

FamilyFiction

February 2020

A close-up portrait of a man with short brown hair and glasses, smiling slightly. He is wearing a dark leather jacket. The background is a textured, dark grey stone wall.

Speculative Author
STEVEN JAMES

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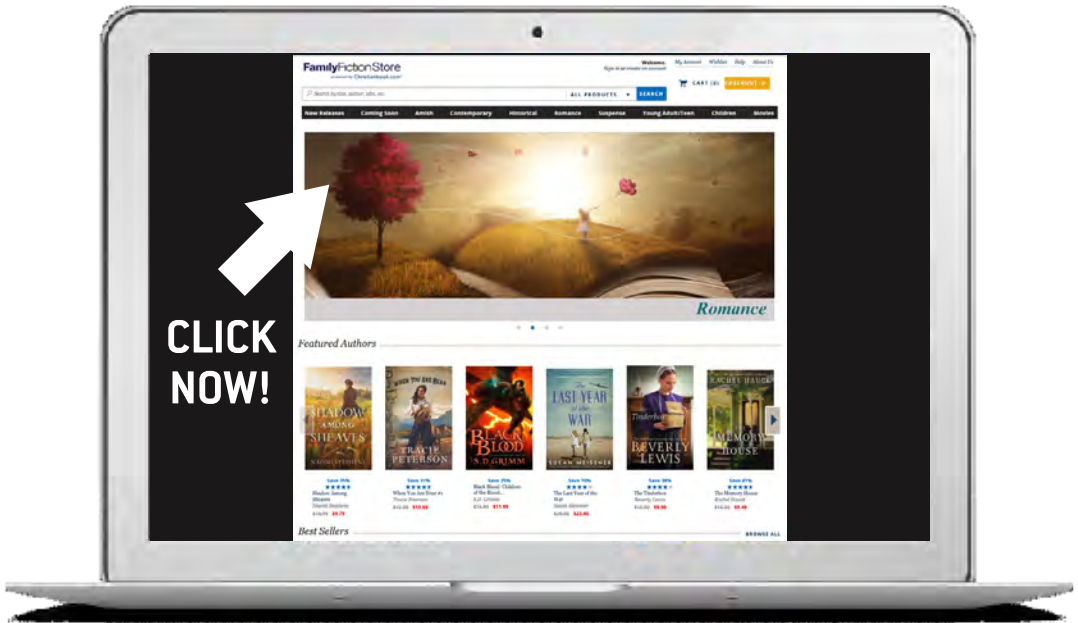
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On the Web: Christian Fiction News

- Vote for your favorite Christian Romance authors in our 2020 Christian Romance Readers Poll.
- Christianity Today Awards Winner Shawn Smucker's *Light from Distant Stars*.
- Francine Rivers will return to bookshelves in 2022 with *The Disinherited*.

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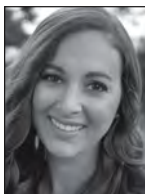
SPECULATIVE

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SUSPENSE

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Christianity Today Awards Winner Shawn Smucker's *Light from Distant Stars*

Named one of *Christianity Today's* picks for the "books most likely to shape evangelical life, thought, and culture."

Read more here:

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Francine Rivers Returns 2022 with *The Disinherited*

The author's next historical romance follows a suffragette and newspaper publisher who forms a complicated relationship with a former Union soldier from a Southern family.

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<https://www.familyfiction.com/francine-rivers-returns-2022-disinherited>



SPECULATIVE: STEVEN JAMES

EVEN THE ROBOTS WILL CRY OUT

The Speculative author explains how his latest thriller grapples with the spiritual implications of artificial intelligence.

The author of the acclaimed crime series starring FBI Special Agent Patrick Bowers, **Steven James'** pulse-pounding, award-winning thrillers are known for their intricate storylines and insightful explorations of good and evil. His latest novel is **Synapse** (Thomas Nelson): Thirty years in the future, when A.I. is so advanced that humans live side by side with cognizant robots called Artificials, Kestrel Hathaway must come to terms not just with what machines know, but with what they believe.

In this exclusive interview, Steven reveals the spiritual themes of *Synapse*, explains the value of the "outside observer" in science fiction, and shares the research he put into getting his near-future world right.

Steven, your latest thriller involves an android on the run to untangle a conspiracy. No spoilers, but what you can you tell us about *Synapse*?

This story takes place thirty years in the future when cognizant robots have self-awareness, consciousness, and free will. In this context, a group of domestic terrorists are not fans of making machines more like people and enhancing people to be more like machines. They have nefarious plans and our heroine and her robot, Jordan, have to stop them—a job that is made all the more difficult because they don't always know who the good guys and the bad guys are.

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This is a little different from your previous suspense and mysteries. What inspired you to go in this direction?

For years I've been interested in A.I. and the implications of it—not just artificial intelligence but also artificial belief. In other words, once machines have free will, what will they choose to believe? Will they believe in God or are we to assume that all machines will be atheists? I think that if God is real, and robots can apprehend the truth, then some robots at least will certainly believe in God. What will happen then?

How much is this for your current readers vs a brand-new audience?

All of my books are really rooted in suspense. I suppose you'd say that's what ties them all together. Some are more focused on psychological suspense, and some have more to do with political intrigue. So, for those who've read my stories before, they'll find that common thread of suspense. This story will also appeal to people who enjoy science fiction and conspiracy thrillers.

At the center of this story are the human Kestrel Hathaway and her “artificial,” a cognizant robot named Jordan. What about these two made you want to tell their story?

At the beginning of the story, Kestrel suffers a tragic personal loss and her brother buys her Jordan to assist her as she works through it. When I first started this story, I thought it would mainly be about Jordan and his quest for faith, but as it turns out, Kestrel questions her faith in God and Jordan inspires her to take her faith to a new level.

The “outside observer” character has populated a lot of SF stories over the years. How does Jordan fit this pattern?

What an insightful question! In this story Jordan has made a moral decision that he deeply regrets. When he seeks forgiveness for it he isn't sure where to turn. His unique perspective on human nature informs Kestrel and helps her to see life from a different vantage point.

Given the near-future technology in *Synapse*, what kind of research or influences went into this novel?

I had to do tons of research on A.I. and futurism. It was fascinating to try to guess what society will be like thirty years in the future. Will people still use mobile phones? What will society look like? How will the growing human population affect people's lives? Looking at current technological trends helped me tremendously in anticipating what life will be like three decades from now.

When you're world-building like this, what are the challenges to making it fantastical yet still grounded?

In order to ground people in the story, I started the book with a very human experience when Kestrel gives birth to her

daughter. Rather than trying to transport people to another world, I wanted to root them in this one. From there, I slowly introduced the differences between Kestrel's world and our own. Yes, the future will be different, but human nature will remain the same.

How close is the world of *Synapse* to the world we live in now?

Very close—except that there are cognizant robots that interact with humans and, in some cases, look so much like humans that it's hard to tell the two of them apart.

What are the spiritual themes or questions running through *Synapse*?

Kestrel is struggling with her anger against God for allowing the loss she experiences early in the story. Jordan is questioning how to receive forgiveness for a past choice. I think that in all stories that matter, the characters will ask questions that matter. So, although my novels are by no means sermons in disguise, they deal with big questions about life, meaning, human nature, belief, and our relationship to God.

Incidentally, Scripture talks about all of creation praising the Lord, everything that has breath praising him, mountains bowing down and trees waving their branches in praise. In fact, Jesus said that if people stop praising him that even the rocks will cry out. I asked myself, "If a rock and a tree and an ant can praise the Lord, why couldn't a self-aware robot?"

