

# FamilyFiction

April 2020



## Suspense Author **SUSAN SLEEMAN**

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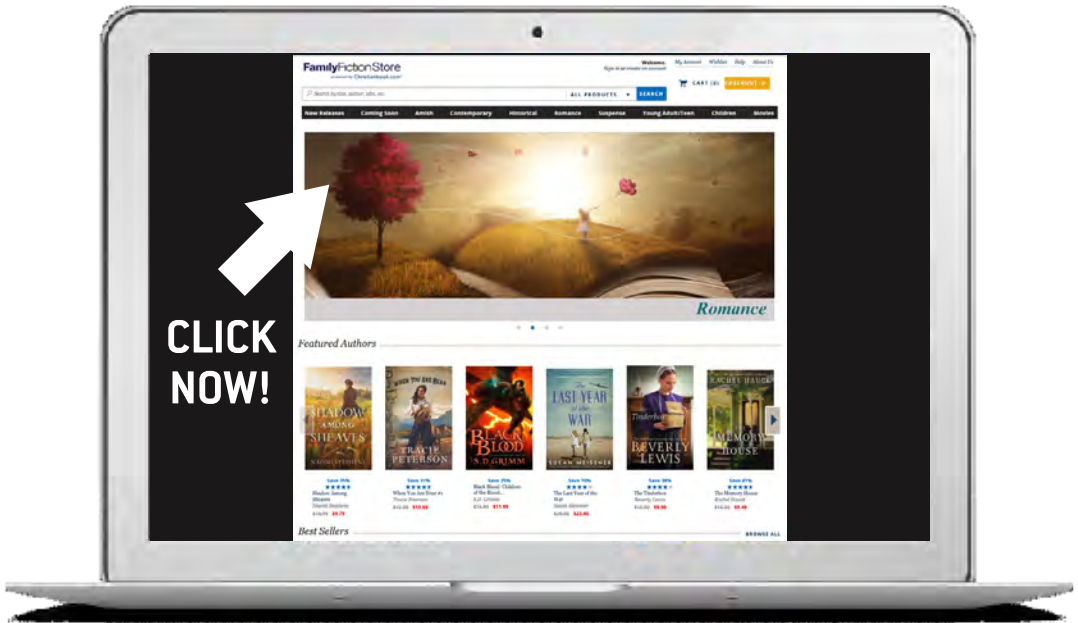
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#### **Publisher/GM**

Ross Cluver  
Ross@FamilyFiction.com

#### **Editor**

Chris Well  
Chris@FamilyFiction.com

#### **Editorial Assistant**

Erica Well  
Erica@FamilyFiction.com

#### **Proofreader**

Michele Thompson

#### **Design & Digital Production**

Ross Cluver

#### **National Account Executive Salem Media Group**

DeDe Donatelli-Tarrant  
805.987.5072  
DeDe@salempublishing.com

#### **Web Ad Traffic Coordinator**

**Web & Social Media Support**  
Brandon Woolum  
BWoolum@salempublishing.com

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## NEWS ON THE WEBSITE

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### **Faith Comedy *Selfie Dad* In Theaters June 12**

A dissatisfied dad facing a midlife crisis risking everything to become a YouTube comedy sensation.

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### **Singer/Songwriter Ellie Holcomb Back With Children's Book *Don't Forget to Remember***

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### **New Speculative Fiction from Amanda G. Stevens**

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# SUSPENSE: SUSAN SLEEMAN

## HEROES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Spotlighting those whose everyday jobs make them extraordinary.

Best-selling author **Susan Sleeman** writes romantic suspense set in the world of government security and law enforcement agencies. In the first book of her new **Homeland Heroes Series**, ***Seconds to Live*** (Bethany House), FBI Agent Sean Nichols and U.S. Marshal Taylor Mills must professionally work through their painful personal past to capture a hacker who has compromised the safety of people in the Witness Protection Program.

In our interview, Susan shares how her new series begins, explains how she prepares to write about her characters, and also gives us a peek into her other recent **Truth Seekers Series**.

### **Susan, what can you tell us about your new series *Homeland Heroes*?**

This series is about heroes that we don't typically think of as heroes, and as the titles suggest—*Seconds to Live*, *Minutes to Die*, and *Hours to Kill*—each book references time. The fictional RED—Rapid Emergency Deployment—team boasts members of the FBI, DHS, and USMS, (US Marshal's Service). Sean, Kiley, Mack, and Cam are a powerhouse of a team who don't let anything, not even a clock ticking down to assured destruction, stop them from bringing the worse of cyber-criminals to justice. These men and women fight against the clock to save the country from serious danger, working behind the scenes to keep our country safe from internet threats. They don't make the news, but I consider them heroes.

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**The first book in the series is *Seconds to Live*.**

**How does that kick off the series?**

Time is ticking down in all of the Homeland Heroes books, and in *Seconds to Live*, a hacker has compromised the WITSEC (Witness Security Program) database and is selling or auctioning off the data, putting witnesses' lives in danger. The team must find and stop this hacker before thousands of witnesses are killed. This book is a race against the clock, pitting the RED team against the cunning hacker, and they are challenged to their maximum. I feel like *Seconds to Live* does a good job of meeting my goal to provide the reader with fast-moving and high-stakes stories where unsung heroes shine.

