Cool, Calm Contentious: Essays

Merrill Markoe
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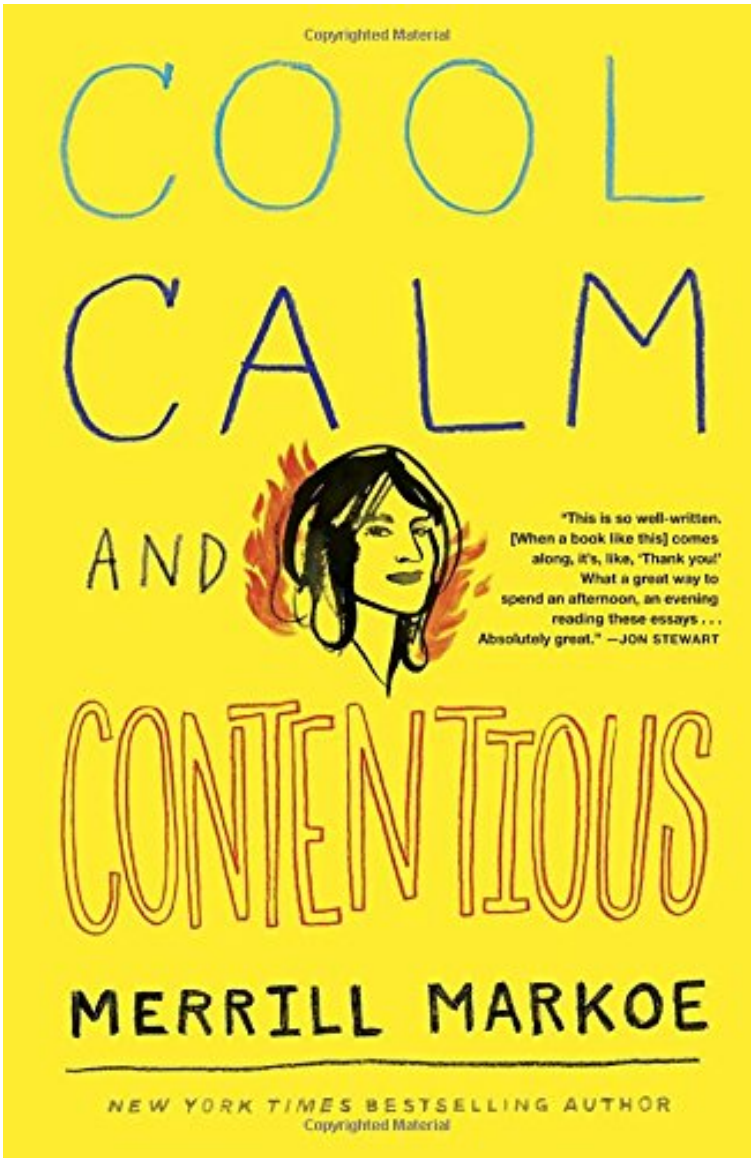

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Merrill Markoe : Cool, Calm Contentious: Essays before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cool, Calm Contentious: Essays:

85 of 87 people found the following review helpful. Love this bookBy jbrown3079This book was worth the wait. The writing is so good. It's more of a conversation than a book.The approach Merrill takes to difficult subjects is extremely clever. Whether she is talking about her mom or her adventures in relationships, she handles it with wit and grace.When I was done reading the book, I wanted to be able to give her a big hug of thanks. But since I couldn't do