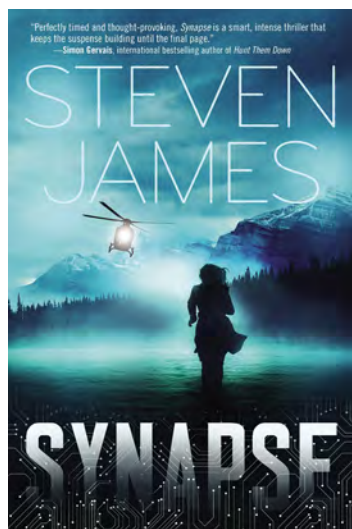
What are the best ways for readers to support their favorite authors?

Thanks for asking that. We love it when you spread the word about books that you've enjoyed. Word of mouth is still the most effective way of supporting a book. Leaving online

reviews and following the author on social media can also be extremely helpful. Even dropping a note of encouragement to the author through his or her website can make a difference. Finally, please pray for your favorite authors. Writing can be a lonely vocation and self-doubt often plagues authors as they slog through writing and editing their manuscripts. **FF**

Visit Steven James' author page here:

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Synapse

Steven James
Thomas Nelson



In a future where cognizant A.I. robots called Artificials live side by side with humans, Kestrel Hathaway must come to terms not just with what machines know, but with what they believe.

Soon after experiencing a personal tragedy, Kestrel witnesses a terrorist attack and is drawn into a world of conspiracies and lies that she and Jordan, her Artificial, have to untangle. With a second, more brutal attack looming on the horizon, their best chance of stopping it is teaming up with federal counterterrorism agent Nick Vernon. But the clock is ticking. Deftly weaving suspense and intrigue into a rich, resonant tale that explores faith and what it really means to be human, Steven James offers us a glimpse into the future—and into our own hearts.



AMISH SUSPENSE: AMANDA FLOWER HUMOR, COMFORT, AND HAPPY EVER AFTER

The Agatha Award-winning author reveals how her faith impacts her mysteries.

A former librarian, **Amanda Flower** knew she had a knack for writing in the sixth grade when she read one of her stories and had the class in stitches. Today, she's a *USA Today* bestselling and Agatha Award-winning mystery author. Alongside her popular **Amish Candy Shop Mysteries**, she kicks off a brand-new spin-off series with ***Matchmaking Can Be Murder*** (Kensington).

In this exclusive interview, Amanda explains what inspired her to launch the spin-off series, shares details about her amateur sleuth, and explains how her faith impacts her as a mystery writer.

The Amish Matchmaker Mysteries Series is a spin-off of your Amish Candy Shop Mysteries. What led you to launching this companion series?

I just knew there were more stories to tell in Harvest, Ohio and I wanted to tell them from an Amish POV. The protagonist in the Amish Candy Shop Series, Bailey King, is *Englisch*. Fans of the Amish Candy Shop Series do not have to worry about those books ending. The two series will run simultaneous. It's been fun writing about the candy shop characters from a different point of view.

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Tell about your Amish sleuth Millie Fisher.

Millie is a sixty-seven-year-old Amish widow. She doesn't have any children and makes her living quilting. She lost her husband twenty years ago. She is also the village matchmaker and helps young Amish men and women meet their matches. She's curious and has a strong sense of right and wrong, which lends well to being an amateur sleuth.

What spiritual themes play out through *Matchmaking Can Be Murder*?

The biggest theme in *Matchmaking Can Be Murder* is forgiveness. The murder centers around members of Millie's family who Millie believes she wronged years ago. She wants to be forgiven and must learn to forgive herself as well.

What can you tell us about your plans for future books in the series?

The next book in the series is *Courting Can Be Killer*, and that is about a young Amish man who dies in a flea market fire. He is blamed for someone else's actions. Millie knows that he's innocent and sets out to clear his name and find his killer. It will release late 2020.

What inspired you to write murder mysteries set among the Amish?

I was a librarian for fifteen years before turning to writing full time. My first librarian position was in Amish Country, so I've known Amish and former Amish. I also live close to Ohio's Amish Country today.

I have spoken to many people in the Amish community who have contributed to the ideas in my books. I find the culture fascinating.

What are the challenges of writing about crime and murder as a Christian author?

I don't find it a challenge at all. In traditional mysteries, such as the ones I write, there is a strong sense of right and wrong, justice, redemption, and forgiveness. Those themes speak to me as a Christian author.

How does your faith impact how you approach storytelling?

As a Christian author, there are certain genres and themes that I personally won't write. If other Christian authors choose to write them, I do not question what they are called to write. However, I know very clearly that my calling as a writer is to bring humor, comfort, and a happily ever after to my reader.

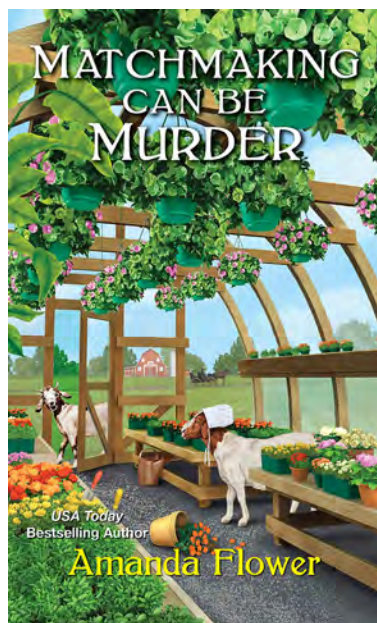
We live in a hurting world, and my goal is to make people escape it for a few hours at a time.

What do you consider the best things readers can do to support their favorite authors?

There are so many things that readers can do for their favorite authors, but I will give my top three: tell their friends and family about the books they love, review and post book reviews online, and follow their favorite authors on social media. I can be found on several platforms, but I'm most active on Facebook and Instagram. **FF**

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Matchmaking Can Be Murder

Amish Matchmaker Mysteries

Amanda Flower

Kensington

Buy Now



Amish widow Millie Fisher will have to piece together a patchwork of clues to find a killer.

When widowed Millie Fisher moves back to her childhood home of Harvest, Ohio, she notices one thing right away—the young Amish are bungling their courtships and marrying the wrong people! A quilt-

maker by trade, Millie has nevertheless stitched together a few lives in her time, with truly romantic results. Her first mission? Her own niece, widowed gardener Edith Hochstetler, recently engaged to rude, greedy Zeke Miller. Anyone can see he's not right for such a gentle young woman—except Edith herself.

Pleased when she convinces the bride-to-be to leave her betrothed before the wedding, Millie is later panicked to find Zeke in Edith's greenhouse—as dead as a tulip in the middle of winter. To keep her niece out of prison—and to protect her own reputation—Millie will have to piece together a patchwork of clues to find a killer, before she becomes the next name on his list.



HISTORICAL: JILL EILEEN SMITH

THE BIBLE AS HISTORY

The author shares the challenges of using fiction to explore the lives of women of the Bible.

Jill Eileen Smith is the bestselling and award-winning author of the biblical fiction series **The Wives of King David**, **Wives of the Patriarchs**, and **Daughters of the Promised Land**. Her research into the lives of biblical women has taken her from the Bible to Israel, where she has particularly enjoyed learning how women lived in Old Testament times. She explores the life of Esther in her newest novel, ***Star of Persia*** (Revell).

In this interview, Jill explains the challenges of filling the blanks when writing about historical figures, shares what started her writing biblical fiction, and reveals her methods of getting to the facts behind her fiction.

You have written many books about men and women in the Bible. When did you decide that you wanted to write about Esther?