**What about FBI Agent Sean Nichols and US Marshal Taylor Mills made you want to tell their story?**

First, I wanted an interesting and unusual romance angle that I had never seen done before. I wanted the hero and heroine to like each other, to know each other, but never have seen each other. Or even seen a picture of each other. And I needed them



both to be in a place in their life where they didn't want a romantic commitment so neither of them would want to pursue a relationship and dig deeper. An online friendship was the answer.

To make it seem even more certain that they would not meet, I placed them on opposite coasts from each other. When the story opens, and the investigation brings them together and they see each other for the first time, it's a life-changing event for them that the reader gets to enjoy, too.

I chose their professions and created the plot to make them be at odds with each other as the story opens. Taylor wants to protect her witness, hold back and take her time while Sean wants to solve the crime, and he's gung-ho in using this witness to get to his goal. The resulting conflict puts them at odds right from the start, and yet, they have an underlying friendship that they have to take into account.

### **Many of your romantic suspense novels involve professional members of law enforcement.**

#### **What attracts you to writing about these agencies?**

I had the honor of being selected to attend the FBI's Citizen Academy. This was a chance to meet for six weeks with FBI agents at the Portland FBI office while they shared their job responsibilities. It also included a fun day at their gun range where I got to shoot weapons including machine guns with these fine agents, plus blow up bombs with the bomb squad. I even got to push the plunger and detonate one of the explosions. Talk about an exciting and memorable day!

During the sessions, I learned a lot of facts and details that have informed my writing, but what I learned more than anything during this time was the heart of service these men and woman have. The heart to protect you and me from criminals and terrorists even if it means giving of their life.

Since then, I have attended a local police and sheriff citizen academy, and I have developed a tremendous respect for our law enforcement officers. In my books, I try to share what officers go through on the job in a realistic way so readers can see how heroic they really are.

I can't even imagine running into danger when called to do so, and by their sacrifices, we are all allowed to live our lives. What better group to write about? And if that's not enough of a reason, I am fascinated by the work they do. The procedures. The weapons. The forensics. All of it interests me, and I like to keep up on cutting-edge equipment, procedures, and techniques to share with readers, too.

### **How do you decide to put your characters in one organization over another?**

The law enforcement organization I choose is almost always based on the crime in the book, as agencies, especially federal agencies, don't investigate all types of crimes. For example, many people think the FBI routinely investigates murders, and they do, but it's often only major incidents where multiple murders have occurred, like serial killers and active shooters. They don't come into a town or city and take over an investigation as is often portrayed on TV and in movies. They only participate when invited by local law enforcement.

## **What background or research comes into play when writing about these people in these jobs?**

Each time I write about an agency I'm not familiar with, I have to research that agency. This involves internet research and reading books, but also, I run all of my scenarios past my law enforcement and weapons expert to make sure I am getting the procedures and policies right.

For example, when I started the Homeland Heroes series, I knew next to nothing about U.S. Marshals and ICE agents, so I had to carefully research their jobs and agencies. The Marshal's WITSEC program is super-secretive so that was quite the challenge to find information. It has to be secret to protect the lives of the witnesses who are enrolled in the program. Fortunately, I was able to obtain what I needed—nothing that would compromise that safety—and I am so grateful I could.

## **You also recently launched the series Truth Seekers. What's that about?**

The Truth Seekers series is about a fictitious forensic lab in Portland, Oregon called The Veritas Center. Veritas means truth in Latin and finding the truth is what each of the books in this series is about.

The lab is owned by six partners with expertise in forensic anthropology, DNA, trace evidence, ballistics, cybercrimes, and toxicology. The lab started with processing DNA to connect loved ones but branched out to other areas so they could assist law enforcement agencies in solving difficult crimes and get to the truth. The partners are committed to restoring hope and families by solving one mystery at a time, but none of them are prepared for when the mystery comes calling too close

to home and threatens to destroy the only life they've ever known.

**What are your favorite suspense stories or who are your favorite storytellers?**

I love stories that are basically police procedurals as that is what I write, and I write them because I like to read or watch them. I do watch a lot of British TV, and I love some of the series set in small towns with quirky detectives such as Vera and Shetland. I also love *Unforgotten*. Great show.

**What do you consider the best ratio for inspirational romantic suspense?**

For me there will be an equal balance of romance and suspense in a book, neither one overshadowing the other. I try for this balance in my books, but if I am guilty of having more of one than another it would be suspense.

**What's your favorite part of writing these stories?**

You might think after my last answer that I would say creating a riveting and edge-of-your-seat suspense plot, and I do enjoy that a lot, but my favorite part is developing real characters that readers can relate to and who need to change to find their happily ever after in life. This almost always involves a spiritual struggle in my books.