that, I wrote this instead.This is a must buy.57 of 58 people found the following review helpful. Classic Markoe PLUSBy ReaderI've always been a huge fan of Merrill Markoe's novels. I bought this book of essays as soon as it came out. Not only is it hilarious (trying to model herself on Jack Kerouac as a desperate-to-be-liked teenager is full of laughs) but incredibly brave and revealing. Markoe writes with honesty, wit and wisdom on a wide range of topics: her impossible-to-please mother, a perfect explanation of the narcissistic personality, or a river rafting trip for women to bond over. Oh, and dogs! Lots and lots of dogs. This book is a treasure.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The Human Condition is Inherently HumorousBy Claudia M.I've heard it said that comedians would be cease being funny if they gained too much insight into their neuroses but Merrill Markoe proves that the opposite is true. Delving into the abyss can lead to some pretty humorous findings.Markoe gets personal in Cool, Calm Contentious, writing about herself, yet doing so makes the book that much more relatable. She shares the impact of being parented by a mother who's less than maternal, shall we say, and how that affected her self-esteem and choices in men. The flip side is that her uobringing also helped form and shape her considerable comedic skills, which have improved with age, while being ruled by self-doubt becomes more a thing of the past. Markoe's lighthearted, breezy style might make it seem like she came by self-knowledge easily, but there's no doubt it was hard won. I imagine some years of therapy (and more years of angst) as she suggests preceded that understanding. But this isn't math and Markoe need not show her work.I like the description of the Fetish Ball as we've all been in situations where we feel out of place. I think we all do have felt the same sadness in hearing about people who attach harm or humiliation to intimacy and The story is funny because it's so unique and yet so human. The chapter on How to Spot an A****** should be required reading as young people go forth and "date." These seemingly small clues actually point out huge warning signs- and in a funny way. I encourage all my single-and-dating clients to read it.

“This is so well written. [When a book like this] comes along, it’s, like, ‘Thank you!’ What a great way to spend an afternoon, an evening, reading these essays. . . . Absolutely great.”—Jon Stewart “[Merrill] Markoe is easily as funny as David Sedaris. She’s capable of manic riffs and acerbic skewering. Still, her good nature shines through.”—The Washington Post In this hilarious collection of candid essays, including two pieces new to this edition, New York Times bestselling author Merrill Markoe reveals much about her personal life—as well as the secret formula for comedy: Start out with a difficult mother, develop some classic teenage insecurities, add a few relationships with narcissistic men, toss in an unruly pack of selfish dogs, finish it off with the kind of crystalline perspective that only comes from years of navigating a roiling sea of unpleasant and unappeasable people, and—voilà—you’re funny! Cool, Calm Contentious is honest, unapologetic, sometimes heartbreaking, but always shot through with Merrill Markoe’s biting, bracing wit. “This has been a great year for funny women. . . . Let’s call Tina Fey and Mindy Kaling exhibits A and B. Both owe a debt to those who came before, including Merrill Markoe.”—The Boston Globe “Markoe’s goal is to find the absurdity in everyday life. That, coupled with her sharp wit, makes her writing sublime.”—BookPage “Laugh-out-loud humor.”—Tampa Bay Times “Not only crazy-funny, but crazy-heartbreaking.”—The New York Times

Advance praise for Cool, Calm Contentious “Now that I’ve read Merrill Markoe’s latest book, I’ve learned a lot—about virginity, fetishism, sociopaths and narcissists, and how she explained the BP oil spill to her dogs. Also that Merrill is funnier, smarter, and more honest than anyone any of us knows. Just accept it—I have.”—Winnie Holzman, creator of My So-called Life, co-author of Wicked“Alarming and reassuring . . . Wait, that’s impossible.”—George Meyer, writer, The Simpsons PRAISE FOR MERRILL MARKOE Nose Down, Eyes Up “Read this novel for its nose-to-the-ground wisdom, for its unsentimental take on family, and for the funniest, furriest pack of jokesters this side of the Marx Brothers.”—O: The Oprah Magazine “Whimsical . . . an ideal place to bury your nose.”—Los Angeles Times “Hilarious.”—Publishers Weekly Walking in Circles Before Lying Down “Bound to make you laugh out loud.”—People (four stars) “Fun and charming . . . So spin around three or four times, curl up with your four-legged friend and enjoy.”—Fort Worth Star-Telegram “A delight.”—Boston Sunday GlobeFrom the Hardcover edition.About the AuthorEmmy Award–winning writer Merrill Markoe lives in Los Angeles, California, the garden spot of America, with four dogs and a man. She has authored three books of humorous essays and the novels Nose Down, Eyes Up; Walking in Circles Before Lying Down; and It’s My F---ing Birthday and co-authored (with Andy Prieboy) the novel The Psycho Ex Game. A lot of additional information about her—including a long bio, goofy videos, etc.—can be found at merrillmarkoe.com. After great amounts of hesitation, she is also on Facebook. But since she thinks about pulling the page down on a daily basis, check fast.From the Hardcover edition.Excerpt. The Place, the Food, Everything Awful: The Diaries of Ronny MarkoeFor most of her life, my mother was varying degrees of pissed off. And not just at me. She was pissed off at everyone. But the conspicuous absence of colorful, controversial political and literary figures and/or captains of industry at our dinner table caused me to take the brunt of it.It was hard to trace her hostility to its origin because she wasn't introspective. If you asked her why she was so mad, which I often did, she would say that she told you on several occasions to put your dishes in the dishwasher or to change that horrible shirt. That was as deep as it got.It probably didn't help that my mother didn't