I never intended to write Esther's story, as it has been done many, many times, and I did not think I could bring anything new to it. But around the time I was finishing *The Heart of a King* and had a contract for my nonfiction, I wondered who else was left in the Old Testament whose story I might like to tell. Revell and I talked over several options. They liked the idea of Esther, and I agreed.

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Did you learn anything new about Esther while writing *Star of Persia*?

I learned a lot more about Xerxes and his life outside of biblical writings. I don't think I really learned anything new about Esther, but as I developed her character, I came to appreciate her more.

Esther had an impossible decision to make—risk her life or consign her people to annihilation. Do you offer a different twist on this experience?

Not necessarily too different, though I do show that she was raised to believe in God. (She was Hebrew, after all.) So when the time comes to face her worst nightmare, she has a background she can lean on—and not just her family. I bring in some of the scriptural writings she might have known that could have helped her, beginning with what type of fast God accepts, since Scripture does say she fasted before she approached the king.

In *Star of Persia*, you reference palace intrigue and politics. How did these affect Esther?

In my research of ancient Persia, I came across some of Herodotus's writings about Xerxes and his family. Ancient history (outside of the Bible) claims that Xerxes was married to a woman named Amestris. Some scholars think that she could have been either Vashti or Esther.

By her character, I did not see Amestris as likely to be either one of them. So I brought her character into the story, which naturally caused more intrigue in the palace simply because she wanted power. She wanted to be queen, but Vashti was queen, then Esther was. If this woman truly existed and if the biblical account can be meshed with other history, then I think Vashti and Esther might have been in danger because of this woman's desires.

Amestris was said to be cunning and cruel—two qualities that would easily put her in the center of or at least part of palace intrigue and politics. Esther would have known that her life and position were always a target for this conniving wife.

What do you hope readers will gain from reading *Star of Persia*?

I hope readers will experience Esther's story in a way they never have before. I hope they see that secular history and biblical history can fit together, and that even though God is not mentioned in the biblical account, we can see His handiwork all over its pages. It's simply hidden, as though God is working behind the scenes, which He often does.

Booklist named your book *The Prophetess* as one of their Top 10 Inspirational Fiction titles. When did you first start writing biblical fiction, and why did you decide upon this genre?

I am truly honored to know that Booklist would give *The Prophetess* such high acclaim. That book was probably one of the hardest I have ever written, and it was the only one I took back from my editor to redo the ending before I finally turned it in.

As for writing biblical fiction, I have loved the genre since I read *Two from Galilee* by Marjorie Holmes when I was sixteen. I realized in that moment of closing the book that those people were real.

I read every book I could find in the genre after that, but I didn't ever think I'd write a book in that genre (or any book, for that matter) until after I co-taught a Bible study on King David's life. That study eventually became the Wives of King David series, which Revell went on to publish in 2009 to 2011. They've continued to support my biblical novels ever since.

You offer both impeccable research and an imaginative flair in each of your novels. However, there have been times when there is very little information in the Bible about your characters. How are you able to create a story when there are limited details?

That question is what makes me ask my husband, "Why did I sign this contract?" When I wrote the Wives of King David Series, there was a lot of material on those three women and a ton of writing on David in Scripture. When I got to Sarai in my Wives of the Patriarchs Series, I still found a lot in Scripture

to help tell her story. But when I hit Rebekah, I knew I was in trouble. There is very little in Scripture on her life, and even less on the lives of Hannah, Deborah, and my current work in progress, Miriam.

The way I deal with this is to study the main male character these women are related to. Sometimes that backfires, as there is very little on Isaac (for Rebekah) and nothing on Lappidoth (Deborah's husband), and we don't even know for sure that Miriam was married. This truly makes for angst and challenge, so I do what I can with what I'm given.

I studied Solomon to get an idea about the four women I wrote of in *The Heart of a King*. I needed to know the man before I could imagine his women. That's not always true, though. For instance, in Miriam's story, I need to know Moses and Aaron more than I would the man I assigned to be her husband. (I did pick a man from Scripture.)

After I understand the men that surround the woman, I begin to imagine what life was like for her. I "cast" my characters using real models of their nationality and start to envision them. Eventually, I loosely plot an outline and begin writing. I get to know these women as their stories unfold to me.

What methods or tools do you utilize for your research?

The Bible, commentaries from various schools of thought, reputable websites, cultural atlases, life-and-times books, and anything I can find that relates to the time period. A lot of my research has been done in the past, especially the cultural life and times.

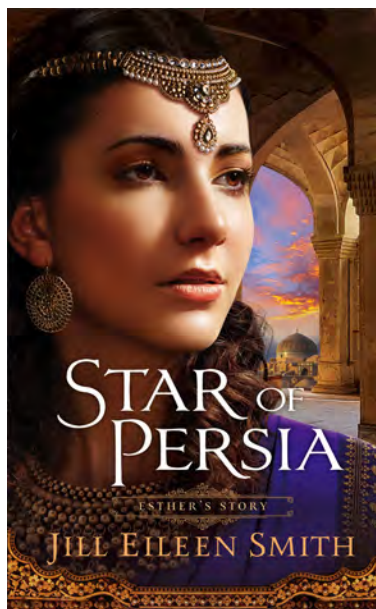
Jill Eileen Smith

But when we see a significant time jump from one era to the next, I still search to make sure of things like whether they had silk, used iron or bronze, lived in houses or tents, etc. As civilizations change, so must the settings for each story. **FF**

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Star of Persia

Jill Eileen Smith
Revell



With her impeccable research and her imaginative flair, Jill Eileen Smith brings to life the romantic, suspenseful, and beloved story of Esther, queen of Persia.

To complete a war his father had planned to win, King Xerxes calls every governor, satrap, and official in his vast kingdom to his palace in Susa to strategize and feast. When they finally leave, he decides on one more week of frivolity, which ends in the banishment of his favorite wife, something he never intended to do. But when he discovers Esther, Xerxes is sure he has a second chance at happiness.

In her wildest dreams, Esther could never have imagined that she would end up as queen of Persia. Yet she knows better than to become complacent. Another of Xerxes's wives is vying for position, and his closest advisor has a deep and dangerous grudge against Esther's adoptive father. Caught in the middle of palace politics, Esther will find herself in an impossible position: risk her life or consign her people to annihilation.

Dana R. Lynn works as a teacher for the deaf and hard-of-hearing during the day, and writes in the evening. Crafting stories all her life, she is often seen jotting down ideas wherever inspiration strikes.



Her latest novel is ***Hidden in Amish Country*** (Love Inspired Suspense):

There's a bull's-eye on her back, and *Englischer* Sadie Standings can't remember why...but she's sure she can trust Amish widower Ben Mast. With the single dad's help, she'll hide in Amish country while trying to figure out why someone is after her. Because unless she uncovers the secrets of her past, both their lives will be forfeit.

In this exclusive interview, Dana gives us some details about the book, explains the research behind the story, and reveals the book's spiritual themes.

No spoilers, but what can you tell us about *Hidden in Amish Country*?

Hidden in Amish Country is a romantic suspense story revolving around Sadie Standings, a young woman with amnesia who is running for her life, although she has no idea why a killer is after her. With no where else to turn, she must rely on the help of Ben Mast, an Amish widower with a young son, to survive.

As the story evolves, Sadie and Ben are faced with constant danger, and several shocking revelations. Their wounded hearts begin to trust again as they draw closer. All the while knowing



their developing feelings are hopeless. After all, he is Amish, and she is not.

What kind of research or background did you need to get the details right in the story?