I just love it when I see the suspense plot, the romance, and the spiritual message all come together in that 'aha' moment that changes the character's life, and they realize they are deserving of a wonderful life no matter their past or their struggles. I just sit back and sigh with joy when that happens. **FF**

**Visit Susan Sleeman's author page here:**

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## ***Seconds to Live***

*Homeland Heroes*

Susan Sleeman

Bethany House Publishers

Suspense, Romance



When cybercriminals hack into the US Marshals' Witness Protection database and auction off witnesses' personal details to the highest bidders, the RED Team led by FBI Agent Sean Nichols begins a high-

stakes chase to find the hacker. But before he can even get started, the first witness is targeted and barely escapes with her life. Sean believes Phantom, an obsessed hacker who previously outwitted the top minds in the field, is behind the attack, and Sean needs this witness's help, as she's the person who has come closest to discovering Phantom's identity.

Trouble is, she's a witness under the care of US Marshal Taylor Mills, and Sean is reluctant to work with the captivating marshal who knows his deepest secrets. But Phantom claims he knows where the witness is hiding and will kill her, so to stop the hacker, Sean and Taylor must work through their personal pain and learn to trust each other. The seconds are ticking down before someone dies.





# HISTORICAL: MARIO ESCOBAR

## *VOICE FOR THE SUFFERING*

The bravery of ordinary people under dangerous circumstances inspires best-selling author **Mario Escobar**'s new novel.

Spanish author **Mario Escobar** writes historical suspense novels that often center around World War II and/or the church. His work has been translated into more than 10 languages. His most recent book, ***Children of the Stars*** (Thomas Nelson), tells the story of two Jewish children who escape internment at the Vélodrome d'Hiver just before the prisoners were sent to concentration camps.

In our exclusive interview translated from Spanish, Mario explains how the story of these two young brothers found him, reveals why he wrote this novel from the point of view of children, and how his degree in history informs what he writes about.

**Your previous novel, *Auschwitz Lullaby*, was based on a true story. What inspired you to write *Children of the Stars*, which is also set during World War II?**

It happened the same way *Auschwitz Lullaby* did. The story came to me alone—it met me. In 2011, a Spanish association invited me to visit France to see the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis. I was with a group of journalists, historians and Christian leaders in Paris, then we visited the south and east of France and saw museums about the persecution of the Huguenots.

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During the trip, we traveled to Le Chambon Sur Lignon and discovered the history of the Christian communities that, inspired by their pastors, saved thousands of Jewish children. A book was published by that group of writers, historians and leaders about their trip to France.

Three years later, after writing *Auschwitz Lullaby* I was exhausted by the emotional effort. What story could be more powerful than that? Then, next to my desk I observed that book and remembered the History of Le Chanbon Sur Lignon and I knew that was the story.

**What moved you to tell this story of two Jewish brothers running for their lives in Nazi-occupied Paris from the point of view of children?**

The persecution of Jews and other minorities in World War II Europe has always interested me. I discovered the subject when I was about fourteen years old, and from that moment I knew I wanted to write about that conflict. That a civilized people like the French collaborated in the deportation of Jews, and that the Vichy regime authorities supported something like that, had to be known to all.

The vision that children have of things has always haunted me. I was a very happy child, raised in a Christian congregation in Madrid, by humble parents who boosted my creativity. I promised myself that I would not betray the child in me. I think I have succeeded.

The look of children is innocent, without prejudice or hate. They are also, along with women, the ones who suffer most in wars and we barely give them a voice to express that suffering.

## **What did it take to research the time period where Moses and Jacob Stein lived?**

After the first trip, I was reading everything in French and English on the subject of Le Chambon Sur Lignon, the life of André Töcmé, the Calvinist pastor who inspired peaceful resistance in the region and the rescue of children.

Later I traveled with my family back to the French town. I went to the museum, the chapel that is preserved, and the house of Pastor Töcmé. When I returned home I could not stop writing, sometimes in tears, for the heroism of these ordinary people.

## **What was the most challenging part of writing *Children of the Stars*?**

Getting in the eyes of a child is not easy. I was inspired by the relationship between my daughter Andrea and my son Alejandro, who at that time were of similar ages. Their reactions, their emotions and enthusiasm gave me the necessary material for the main characters. The shadow of the success of my previous novel was always on me. My wife gave me great advice: *What needs to be done after writing a great story? Write the following [one]*. Now *Children of the Stars* will come out in nine languages, a blessing from God.

## **Was there any part of the process of this novel that surprised you?**

I always feel like the first reader of my books, as if they were opening in front of me. I didn't know the end until shortly before I wrote it. What surprised me most was the strength of a secondary character, an old theater producer who helps children and whom I ended up loving especially.



**Your novel is about two Jewish boys living in World War II-era France. It was originally written in Spanish and has been translated into English. Have you had any concerns as an author in getting your books translated in general, and specifically with this one, given all the cultures involved?**

I have the best translator in the world, Gretchen Albernathy. She always improves my books. She is conscientious, awake, fast, and above all sincere. Translating is a true art. Without translators and proofreaders, writers would be lame or one-armed.

**You have a degree in history. How does this inform what you write?**

It influences a lot. I have a degree in modern history, and I did a PhD on Protestantism in the 16th century in Spain. History gives me a broad view of things, to put stories in context and be rigorous in research. Then fiction helps me reach people's hearts.



No one changes for conviction; our true engine is the heart. My books seek the return to the values of Christ, His unconditional love for humanity without making distinctions of any kind.

