



Photo: Ellis Parrinder

KIM-JOY'S TURTLE BREAD

How Bake-Off's Kim-Joy turned her passion for cakes into a conversation about mental health.

Kim-Joy has been delighting us with her animal-themed bakes and rainbow-coloured cakes ever since appearing on *The Great British Bake Off* in 2018. Five years and four (extremely cute) cookbooks later, Kim-Joy has now ventured into the world of comic-book writing, to bring us *Turtle Bread: A Graphic Novel About Baking, Fitting In, and the Power of Friendship*.

Turtle Bread combines Kim-Joy's passion for baking with a desire to encourage open conversations about mental health; "I've always wanted to write something related to my experiences of not fitting in and of social anxiety," says Kim-Joy. And so, *Turtle Bread* tells the story of Yan, a shy woman who plucks up the courage to join the local Baking Club despite worrying that she might not fit in or be as confident as the others. As friendships blossom and Yan starts to come out of her shell, she also discovers that not everybody is as confident as they first appear...

Kim-Joy weaves a series of delicious illustrated recipes into the story (including one for Turtle Bread, of course!) so I was keen to find out how she chose which ones to feature. We also caught up with what (and who) inspired Kim-Joy to write her first comic, what we can learn from the characters, and how illustrator Alti Firmansyah expertly brings them to life on the page.

Can you tell us how the idea for *Turtle Bread* came about, and how much of Yan is a reflection of your own experiences?

I've always wanted to write something related to my experiences of not fitting in and of social anxiety. So, Yan's emotions and many of her

experiences are very much based on my own – but with some fictional tweaks to create the story. For instance, I never joined a baking club, but I did join the *Great British Bake Off*! And I did join a board gaming club when I first moved to Leeds, which in a similar way to Yan, was my way to try to break out of my shell and make friends. The character of Bea is based on traits I admire in many different people. But also partly inspired by working in a nursing home and learning a lot from the older people I used to care for.

A lot of people will relate to Yan feeling like she doesn't fit in and worrying about saying the 'wrong' thing. Do you think that facing your fears (like Yan does by joining Baking Club) has helped you with your own confidence?

Facing my fears has definitely helped with my self-esteem, and with my confidence in certain areas. But it's not as simple as 'just face your fears and you will become more confident!'. It's hard to face our fears unless we have a stable base to return to in case things don't go to plan. I never really had that base until I went to university and made friends, and most of all when I met my partner Nabil. Those people really helped me to keep going. It really helps to find your community. BUT there are also some fears that are there for a reason and aren't to be tackled – because all of our brains work differently and many of us are neurodivergent in a world that isn't set up for us. And everyone's situation is individual!

Yan is given a warm welcome to Baking Club by the other members and over time they begin to open up to each other. What do you hope people

Turtle Bread: A Graphic Novel About Baking, Fitting In, and the Power of Friendship. Written by Kim-Joy. Art by Alti Firmansyah



Courtesy of Dark Horse Books/Comixology Originals



“THE PROCESS OF BAKING AND GIVING REMINDS US THAT WE ARE USEFUL AND CONNECTS US WITH OTHER PEOPLE, IN A SOCIETY WHERE OFTEN THOSE THINGS ARE PUSHED ASIDE AS THERE’S SO MUCH PRESSURE ALL AROUND.”

take away from these relationships?

That you never know everything about someone when you first meet them. Many people have low self-esteem and negative core beliefs, leading them to create a ‘shell’ to hide behind. For instance, Bea is confident, but her self-esteem is not what you’d assume. Her core belief is that she will only be loved if she’s not a ‘burden’ on others. So, she keeps her struggles to herself. I hope people also see themselves in some of the characters and take away the power of being vulnerable.

Turtle Bread features step-by-step baking guides throughout (including a recipe for Turtle Bread of course!). How did you choose which bakes to incorporate?

Of course Turtle Bread had to be included! Some of the recipes I picked because they could be used as a way to further character development. So the pigfiteroles were great in showing a bit more about the characters through their decorating. For example, Zara is a perfectionist and very self-critical and so in her eyes, her pigfiterole isn’t good enough, which is in stark contrast to Amit whose pigfiterole is covered in chocolate, but he doesn’t care.

Can you tell us about your creative collaboration with illustrator Alti Firmansyah and how you worked together to bring Turtle Bread to life?

Alti was amazing to work with and so talented. I asked her at the beginning how she preferred me to write everything out, and she wanted everything very structured with specific panels and instructions for what is in each panel. So I did that! But it was always a two-way collaboration. Alti often had really good suggestions of her own which we incorporated in. And she added in little details

(there’s a poster of me in one of the panels when Yan is at home – which is very meta!) and added in bakes from my Instagram and really fun bits. It was always really interesting to see how Alti interpreted things and how she brought the characters to life.

You often encourage baking for fun without worrying too much about how perfect the end result is – what other positive effects do you think that baking can have on people’s wellbeing?

You can make something out of flour and sugar and butter and it transforms in the oven! There’s something really special about that. It’s something you’ve created yourself and something to be proud of. Giving a bake to someone and seeing them smile brings you so much happiness. The process of baking and giving reminds us that we are useful and connects us with other people, in a society where often those things are pushed aside as there’s so much pressure all around.

Christmas is just around the corner, we’d love to know what a Kim-Joy Christmas looks like?! And do you have any 2024 plans you can share with us?

Last year I had my brothers Kenneth and Kevan round for Christmas, and Kenneth’s girlfriend Jade! We made a big Christmas dinner and played lots of video games. We all got really into *Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime* (it’s such a good couch co-op game). So hopefully this year will be similar! I am also currently working on a new baking book so hopefully you will hear about that in 2024... and I have ideas and plans for another graphic novel (though that will be later than 2024!). There’s lots going on and I’m excited about everything I’m working on! ●

HOLLYWOOD HANDSHAKE

Appearing in the ninth season of *The Great British Bake Off*, Kim-Joy was a favourite with fans thanks to her cute, signature style, which earned her a handshake from Paul Hollywood in the fifth week when she created an adorable gingerbread house for Spice Week.

COOKBOOKS

Apart from a board game called *Kim Joy’s Magic Bakery*, which was produced by Skybound Games last year, Kim-Joy has also written four recipe books, *Baking with Kim-Joy*, *Christmas with Kim-Joy*, *Celebrate with Kim-Joy*, and *Bake Me a Cat*.