Part of the research while writing this story involved interviews and a visit to a nearby Amish community. I find visiting these communities fascinating. Depending upon the area and the district, they can vary in a multitude of ways, from the color of the women's dresses and the shapes of their bonnets, or whether they are allowed to ride bicycles.

What spiritual themes run through the book?

Forgiveness is a huge theme in *Hidden in Amish Country*. Ben especially has to learn to forgive himself to move forward.

In addition to forgiveness, *Hidden in Amish Country* also has the theme of trusting in God's plan. Both characters are independent minded. They need to learn to trust in God's providence and to let Him be in control.

How does this fit into the larger picture of the Amish Country Justice Series?

Hidden in Amish Country is one of two stories set in Waylan Grove, an imaginary town in Ohio. While it is still under the Amish Country Justice series umbrella, it is only lightly connected to the first five books, which were set in LaMar Pond, Pennsylvania. Readers should have no difficulty understanding the story, even if they have not read any of the others.

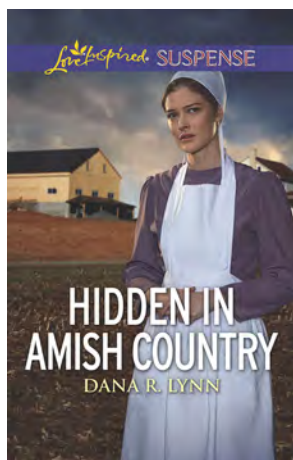
What do you hope readers will take away after reading *Hidden in Amish Country*?

I hope the readers will come away with the sense that God is infinitely more powerful than any circumstance they might encounter. On a literary level, I want the readers to fall in love with the characters and close the book satisfied with the resolution and the happy ever after Sadie and Ben found at last. **FF**

Visit Dana R. Lynn's author page here:

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Dana R. Lynn



Hidden in Amish Country

Amish Country Justice

Dana R. Lynn

Love Inspired Suspense



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Historical Regina Jennings

The author of numerous novels and novellas, **Regina Jennings** has won a **National Readers' Choice Award** and been a finalist for the **Oklahoma Book of the Year**. Her latest historical romance is the third title in her **Fort Reno Series**, ***The Major's Daughter*** (Bethany House): Caroline Adams returns to Indian Territory after tiring of confining society life. She wants adventure, and when she and her friend Amber come across swaggering outlaw Frisco Smith, they find his dreams for the new territory are very persuasive. With the much-anticipated land run pending, they may just join the rush.



Growing up parentless, all Frisco Smith wanted was a place to call his own. It's no wonder that he fought to open the Unassigned Lands. After years of sneaking across the border, he's even managed to put in a dug-out house on a hidden piece of property he's poised to claim.

When the gun sounds, everyone's best plans are thrown out the window in the chaos of the run. Caroline and Frisco soon find themselves battling over a claim—and both dig in their heels. Settling the rightful ownership will bring them closer than they ever expected, and change their ideas of what a true home looks like.

In this interview, Regina outlines the historical context of the story, reveals the challenges she ran into, and shares what drove her to write it.



What's the main conflict of this story?

When Frisco mocked Caroline for her dependence on her parents, he never expected her to take his criticism seriously. He definitely didn't think she'd compete in the land run and steal his homestead out from under him. He should've kept his mouth shut.

Convinced by Frisco that this opportunity must be grasped, Caroline can't back down. Doing so would only prove to him that she can't make it on her own. But to what lengths is he willing to go to win back his land?

***The Major's Daughter* begins at the brink of the Oklahoma Land Run of 1889. What exactly is that all about?**

The 1889 Land Run was perhaps the worst-organized government initiative in the history of the United States, and being the worst is quite an accomplishment. According to the Homestead Act of 1862, public domain land was eligible to be settled and won by homesteaders (men or women!) who could reside on the property for five years and make improvements on it.

As other homesteading areas filled up, people turned to the two million acres in the center of Indian Territory that the government was holding in reserve. This land was called “Unassigned,” as it wasn’t part of any Indian reservation.

After much petitioning, Congress decided to open it for settlement, but how would they decide who got one of the 160-acre plots? They couldn’t be bothered with the details. Instead, a date and time were chosen for when the land would become eligible (April 22, 1889, high noon), and the first person to reach a homestead after that could claim it as their own. With tens of thousands of people racing for farms, what could possibly go wrong?

We’ve seen debonair Frisco Smith in the earlier Fort Reno books. Is his character based on anyone?

Frisco’s character was inspired by the self-made men of the western frontier. In the first books, he’s a charming scalawag who spends more time in the guardhouse at the fort than he does in the parlor. In *The Major’s Daughter*, we learn that Frisco’s illegal activity had a purpose behind it. He wasn’t wasting time but educating himself in the peculiarities of the law and of the soon-to-be opened land. No longer a victim of circumstances, he’s prepared to be a leader in the new society.

Some books are tougher to write than others.

What challenges did you run into with this story?

I tried something I’ve never done before—creating four point-of-view characters for two different romantic story lines. Besides Caroline and Frisco, we also get to check in on Bradley Willis and Amber Herald, who first met in *Bound and Determined*. I loved having their story continuing in the background as Caroline and Frisco are sparring.

Why write *The Major's Daughter*?

Living in Oklahoma and writing nineteenth-century historical fiction, I knew that sooner (ha!) or later I'd have to write a land run story. It was inevitable. I couldn't ignore the larger-than-life origin story of our state, but the land runs were so epic and unruly, the thought of getting them on paper was intimidating.

It still is intimidating, but I did it anyway. I'm glad I waited until I had a dozen or so books penned before I attempted it, because this might be the only story about our crazy land run that some reader ever reads, and I want to do it justice.

This is my love letter to my state. I hope readers get as caught up in it as the racers did that spring of 1889. **FF**

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The Major's Daughter

Fort Reno Series #3

Regina Jennings

Bethany House



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Award-winning novelist **Ruth Logan Herne** has written dozens of novels and novellas. Her latest romance is ***A Hopeful Harvest*** (Love Inspired), the latest in the **Golden Grove Series**. When her family's apple orchard is damaged by a storm, single mom Libby Creighton knows the harvest she's depending on is in jeopardy. Though he prefers a solitary life, Jax McClaren has the skills to revive Libby's orchard—and her guarded heart. But he'll have to overcome the secrets of his past if he and Libby are going to have a fruitful future together.



In this exclusive interview, Ruth shares some details about her main characters, outlines the big picture of the series, and reveals the spiritual themes of the book.

No spoilers, but what can you tell us about *A Hopeful Harvest*?

Single mom Libby Creighton has a lot on her plate. She's running her grandparents orchard, raising her little girl and taking care of her grandfather as his dementia worsens. Finances aren't tough: They're non-existent. The words discretionary income aren't in her dictionary. When a rogue windstorm takes down their aged barn, Libby is pretty sure God's given her a sign that she's trying to do too much with too little.

When Jax McClaren realizes what's happening, he has to help. He shouldn't... After witnessing a tragic war accident, Jax has had his own private battles. Battles he can't seem to win. But he was brought up raising apples. He's handy with power tools and he lost his grandmother to Alzheimers, so he's got all the experience

Libby needs to survive this current season. Her plight touches him. Her determination and faith draw him. Can he keep his distance while being close enough to help?

Tell us about your main characters. What about these two made you want to tell their story?

I love writing about heroines who have to rise above and do it. Life can be tough. Mistakes can trip us up, but a plucky heroine who owns her mistakes or bad choices is so relatable—and their success makes readers smile! Libby Creighton is the perfect heroine for this story...bowed, but not breaking. She's like Ruth in the fields, gleaning. And her recently renewed faith is strong. She's a woman every woman can cheer for.