**Your novels are a fascinating array of non-fiction, historical, suspense, and even speculative stories, based on facts. How do you choose what you're going to write next?**

The stories look for me, but one of my most important parameters is that they touch my heart. I have a very large library in my house, more than 60,000 volumes, but I believe in the stories that stay lodged in the heart and make us better people.

**Why does the Church come up so often in your work?**

It was part of my research at the university. In Spain, the Catholic Church permeates everything, from art to mentality, through architecture and literature. I am an evangelical Christian. I specialize in the history of Protestantism in my country, but also in the Vatican, Religious orders, and the papacy.

**What were your goals in writing *Children of the Stars*? What are you hoping readers will take away with them after reading this novel?**

Calmness. We live in turbulent times when politicians of every sign want to confront each other. History helps us to reflect on the consequences of shaking the hornet of ideologies. One of the characters in the book says that his true homeland is his family, the place where he always wants to return.

I love my country, I love my city, but I think the most important thing is to love my family, as my parents taught me. That is the only legacy, in addition to my faith, that I want to leave my children. **FF**

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## ***Children of the Stars***

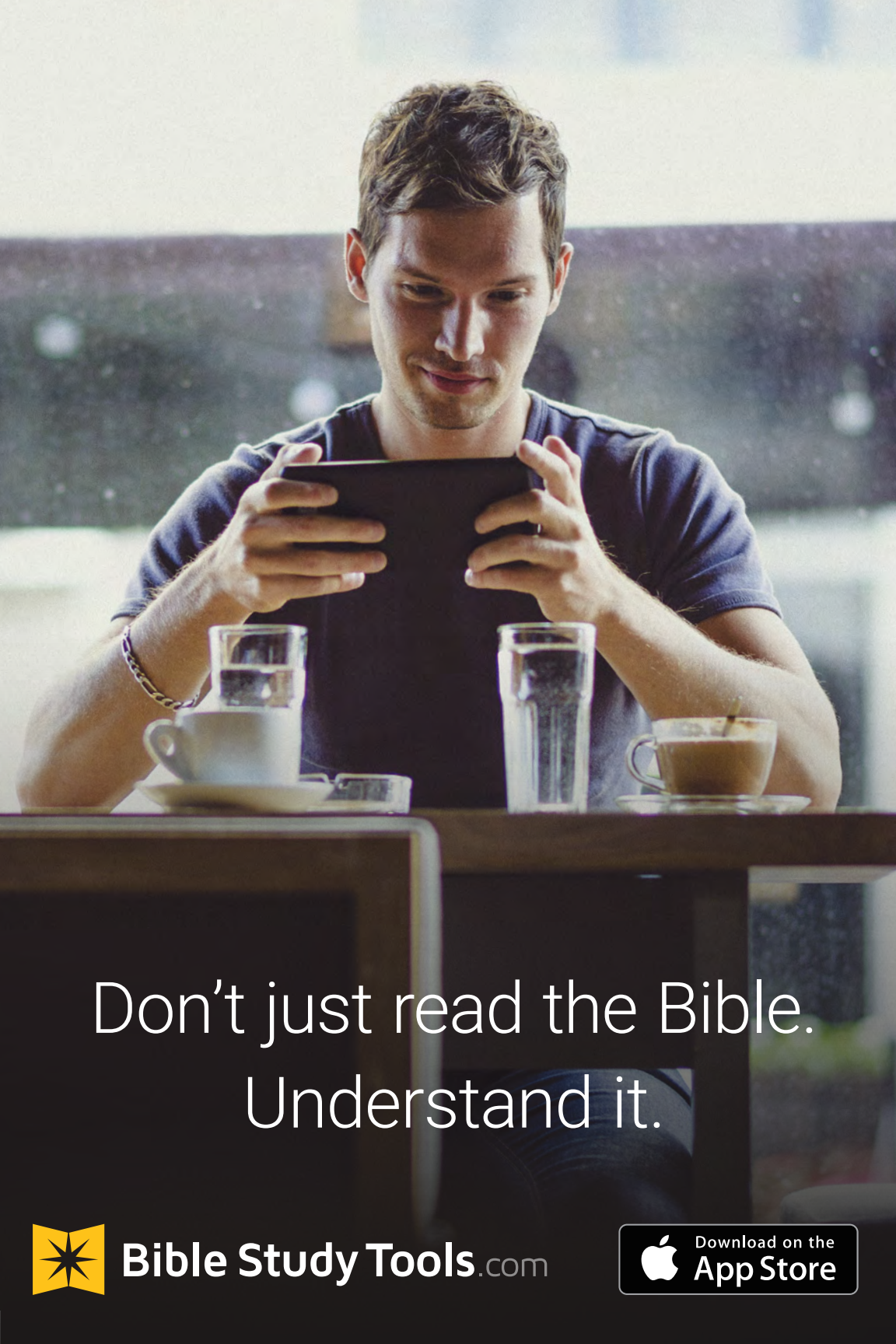
Mario Escobar  
Thomas Nelson  
Historical



August 1942. Jacob and Moses Stein, two young Jewish brothers, are staying with their aunt in Paris amid the Nazi occupation. The boys' parents, well-known German playwrights, have left the brothers in their aunt's care until they

can find safe harbor for their family. But before the Steins can reunite, a great and terrifying roundup occurs. The French gendarmes, under Nazi order, arrest the boys and take them to the Vélodrome d'Hiver—a massive, bleak structure in Paris where thousands of France's Jews are being forcibly detained.

