, we had nothing to talk about." Discuss the similarities between Cupcake's attitude here and Mr. Burns' attitude toward the life insurance money. Do you think Cupcake realized the similarities? Do you think she would have changed her ways if she did?
10. Compare and contrast the roles that Fly and Larry played in Cupcake's life. Why do you think she allowed Fly to be more of a brother to her than Larry? Did it have to do with their gang participation?
11. On page 411, Venita asks Cupcake if she ever grieved for her mother. Do you think Cupcake could have avoided her addictions and problems if someone had taken the time to ask this and help her through the stages of grief?
12. Discuss the inspirational qualities of a story like Cupcake's. Has her story influenced you to make any changes in your own?

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