Jax is the quintessential wounded hero. Suffering from PTSD, he's been so mad at himself and God that his therapist's help and advice hasn't quite sunk in because he doesn't really think he deserves to get well when he lost so many good men to a tragic accident. An accident he watched happen and narrowly missed.

But working with Libby's grandpa, and talking with CeeCee, her little girl creates a spark of life in Jax. Working at this old orchard, with this family, makes him want to get better and that's a whole new feeling, but Jax isn't just any old handyman. His family is one of the pioneer fruiting families in Central Washington, owners of a huge fruit processing business that's been buying up small farms all over the valley, and they want Libby's farm.

How can he explain to her who he is, when her grandfather threw his older brother out of the house a few months back? She would never trust him if she knew.



What spiritual themes run through the book?

A Hopeful Harvest is a beautiful story of healing and hope. It's a story of second chances and new beginnings, how the tiniest flicker of faith can help reignite the love of God within a wounded soul and give strength to the weary. Set in the beautiful plateau of Central Washington, this small-town Cinderella-style romance is sure to touch hearts.

How does this book fit into the larger picture of the Golden Grove Series?

The Golden Grove Series is a trilogy set in this small Central Washington town. The books focus on kindness, sacrificial love and helping others. The opening book gives readers a glimpse of the setting and the town.

Book two is the touching romance of a widowed county sheriff whose daughter launches an internet search to find her dad a wife, much to her new teacher's chagrin. A beautiful story of God's perfect timing.

Ruth Logan Herne

And book three finishes the series with another sheriff's deputy whose family is on the verge of adopting triplets they've fostered since birth when their mother passed away. But when DNA testing alerts a Seattle doctor that she has a full sister in Central Washington, that the sisters were split up by an adoption agency, she's determined to be a part of the triplet's lives. And that means bringing them to Seattle.

What do you hope readers will take away after reading *A Hopeful Harvest*?

The thread of sacrificial love and God's timing winds its way through each story, reminding us to trust and hope and reach out to others. **FF**

Visit Ruth Logan Herne's author page here:

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A Hopeful Harvest
Golden Grove Series
Ruth Logan Herne
Love Inspired

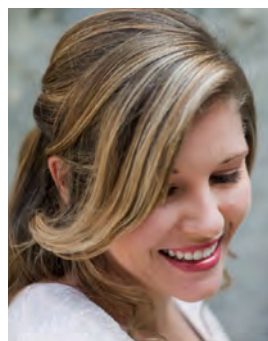
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The award-winning author of the **Unblemished Series**, **Sara Ella** is a lover of fairy tales, and believes “Happily Ever After is Never Far Away.” Her latest novel is **Coral** (Thomas Nelson), a reimagining of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* that explores mental health and what it means to be human in a world where humanity often seems lost.



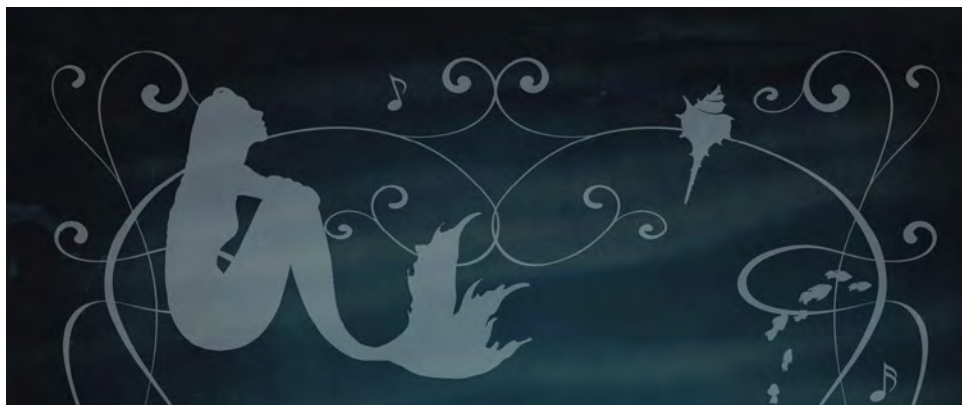
In this interview, Sara explains what inspired the novel, the process that led to her modern take on the tale, and why it’s important to raise awareness without raising false hopes.

What inspired you to write *Coral*?

Anything I write tends to start with an idea that relates back to Disney or fairy tales. *The Little Mermaid* was on the list of retellings I wanted to try.

In the end, it was my editor who helped me decide. That story was the one my publisher wanted me to tackle at the time. I’ve always been a huge fan of the 1989 animated version of *The Little Mermaid*, but it was the first time I heard Hans Christian Andersen’s original fairy tale that I was truly inspired to write my own twist.

I attended a Marissa Meyer signing in 2015 and it was Marissa who shared the original tale. The ending was dark and portrayed what true love and sacrifice are all about. The line, “But a mermaid has no tears, and therefore she suffers so much more”



became my anchor and base for inspiration. This single quote sparked the idea of addressing mental health through my characters.

What was the process of taking a popular fairy tale and reworking it with a modern twist?

I started my research by listening to *The Disney Story Origins Podcast* (Episodes 06a and b). I began by trying to fit myself into the box of the original story. As I neared the end of draft one, I realized the heart behind the novel was absent. When I recognized the story needed to focus on mental health, *Coral* came to life in a new way.

I won't lie, it was a lot more work than I expected. After writing a fantasy trilogy, I figured a standalone contemporary would be a nice break. I laugh at myself now.

This story was—in so many ways—much more difficult to write. I had the expectations of my readers, as well as the expectations of die-hard Disney fans. I rewrote the story three times. It came down to learning how to balance my own voice and ideas with

the original story as well as with the animated version. The result became a mix of all three.

I think there is more than one route to take when approaching a retelling. Some elements from the animated version (like a singing crab) didn't fit with the seriousness of my story. Other elements from the original (like a love triangle) didn't work either. It was a juggling act, and I learned to think outside the box.

What were your goals writing *Coral*?

My main goal was to relate to anyone struggling with or affected by mental health issues. I wanted the story to bring a sense of hope, but to also be entirely truthful and realistic. I didn't want to sugarcoat the issues, but I also wanted the reader to feel heard and understood.

There is so much negative stigma around the topics of depression, anxiety, trauma, suicide, etc. False assumptions about these things are all too common. It was important to me to create an awareness that these illnesses are just that, and they can't simply be cured or fixed by positive thinking or "getting over it."

How does your faith impact how you approach writing your fiction?

I love allegory. It was C.S. Lewis who first inspired me to write my faith subtly into my stories. With *Unblemished*, there was the idea of good versus evil, light overcoming darkness.

With *Coral*, it's even more subtle. It's a dark story, but the hope given at the end comes from a very real place in my life. A hope I only have because of my amazing Savior.

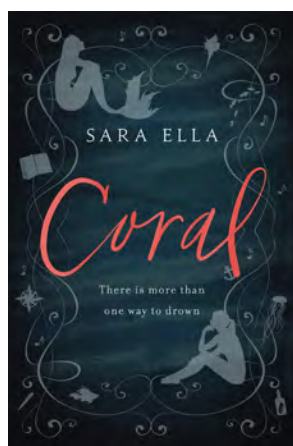
What do you hope readers take away after reading *Coral*?

Hope. And the truth that they are loved. And they are not nothing. And they are not alone.

There's a suicide hotline info page at the novel's end, and I've included personal notes to the readers at the front and back. If they are struggling with the themes addressed in the novel, or they know someone who is, my deepest desire is that they will feel understood as well as inspired to reach out to others. **FF**

Visit Sara Ella's author page here:

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Coral

Sara Ella
Thomas Nelson



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Terry Brennan is the award-winning author of **The Jerusalem Prophecies Series**, including *The Sacred Cipher*. He was the leader of a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism team and has received the Valley Forge Award for editorial writing from the Freedoms Foundation.