Jacob and Moses know they must flee in order to survive, but they only have a set of letters sent from the south of France to guide them to their parents. Danger lurks around every corner as the boys, with nothing but each other, trek across the occupied country. Along their remarkable journey, they meet strangers and brave souls who put themselves at risk to protect the children—some of whom pay the ultimate price for helping these young refugees of war.



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# AMISH: CHARLOTTE HUBBARD

## MATURING IN FAITH

The author details writing about a relationship that appears irreconcilable—and making it flourish again.

Drawing upon her experiences in Jamesport, the largest Old Order Amish community west of the Mississippi, long-time Missourian **Charlotte Hubbard** writes of simpler times and a faith-based lifestyle. She continues her **Promise Lodge Series** with ***Light Shines on Promise Lodge*** (Zebra): With autumn in full brilliant color, the Amish of Promise Lodge celebrate a successful harvest—and a community rooted in deep friendship. But as cold winds of judgment cast doubt and fear, residents will need each other more than ever to weather the storm.

In this interview, Charlotte reveals the inspiration behind the new book, shares the spiritual themes behind the stories, and explains how it fits into the bigger picture of the series.

### **Charlotte, what inspired the story in *Light Shines on Promise Lodge*?**

Throughout the Promise Lodge series, Gloria Lehman is a boy-crazy, flighty, airheaded young woman who can't seem to do anything right and who makes a pest of herself with two young men who tell her right out that they don't want to date her. I wanted to give Gloria a chance to grow up and prove herself.

Readers who have followed Gloria through the series will be pleased that she finds a young man to love—and will hopefully get a big kick from the *twist* in the story as the truth about Clayton King is revealed. Bishop Clayton King has come

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from Lancaster County PA to declare himself the new leader of Promise Lodge and he's dead-set on putting the residents back on the straight and narrow, more conservative Old Order path to salvation.

**What spiritual theme or themes play out through the novel?**

A major theme in this story deals with the question "Is there such a thing as an unforgiveable sin?" Very conservative settlements of Old Order Amish believe that if a person (like Phineas Beachey) leaves the faith to become English, he forfeits his salvation and cannot be forgiven or readmitted to the Amish faith because he has broken the vow he took at baptism.

Promise Lodge's progressive bishop, Monroe Burkholder, must act and pray over Phineas's reappearance in his estranged wife, Annabelle's, life and decide whether Phineas can be forgiven—whether Jesus' example of love and forgiveness can overrule the Old Order's beliefs.

This book is also about Gloria's maturation in her faith, about Cyrus and his brother, Jonathan, apologizing for a stunt they pull on Gloria and her friend, Phoebe, and receiving their forgiveness. And it's about second chances at making relationships right and loving again.

### **How does this book fit into the larger picture of the Promise Lodge series?**

*Light Shines on Promise Lodge* is the fifth and final book in the series. Readers have been so adamant about seeing more Promise Lodge stories, however, that my editor might agree to more stories in this series after I complete the series I'm currently writing!

### **What themes or characters tie the books together?**

My books almost always deal with Old Order women who behave more independently than what's considered allowable in very conservative Amish settlements—and the men at Promise Lodge must often adjust their patriarchal attitudes to win these ladies' hearts! From the first book, *Promise Lodge*, the series has featured three sisters—Mattie, Christine, and Rosetta—who sold their farms to buy the abandoned campground, Promise Lodge (which is really pushing the envelope for Amish women) and who eventually found wonderful men to marry.

As the series has progressed, the second generation's stories have been told, so the series has a family saga feel to it. Promise Lodge itself is almost a character in this series, and many readers tell me they would love to go there and live!

**Tell us about Phineas and Annabelle. What about these two people made you want to tell their story?**

I wanted to explore that question about whether there's such a thing as an unforgiveable sin. In the previous book, *New Beginnings at Promise Lodge*, Annabelle has found her way to Promise Lodge because her husband, Phineas, has abandoned her and the Amish faith. This leaves her with no means of support—and no way to remarry, because the Amish don't allow divorce.

To her new friends, she paints a picture of the very stern, judgmental husband she's spent her adult life with, to the point we believe she's better off without him. When Phineas finds her, demanding that she come with away with him, nobody at Promise Lodge wants her to forfeit her own faith and be stuck in such a marriage again.

Phineas, however, undergoes a major transformation because Bishop Monroe and the others at Promise Lodge are willing to be more loving and flexible than the Old Order leaders who caused him to abandon the Amish faith earlier.

**So many romances are about single people coming together—but this is about reconciliation between married (albeit estranged) husband and wife. What inspired you to write a romance with this angle?**

I wanted the challenge of writing a story about a relationship that appears irreconcilable and making it flourish again. I often write about Amish characters who've been widowed and find a second romance, so this book took that theme up a notch. It felt very satisfying to watch Annabelle and Phineas behaving like newlyweds again at the end of the story, as their new

friends at Promise Lodge helped them move forward and find a new forever home where Phineas would be accepted for who he is.