feel well a lot of the time, afflicted with a wide variety of symptoms, many of which I associated with her always simmering rage. The first time I remember her being hospitalized was when I was in the third grade. We had just moved from New Jersey to Florida. I was sitting on the floor, in the midst of a one-person jacks-playing marathon, when the phone rang. It was her sister-in-law, calling long-distance from New York. I watched all the color drain from my mother's face as she began to comprehend that her brother had dropped dead of a heart attack at the age of thirty-three.Not emotionally up to the responsibility of informing my grandmother, who lived with us, that her only son was dead, my mother instead pretended that her brother had survived, then put my grandmother on a plane to New York to go visit him in the hospital. This she confessed to me a couple of hours later, while sobbing uncontrollably during a harrowing drive home from the airport as I kept my hands hovering over hers on the steering wheel, terrified of finding myself, at the age of eight, in charge of a runaway vehicle that was careening into other cars on its way to the middle of a freeway median strip.A few days later, my mother was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis and hospitalized for two weeks.From that point on, she never left the house for any extended period, even a weekend, without what she called her "train case": a portable pharmacy, about the size of a bread box, made of hard white plastic with a handle on top. It opened into many compartments, most of them full of amber-colored prescription bottles. Inside, she always had prednisone, in case of an uncomfortable intestinal flare-up, along with a couple kinds of painkillers--Darvon, Tylenol with codeine, Vicodin, paregoric--as well as Imodium, Kaopectate, Lomotil, Elavil, and those old standbys Valium and Xanax. In addition to her abdominal discomfort, she was constantly being treated for other unidentifiable inflammations: pains in her arms, legs, ankles, neck, and back; swellings, skin eruptions, allergies. For the rest of her life, whenever I saw her on holidays or birthdays, she was either coming down with something or recuperating from something else.Maybe she would have had medical problems even if she'd had a sunny disposition, but it seems just as possible to me that her endless physical problems may have been worsened by her seething, unacknowledged, and unexamined rage. It's also possible that she was set at a permanent rolling boil by her own utterly dependent and anxiety-ridden widowed mother, who moved in with her on the eve of her marriage to my father, then refused to get a job, learn to drive, or move to a nearby apartment when my father offered to pay for one, all the while maintaining an oblivious attitude centered around the premise that she was only there to help. That could have played a role in pissing my mother off.It certainly would have gotten to me.By all accounts, my mother started life as a pretty, brighter than average Brooklyn kid who skipped a lot of grades and went off to college at fifteen.The few photos of her from this period show a cocky, fashionable girl of the 1930s, operating in the stylistic middle ground between Lauren Bacall and Dorothy Parker. She had shoulder-length, light brown, wavy hair that she wore swept up in a pompadour style, sometimes with a flower tucked coquettishly behind one ear. In photographs, she always looked pleased with herself, radiating confidence. The people who grew up with her all mentioned her wisecracking air of sophistication, smartly accessorized with swearing, chain-smoking, and a large multilanguage vocabulary.During her late teens and early twenties, she fancied herself a worldly adventuress. By World War II, fresh out of college at nineteen, she'd gotten a job writing for a girlie magazine, a risqué credential she wore like a badge of honor. She loved to tell stories about how it was her job to come up with captions full of puns and wordplay that were then used under black-and-white photos of nude women posing behind beach balls and umbrellas.When that ended, she did some copyediting for Time, followed by some graduate work in Mandarin Chinese at Columbia. The highlight of this phase seemed to be during the war, when she was written up in Earl Wilson's column in the New York Post after some woman saw her studying her Chinese-language textbook on the subway and reported her to the police as a Japanese spy. That was a big feather in the imaginary fedora of the glamorous trench-coat-wearing foreign-correspondent alter ego my mother carried around in her head. "Chinese is the coming language," Earl Wilson quoted my mother as saying.But when the war ended, she didn't pursue any of the careers for which she'd been gearing herself up. Instead, she married my father, a man so controlled and methodical that he took an hour to dice a carrot and had a special pair of plastic sandals just to wear in the shower. Thus did my mother bid a fond farewell to her life as a foreign correspondent in order to stay home . . . and devote the next forty years to seething and being resentful.Though she continued to think of herself as someone who lived for a rousing intellectual debate, she claimed to have found happiness with a man whose conversational digressions tended to be lengthy authoritative explanations of the obvious.* And though she insisted that she was blissfully wed, she often mentioned, over the years, that she was angry at my father because he didn't want any wife of his to work after they got married.Looking back, it seems to me that she didn't fight this prefeminist battle as hard as she might have. My father was the kind of good sport who, despite initial signs of bluster, might have given in if she had argued passionately. If her work had been important enough to her, I always thought, my mother could have talked him into letting her pursue it. She also had no explanation for why, with her mother living on the premises, bored and available to watch the kids, she didn't at least pursue writing as a hobby.Meanwhile, she continued to carry herself with a kind of calculated imperiousness . . . a Hillary Clinton-like bearing of a woman destined for literary greatness. She never stopped obsessing over word choice and sentence structure, never stopped chastising me for using slang. "Why do you have to say everything is 'neat,'" she would nag when I was in grade school, "when there are so many other magnificent words to choose from? Why not say, 'It's marvelous.' Or 'Bewitching!' Or 'Enchanting!' or 'Delightful!'" Though in my heart I suspected she was right, it was beyond embarrassing to imagine saying, "How