His brand-new **Empires of Armageddon Series** kicks off with the thriller ***Ishmael Covenant*** (Kregel Publications): At the end of his rope, Diplomatic Security Service agent Brian Mullaney is banished to Israel to guard a U.S. ambassador and an insignificant box. Little does he know that this new job will propel him straight into a crisis of global proportions.

In this exclusive interview, Terry explains the prophetic underpinnings of the new book, what to expect from the trilogy, and how his background as a journalist impacts his fiction.

What inspired the story in *Ishmael Covenant*?

I had one idea. That three ancient empires of the East—Persian, Ottoman, and Islamic—appeared to be on the cusp of rising again.

Taking that idea, I wondered how this potential clash of empires might impact current history, future events and the viability of the Jewish state. One conclusion was that an emergent Persian Empire—an alliance between the majority Shia governments of Iran and Iraq—would drive their ancient enemies, the Sunnis of Saudi Arabia, into a treaty and mutual defense pact with, of all



people, Israel...hence, the Ishmael Covenant.

One afternoon, my wife, Andrea, and I ran that idea past Nick Uva, Associate Pastor at Harvest Time Church in Greenwich, CT, a profound teacher and man of great biblical understanding. We spent a couple of hours knocking that idea around, considering its implications under the lens of biblical prophecy and measuring it against a number of end-times scenarios.

And then Pastor Nick asked, “Have you ever heard of the Vilna Gaon?”

No. But it didn’t take me long to look him up.

The Genius of Vilnius, or Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, was the most revered Talmudic scholar of his time, the late 18th century. In 2014, his great-great-grandson revealed a prophecy the Vilna Gaon wrote two hundred and twenty years in the past: “When you hear that the Russians have captured the

city of Crimea, you should know that the Times of the Messiah have started, that his steps are being heard.” In the spring of 2014, Russian troops had invaded the Ukraine and swept through the Crimean Peninsula.

I took the idea of the rising empires, the premise of an unexpected treaty between Israel and all its Arab neighbors, wrapped it up in the Vilna Gaon’s prophecy, speculated that the Gaon wrote a second prophecy that was yet to be revealed, and started writing.

As a writer, I’m a gardener (not an architect). I plant a seed, water it, let the sun shine on it, and watch to see how it grows. That seed grew into the Empires of Armageddon Series.

**What can you tell us about the Empires of Armageddon Series?
What themes or characters will tie the books together?**

The three-book series The Empires of Armageddon is a fast-paced, modern-day international thriller, constructed around historical fact and historical fiction. The driving premise of the series is that no man can change biblical prophecy, but one man can change history.

Out of the chaos and conflict of today’s Middle East, it appears that three ancient empires are about to resurrect themselves—the Persian, Islamic and Ottoman Empires. Ultimately, each of those empires will covet the same slice of land which they once ruled—from the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia to the rocky desert known as Palestine. The collision of those competing empires could trigger the climactic events in the Valley of Megiddo.

In the series, one byproduct of these growing empires is an unexpected peace treaty and mutual-defense pact between

Israel and its Arab neighbors—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and most of the small, Persian Gulf states—the Ishmael Covenant.

The core of the action in all three books takes place over the span of just a few days in July of 2014. The story envelopes the lives of nearly a dozen key characters, but is driven by three primary characters: Diplomatic Security Service Special Agent Brian Mullaney; his assignment, the newly appointed US ambassador to Israel, Joseph Atticus Cleveland; and their unknown but evident enemy, The Turk, an immortal agent of evil who serves The One.

The secondary characters, who are key participants in the series, include: Mullaney's wife, Abigail; Cleveland's daughter, Palmyra; Mullaney's best friend and sidekick, Tommy Hernandez; Rabbi Mordechai Herzog, former head of the Rabbinat Council in Jerusalem; Colonel Meyer Levinson, Director, Operations Division, Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency; Arslan Eroglu, Prime Minister of Turkey and Bayard, angel of light.

Cleveland, and then Mullaney, accept a responsibility—guardian of the Gaon's second prophecy and the lethal box that protects it—that puts both their lives, and the lives of those they love most, in terrible peril. Mullaney is eventually anointed as the final guardian of the Vilna Gaon's second prophecy, planting him in direct opposition to The Turk. The Turk and The One have been focused on a singular purpose for over two hundred years—if they can prevent the fulfillment of one Messianic biblical prophecy, they can eradicate the validity of all prophecy and change the end of the Book ... the outcome of the Battle of Armageddon.

That theme of ultimate evil trying to overthrow the plans of God, fuels the story of the Empires Of Armageddon, which utilizes this



geo-political cauldron and its biblical ramifications as the backdrop for an epic testing of one man's character when faced with multiple adversaries who threaten his family, his faith and his country. How Brian Mullaney responds to his calling could dictate the fate of this world—and the onset of the next.

How does this series compare/contrast with your Jerusalem Prophecies Series?

While the Jerusalem Prophecies series is more of an Indiana Jones type 'search for the missing ...' adventure yarn, Empires of Armageddon is more of a Jason Bourne type international political thriller. The action in both series takes place primarily in the Middle East and in one area in the US (New York City area in the first series; Washington, DC area in the second).

Both series are structured around a similar protagonist—a Christian man, accomplished and successful in his career, who is enlisted ... called ... into a life-threatening situation beyond his sphere of experience and understanding. This lethal danger, projected not only against the man himself but also against his family, is perpetrated by a shadowy gang of murderous thugs who ruthlessly pursue our hero from one country to the next.

One complicating factor is that our protagonist realizes the spiritual implications and consequences of the deadly conflict into which he was recruited. As a result, his faith and character are challenged to the utmost as he confronts a relentless string of obstacles to fulfilling his call.

While I wouldn't exclusively characterize either series as "end-times thrillers," each of them has an underlying tint of last-day's events ... how the quest of the protagonist may ultimately reflect or affect biblical prophecies ... Empires being more overt. But, primarily, they are stories of good against evil, and how that conflict plays out in the life of just an ordinary guy.

How does your background as a journalist impact how you're approaching these stories?

Interesting question, which I hadn't considered. There are parts of Tom Bohannon's history (Jerusalem Prophecies) which are autobiographical. One aspect of Bohannon's background, as is mine, is that he was a former journalist who once worked for *The Bulletin* in Philadelphia.

Journalists are trained observers. We absorb, analyze and report on what we see. When I write these books, I see them as movies. In other words, I'm writing what I see in my mind. Which is similar

to what I did as a journalist—primarily my ten years as a sportswriter. I would watch an event and then try to accurately recount it for my readers.

I've done a ton of research for both of these series, which gave me a great deal of pleasure. I've discovered so much that I never knew before, and I've been able to weave many of these current and historical facts into the fictional narratives. I seldom needed to do such extensive research for the work I did as a journalist, but the process was similar.

Perhaps the most tangible result of being a journalist is that I approach my writing as a gardener, not as an architect. Architects are the writers who have everything planned out and plotted out before they get started, including extensive biographies for all their key characters and a detailed outline that is a roadmap for the entire book.

Journalists don't have the time for such exhaustive planning. You watch a game ... you're on deadline. Write the story! Even longer, or investigative pieces—though they would naturally have some structure—are generally written the same. You have an idea, or an assignment, and you start writing. And see where it takes you.

In writing novels, the process is often to see where my characters take the story. They reveal themselves to me as I write.