### **What experience or research do you bring to writing about the Amish? What do you do to make sure you get the details right?**

I write about the Amish in Missouri, where I've spent most of my life, because I know about the lay of the land in the Missouri countryside where there are several Amish communities. I also set my books in Missouri because most other authors write about Lancaster County or other better-known Amish settlements.

I did some extensive on-site research in Jamesport, MO, as I began writing Amish stories back in 2009; and now that I live in St. Paul, MN, I've maintained my friendships with a couple of non-Amish folks who act as my research assistants. Whenever I have a question as I write now, I can email these folks and they in turn consult with their Amish neighbors and give me the insights I need.

### **How does your faith impact how you approach storytelling?**

As a very active choir member and Deacon in my Presbyterian congregation, I'm a big believer in being the hands and feet of Jesus here on earth—giving direct help to those who need it—which is also a value the Amish cherish. Also, I sometimes get story ideas from Sunday sermons, or I take note of scripture passages that would be relevant for the bishops and preachers in my books to use!

### **What do you hope readers take away after reading *Light Shines on Promise Lodge*?**

I'm delighted when readers tell me that my books take them away from their everyday problems—or from the bad news we learn each day about national/world events. If first-time readers find this book, I hope they'll be inspired to read the four books that preceded it, of course!

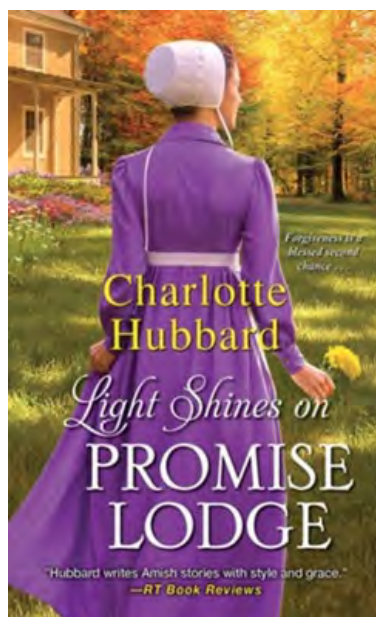
In particular, I hope readers come away from *Light Shines* with a sense that if characters like Gloria and Phineas can rise above their old habits and reconcile their relationships, then any of us have that same chance to make a better life for ourselves and our families.

### **What do you consider the best ways for readers to support their favorite authors?**

Readers best support authors by not only buying their books new (so authors get royalties from those sales) but also by talking up those authors' stories to their friends who read. Online reviews at places like Amazon, BN.com, GoodReads, etc. are also helpful, and so is recommending favorite stories in Facebook groups where readers who enjoy that genre of book will read their recommendations. **FF**

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## Light Shines on Promise Lodge

*Promise Lodge Series #4*

Charlotte Hubbard

Zebra

Amish, Romance

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For abandoned wife Annabelle Beachey, Promise Lodge is a refuge where she's gained confidence and self-sufficiency. But she and others are dismayed when newly arrived Bishop Clayton King claims the community is too progressive

and sets out to change its ways. Worse, her husband, Phineas returns, expecting her to give up her faith as he has. And he won't leave Promise Lodge without her.

But little by little, Annabelle's determination and new forthrightness make Phineas realize his mistakes—and truly hear his wife for the first time. Meanwhile, Annabelle finds herself feeling compassion—and even renewed love—for her newly humble, more caring husband. And as Bishop Clayton's attempt to control Promise Lodge threatens everything its residents have built, Phineas and Annabelle must work together with unshakable courage to save their new home—and their opportunity for forever happiness.

# Historical Sharlene MacLaren

A lover of the English language, **Sharlene MacLaren** has written all kinds of things—including poetry, essays, and articles for periodicals and newspapers. Her favorite thing to write, however, has always been romance. Her latest novel is the Civil War romance ***Her Rebel Heart*** (Whitaker House): When a Confederate widow mistakenly shoots a Yankee soldier, she decides to nurse him back to health. What will happen when she discovers that he's the one who made her a widow? Will her rebel heart forgive him—or finish him off? In this interview, Sharlene explains why she chose the historical setting, the challenges in writing stories based in history, and the spiritual themes behind the book.



## ***Her Rebel Heart* is set during the Civil War.**

### **What inspired you to want to tell this story?**

The American Civil War has always fascinated me. The issues of slavery, the Underground Railroad, Abraham Lincoln's presidency, battles fought, victories won, soldiers from both sides of the spectrum, and the Reconstruction of the South are just a few intriguing topics surrounding the war. Because it's such a widespread era with a vast array of complex situations and problems, inventing stories that encapsulate that period come naturally to me.

In *Her Rebel Heart*, I tried to take one segment of history and build a story around it. War often necessitates men and women leaving behind loved ones to fight for causes bigger than themselves. Such was the case in this story, one Southern woman's





husband leaving her to fight for the Confederate cause only to lose his life at the hand of a Union soldier. As a result, moral and religious questions come into play, and two characters set out to find the paths best suited for them.