delightful! Utterly enchanting!" to a group of my fellow fourth graders during a discussion of TV shows we liked.From junior high on, she would mark up all my homework papers with official copy editor's notations in blue pencil, the way she'd learned to at Time. (New paragraph! Stet! Sp!) She also took to carrying a marking pen with her when we went out, so she could circle and correct any misspellings when she found them in their natural habitat: in the grocery store (Avacadoe Sp!), at the gas station (Gasolin Sp!), at the drugstore (Asperine Sp!).Yet oddly enough, when later in life I wound up getting work as a writer, she never seemed especially pleased. She was in all ways a relentless and scrupulous cataloguer of my many shortcomings.The minute I walked through the door of her house, I entered an already-in-progress pageant she was judging that had so many recently added unannounced categories it was impossible to be properly prepared. I was always too fat or too thin; my hair was too long, too shapeless, or too short; my clothes were too loose or too tight, too trendy or too adult, their colors too loud or too somber. If I became insulted, she became outraged."Do you want me to be less than honest?" she would say, as though tact were not also an option. If I argued a point or defended myself, she took offense at my audacity, because she was absolutely convinced that she was always right, including on occasions when she said things like "If someone acts like they're gay, that is a tip-off that they are not. Because why would they want you to know?" She would raise one eyebrow and say, "I don't happen to agree."Next thing I knew, we would be in the middle of a fight. By the time I heard her shoes click click clicking down the hall as she stalked out of the room, I had given up trying to stand my ground. She either won or the fight would go on indefinitely.One day, when I was in my thirties and gainfully employed as a writer on a television show, I decided to conduct an experiment. Knowing that I was going to have lunch with my mother later that day, I thought it would be interesting to see if I could achieve one perfect, criticism-free encounter. So I tried to predict all my own flaws and preemptively correct them. I bought a new outfit and a new pair of shoes, got an expensive haircut, and was careful with my makeup. I plucked my eyebrows to avoid a repeat of one particularly unpleasant family excursion to Mexico when my apparently slovenly and feeble attempts at eyebrow grooming pretty much ruined the whole vacation for everyone. Then, after I arrived at work, I made a stop at every office and cubicle on our floor and asked my co-workers to have a look at me and tell me if they noticed anything wrong."You look great," they all said. Or "That's a nice jacket." Or "You look so pretty all dressed up!"When no one seemed able to highlight any obvious problem areas, I made them all work harder."No," I said. "Look again. There is definitely something wrong, and it won't take my mother five seconds to find it.""You look good," they repeated."Are you sure?" I countered. "I bet there's something you're missing."And of course, they all failed me. Within a minute of my entrance into my mother's hotel room, practically before she finished saying hello, she spotted a plastic loop that had once held a tag of some kind, lolling around on the underside of my brand-new purse."Come here," she said. "You've got a tag hanging off of your handbag."I looked at my mother and thought, Wow. You are good at this.Now that there is a period at the end of her sentence, it occurs to me that