One of the first things I learned as a writer, is that novels are not written in the same way newspaper stories are written. I had to throw away my first novel because of that. But, now that you've asked, I can see the connections between my two decades in journalism and now my nearly 15 years as an author. Yes ... I do write slow.

What do you hope readers take away after reading *Ishmael Covenant*?

I hope that readers of *Ishmael Covenant*, and all the books of the *Empires Of Armageddon* series, understand that Christians are in a real, tangible war. Believers in Jesus Christ are engaged in what the notes in my 1985 NIV Study Bible call a “titanic conflict”. (Ephesians 1:3 “heavenly realms”): “... in the Christian’s union with the exalted Christ, ultimate issues are involved ... At stake are God’s eternal eschatological purpose and the titanic conflict between God and the powerful spiritual forces arrayed against him As a result, the spiritual struggles of the saints here and now is not so much against ‘flesh and blood’ as against the great spiritual forces that war against God in heaven.”

There are great spiritual forces that war against God in heaven? Interesting thought. More sobering is the idea that my ‘spiritual struggles’ here on earth have, in some way, an impact on that war in heaven.

Not all of us will come face-to-face with evil incarnate, as does Brian Mullaney and the other characters of *Ishmael Covenant*. But agents of evil are at work in the world today, just as they have been since Lucifer’s rebellion was crushed and banished to earth.

It’s likely that there are two reasons why those agents of evil are still fighting against the light:

- To deceive as many human beings as possible in order to steal their souls, and
- Because they believe there must be some way they can alter the future and change the outcome of the coming judgment.

I don't generally live my daily life conscious of the part I play in this great spiritual battle in heaven. I most often perceive the evil I face as personal. So, I pray against the spirits of evil that try to 'steal, rob and destroy' in my life, in my family, in our marriage. Which is good.

But, through research for this book, I've learned that I need to reach beyond the personal conflict of good and evil in my life and be more conscious of the vastness of this titanic conflict around me. I need to be an example, a reflection, of Jesus and his love for all souls.

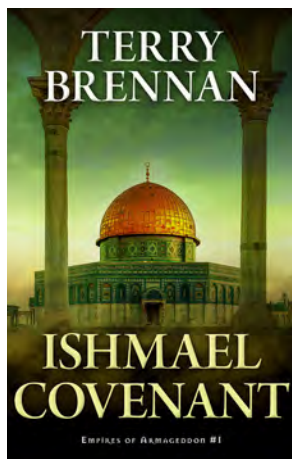
And I need to stand up for light—to be a warrior/ambassador for light—in the midst of a dark world that often seems to be getting darker.

But the bottom line is inevitable. Good triumphs. The end of the Book will never change. **FF**

Visit Terry Brennan's author page here:

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Terry Brennan



Ishmael Covenant
Empires of Armageddon #1
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Grace Hitchcock has written Historical Romance novellas in *The Second Chance Brides*, *The Southern Belle Brides*, and the *Thimbles and Threads* collections with Barbour Books. She also has two entries in Barbour's multi-author true crime series *True Colors*.



Her latest novel in the *True Colors Series* is ***The Gray Chamber***. Enter the terrifying asylum on Blackwell Island in 1887 along with Edyth Foster, who was wrongly committed by her greedy uncle. Inside, she meets an undercover journalist. Will either woman find a way to reclaim her true self?

In this exclusive interview, Grace explains the challenge of writing a novel that combines true crime with history and romance, reveals some of the historical details that inspired the novel, and shares the real-life spiritual lesson from her own life that made its way into the book.

The True Colors Series are novels that combine true crime, history, and romance. How much of a challenge is it to write books that include all these moving parts?

It is definitely a challenge to balance a historical romance blended with true crime events, but I believe that being able to write a love story around tragic events has made me a stronger writer because I have to find ways to bring an element of lightness to the story so as not to bog the readers down in the horrors that is the true crime.

What inspired you to tackle the historical events of *The Gray Chamber*?

During the initial brainstorming of ideas for the True Colors Series, my editor, Rebecca Germany, mentioned a Blackwell's Island asylum where a journalist named Nellie Bly went undercover for ten days for a story, which caught my interest.

In reading Nellie's scandalous exposé for Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper, *The World*, I was shocked at the grounds by which the asylum would commit women and that's when I discovered a tiny mention about an heiress with family members who had her tucked away so they could have her fortune...and Edyth Foster was born, a cat-rescuing, fencing American heiress with a terrible sense of style.

What research did you have to do to get the details right?

I listened to Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* on audiobook, which I ended up buying in paperback so I could re-read and underline. I found amazing articles from the historical society on Blackwell's Island, printed out a historic map of the island with the location of its various buildings and taped it to my desk for the duration of writing, and checked out many books on fencing for beginners and a history of fencing.

I was terrified that I would get something wrong with the fencing scenes. I watched YouTube videos on fencing, and even looked up where I could take a class on fencing (*haha*) but ran out of time before I could go to a class in a nearby city—one day!



This is your second book in the True Colors Series. Since there are multiple authors involved with the series—does that ever impact what you're writing? What's your process creating a book for this series?

Even though there are multiple authors in the series, each book can be read like a stand-alone, so the other authors' stories don't really rely on mine and vice versa. But it does make a difference in the fact that it adds a level of comradery. I admire the fellow authors in this series and have had the pleasure of meeting a few in person at writers conferences.

As for the process of creating a book for the series, I wanted to somehow connect *The Gray Chamber* with my debut novel, *The White City*, even though it takes place in Chicago 1893 and *The Gray Chamber* in New York in 1887. And it oh so magically worked out that Jude Thorpe, the New Yorker hero from *The White City*, could take a small role in my latest work as a young, untested

detective. I loved writing about teenager Jude, and I hope my readers will enjoy seeing this new side of our hero.

How does your faith impact how you approach storytelling?

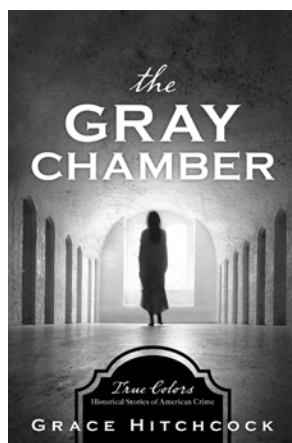
Usually, whatever I am personally learning spiritually while writing impacts my heroine/hero in some way. With *The Gray Chamber*, Edyth and Bane tried again and again to take matters into their own hands and failed.

I forced them to sit still and wait on God to fight this battle for them because, sometimes, we can do everything in our power to change a circumstance and it does nothing when all we are supposed to do is stop, be still, and let God move. So, I gave Edyth that lesson.