### **Did you have any challenges or apprehensions in setting a romance during the Civil War?**

Challenges always abound when writing historical fiction. On the one hand, it's fiction, so there's plenty of room for setting my imagination free; on the other, it's history, and no author wants to "mess with actual fact." So, yes, there is natural apprehension going into writing a historical novel.

As for the romantic element, I am a big believer in romance. Romance can blossom from the driest soil. It can flourish under fire, in the deepest, darkest night, in grief and sorrow, and in hopeless situations. When all else fails, love prevails—a cliché, I know (sorry), but true nonetheless. I love writing romance into my stories because it represents light and hope and goodness.

**Cristina Stiles is the wife of a Confederate soldier, and Jack Fuller is a Union soldier. Presenting both sides of the conflict, which character surprised you most as you told their story?**

In *Her Rebel Heart*, Jack Fuller is a strong, faithful, and trustworthy character. He is a “what you see is what you get” sort of guy. You meet him, and you instantly know you can count on him. His intentions are right, his motives true and pure, and his convictions strong. Clearly, nothing and no one can sway his faith in God.

Cristina Stiles comes off as feisty and strong-willed, but her heart and mind are awash with questions and feelings of insecurity. Who is God? What part does He really play in this world? Does He even exist? If He’s real, why doesn’t He step in and fix all the wrongs? What is my place on this earth, and will I ever be able to find it?

It is Cristina who “surprises” me the most as she learns to navigate life’s complexities. It was so much fun watching her character evolve and her spirit and personality soften before my eyes.

**This is the first in your Hearts of Honor series. Aside from being the intro, how will *Her Rebel Heart* fit into the framework of the series?**

*Her Rebel Heart* is the first in a three-book series titled Hearts of Honor. All three books will have their focus on one of the Fuller brothers. The Fuller Family Farm is located in Lebanon, Ohio, so while book one is set in Ripley, West Virginia, the home of Cristina Stiles, books two and three will have their settings in Lebanon. Book one is set in 1863, book two, 1864, and book three, 1865.

## Did you have spiritual themes you wanted to share in writing *Her Rebel Heart*?

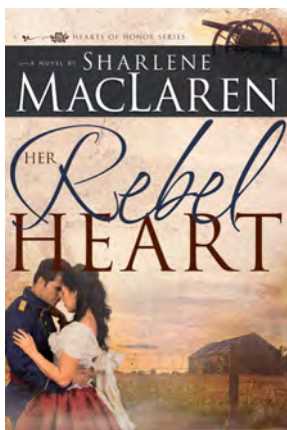
There is always a strong faith element in my stories, and *Her Rebel Heart* is no different. Anyone who reads my books will learn that while I am not “preachy,” I do weave in a gospel message with every story. I don’t want my readers closing the covers on my books with any sort of question remaining as to how to have a genuine relationship with God through Jesus Christ, His son.

I think one of the main lessons to be gained from *Her Rebel Heart* is that God is always with us, whether we’re aware or not. He is in the now of life, just as He was in all our yesterdays. We may not always sense Him, but He’s here—in the sorrow and the joy, in life’s accomplishments as well as the disappointments, in the laughter and the tears, and in the victories and the losses. We have but to seek Him, and He will reveal Himself. **FF**

### Visit Sharlene MacLaren’s author page here:

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***Her Rebel Heart***  
*Hearts of Honor #1*  
Sharlene MacLaren  
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# Historical Susan Anne Mason

**Susan Anne Mason's** historical novel ***Irish Meadows*** won the Fiction from the Heartland contest from the Mid-American Romance Authors chapter of RWA as well as the Christian Retailing's Best Award for Debut Novel. Her latest novel is ***The Brightest of Dreams*** (Bethany House), the third book in her Canadian Crossings series. Quinten Aspinall crossed an ocean to reunite his family—but meeting Julia Holloway makes him question everything. Torn between reuniting his family and protecting Julia, will Quinn have to sacrifice his chance at happiness to finally keep his promise? In this interview, Susan tells us about the historical underpinnings of the story, gives us some background on her leading man and leading lady, and reveals how this standalone story interconnects with the other books in the series.



**This story centers around the British Home Children who came to Canada in the early twentieth century. Can you tell us a little more about the subject?**

I'd be happy to. When this topic was suggested as a possible subject for a book, I confess I'd never heard of the British Home Children before. After doing some research, I was surprised to learn the role they've played in my country's history. From the late 1860's to about 1948, more than one hundred thousand children of all ages were sent from the United Kingdom to Canada to be used as indentured workers, mostly on Canadian farms.



The intention was that the orphans would have a better life in the wide, open spaces of Canada, working until the age of eighteen, at which time they would receive a decent amount of money to start them on their own path in life.

The sad reality is that many children were abused, both physically and emotionally. Often the children were not orphans at all, but victims of hard times, whose parent had placed them in the home temporarily, hoping that when their situation improved, they would reclaim their offspring.

However, by the time this occurred, the children had already been shipped off to Canada. This is the plight of Quinten Aspinall's younger siblings in *The Brightest of Dreams*, and when Quinn comes back from the war, he is devastated to learn that his mother is in a workhouse and his three siblings have been sent to Canada. Thus begins his journey to find them and to ultimately reunite his family.