the only time I ever saw my mother happy was a few years before she died, when she went back to school and got her master's degree in librarianship. For a while, she rode around on a bookmobile, but by her mid-fifties, she'd found a job at Stanford University, helping to catalogue their library inventory on computer. For those few years, I noticed a positive shift in her demeanor--a certain lightheartedness had seeped in that had been missing before. And it lasted right up until my father, who was nearing retirement and wanted to do a lot of traveling, demanded that my mother quit her job in the interest of keeping him happy.By sixty-five she was dead.During one of her last medical emergencies my mother was encouraged to join a wellness group, where she reluctantly took part in an activity she had always belittled: group therapy. I had tried on and off for years to get her to consider talking to someone, maybe even begin taking an antidepressant. But she was as firmly against therapy as she was against exercise and, as always, once she had a final thought on the matter, there was no more room for discussion."How can a complete stranger claim to know anything about me? Am I not a unique individual?" she used to argue, in one fell swoop discounting the entire legacy of literature and psychology.Now, after a particularly serious hospitalization, and a virtual intervention by the medical staff in charge of her recovery, she had been unable to turn the suggestion down. Thus she was playing along, however reluctantly."We were each asked to pick a stuffed animal that represents our inner child," she explained to me when I visited her in the hospital, holding up a medium-sized plush stuffed monkey with very long arms and a scowling expression. "This is Little Ronny." Then she looked at me, rolled her eyes, and threw the monkey across the room. "Fuck Little Ronny," she said.But something must have shaken loose in those sessions, because not too long afterward, when she was finally back home, she and I talked intimately for the very first time. Unprompted by me, and totally unexpectedly, we had a long, rambling, two-way conversation that felt to me like a breakthrough in our relationship. For the first time we sounded like two friends."Mom," I said to her as the conversation was winding down, "I just want to say that I loved talking to you like this. I'm really glad we can talk to each other this way.""Well, just because I'm talking to you like this now doesn't mean I always have to talk to you like this," she replied.We never talked like that again.At my mother's funeral the woman who ran her wellness group got up to give a speech. She was one of those down-to-earth, well-intentioned, sensible-looking women I associate with the San Francisco Bay Area--resplendent in woven materials, ethnic jewelry, and Birkenstocks. I was happy to see that she and the other people who had attended the wellness group, as well as the Stanford library people, seemed to feel genuine fondness for my mother. In a lovely impromptu speech, she talked

about my mother's intelligence and her sense of humor. I found myself wishing there was video of the sessions so I could have a look at that for myself.*His detailed discourse delivered to my brother on the topic of "How to Fold a Napkin" remains to this day a classic of its kind. ("Hold both ends of the napkin out like so, one in each hand, and then shake the napkin until it is fully extended. . . .") It's also appropriate to note that on the occasion of the napkin seminar my brother was in his late thirties and had a Ph.D.From the Hardcover edition.