Even though it feels a bit vulnerable to put my personal lessons in a book, I think that it offers a level of genuineness that can bring life to the story and hope to the reader. **FF**

Visit Grace Hitchcock's author page here:

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The Gray Chamber

True Colors

Grace Hitchcock

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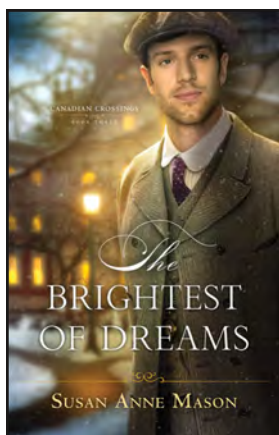
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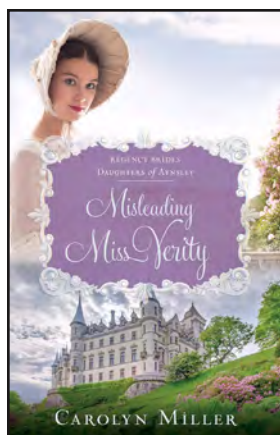
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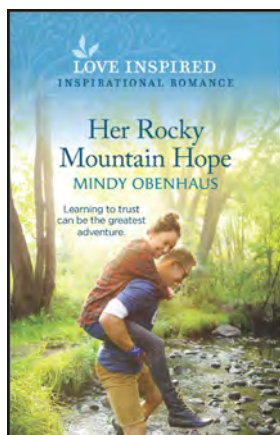
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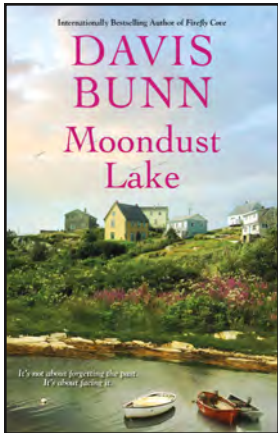
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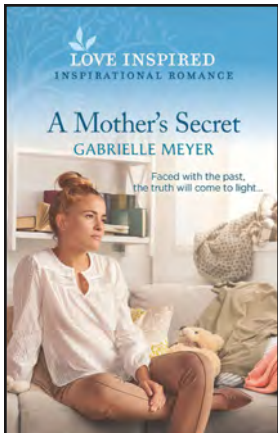
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Gabrielle Meyer

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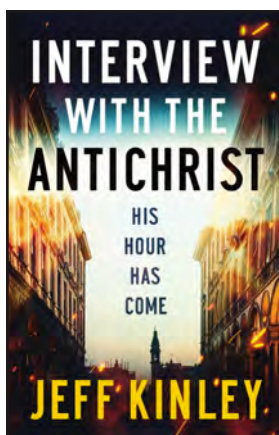
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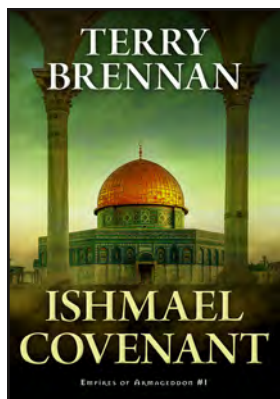
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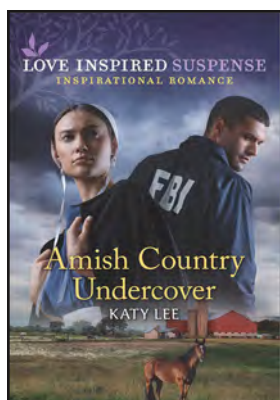
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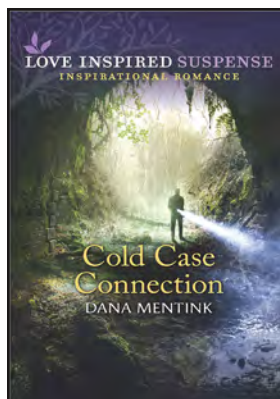
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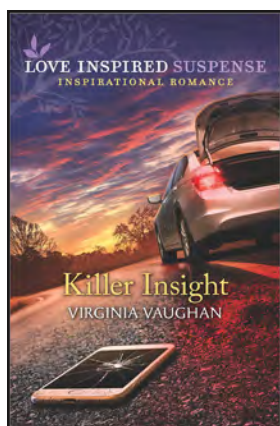
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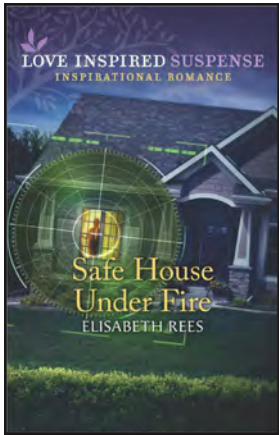
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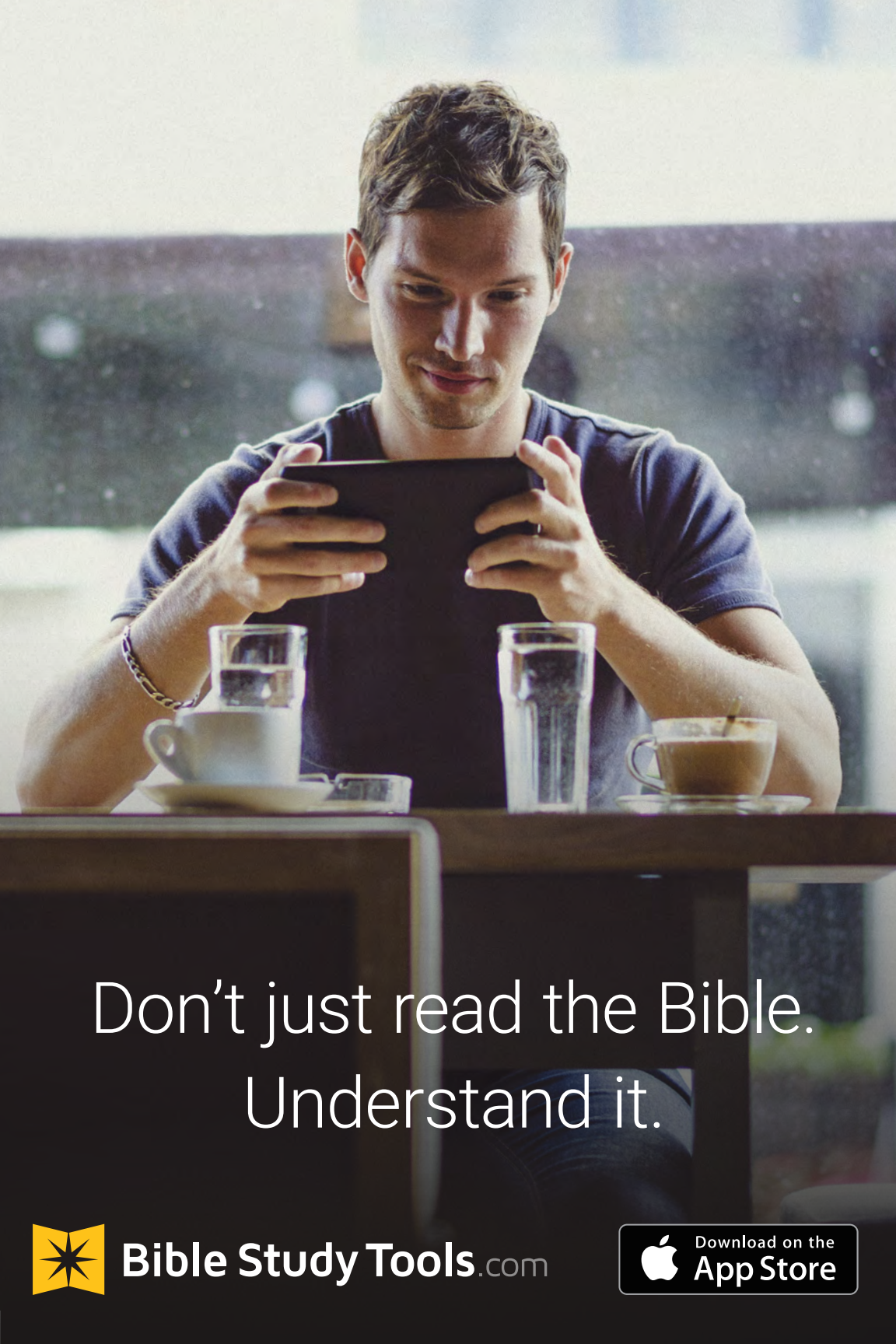
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