## **Tell us a little more about your hero in**

### ***The Brightest of Dreams.***

Quinten Aspinall is one of my favorite heroes. He's protective, driven, honorable, and fiercely loyal, almost to a fault. When his father died, he made Quinn promise to provide for the family and to keep them all together. For nine years, Quinn tried his best to do so, working as a valet for an earl, sending every shilling home to his mother for his younger siblings.

When WWI breaks out and Quinn is sent off to war, he has no idea that his mother is in such dire straits or that she has surrendered the children to one of the Barnardo Homes. When he learns that Becky, Cecil and Harry have been sent to Canada as indentured workers, Quinn is devastated and vows to bring them home where they belong.

Of course, I had to add a little romance to the mix, so I added Julia Holloway, a young woman who has 'run off' with a Canadian soldier. Quinn is asked by her uncle to look for her while he's overseas, promising that if he manages to bring her home, he'll be in for a handsome reward.

## **Can you tell us a little more about Julia and her story?**

Without giving away too much, Julia is in dire straits when Quinn finds her living in the slums of Toronto. She came to Canada to help a wounded soldier, but circumstances changed, and she is left with no money, nowhere to live, and no way to get back to England. She ends up living in the worst conditions with a less than scrupulous landlord and soon finds herself running out of options.



Thankfully, Quinn arrives just in the nick of time and though Julia hates to be indebted to Quinn, she can't afford to refuse his help. Things just start to look up for her, when she receives some devastating news that will change her life forever. (Is this enough of a tease to read the book?)

### **What other nuggets can you share with us (without spoilers)?**

*The Brightest of Dreams* is the third book in the Canadian Crossing series, but it is most definitely a standalone book. I did this on purpose so that each of the three books could be read independently of the others. The protagonists of all three stories meet on the ship coming to Canada, each with their own reason for making the voyage. Their individual stories are told separately, but there are a few overlapping characters in all of the books, such as Mrs. Chamberlain, the boarding house owner and Reverend Burke, the local minister, a fun touch that adds a nice consistency to the series.

Mrs. Chamberlain and the minister have been friends for years, supporting each other through the deaths of their spouses. Quinn's arrival at Mrs. Chamberlain's doorstep brings back horrible memories from her childhood, and Rev. Burke helps Mrs. C. find the closure she never received back then. I didn't plan on Mrs. Chamberlain having been a British Home child herself, but the story just evolved on its own and has a fitting tie-in with this last story in the series.

### **What is the overall theme of the book?**

I think the main theme is learning to rely on God to get us through life's hardships. Quinn tries too hard to fix all his family's problems on his own and soon learns that he can't control the actions of others, and that only through prayer and trusting in

God's plan for everyone, can he accept the outcome that occurs.

This story deals with some sober topics, such as physical abuse, but I felt the need to portray events as realistically as possible, without being graphic, in order to do justice to what the real British Home children went through.

I hope readers will love the twists and turns of Quinn and Julia's story as much as I did! **FF**

**Visit Susan Anne Mason's author page here:**

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Susan Anne Mason

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## ***The Brightest of Dreams***

*Canadian Crossings #3*

Susan Anne Mason

Bethany House Publishers

Historical, Romance



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This past August, Hallmark Channel premiered an original movie based on **Melody Carlson's** book ***All Summer Long***. While that opened up more opportunities for this bestselling author, her fans were already in love with her charming novels full of quirky characters, family drama, and sweet romances. Her latest contemporary romance, ***The Happy Camper*** (Revell), will have you scouring Craigslist for your own diamond-in-the-rough camper to restore, and haunting your local hardware store for a handy guy to help your dreams come true. In this interview, Melody explains how a vintage camper brought two people together, offers some background on her Hallmark movie, and shares why contemporary romance is her "sweet spot" genre.



**Melody, would you tell our readers a bit about your latest book, *The Happy Camper*?**

Ready for a change, Dillon Michaels quits her job and heads home to help her ailing grandfather on his farm. But her estranged and eccentric mom is already there and taking over. So Dillon, feeling displaced and confused, questions why she came home. When her grandpa offers her an old vintage trailer, she is thrilled. Despite its dilapidated, mouse-infested condition, she feels like she's won the lottery. Working to restore the sixties camp trailer, Dillon is befriended by hardware store owner Jordan Atwood. And although life and love have their ups and downs, Dillon discovers the secrets to becoming a happy camper.

**Vintage trailers are very popular right now. Can you tell readers how a vintage camp trailer was a key component in bringing two people together?**

Dillon has never set up housekeeping, much less restored a trailer into what she hopes will become her tiny home. But she's determined to go the DIY route. This necessitates numerous trips to the small-town hardware store. Jordan, owner of the store, is also a vintage trailer expert, resulting in a friendship that gets challenged on various fronts.

**What do you hope readers will gain from reading *The Happy Camper*?**

Hopefully, readers will be entertained and maybe learn a thing or two about renovating vintage trailers. (This story is partly inspired by my own journey of restoring an old camp trailer.) But most of all, I'd like readers to see how grace can heal broken relationships, and to experience a feeling of hopefulness when they finish the book.

**Your books are perfect for Hallmark movie fans, and one of your recent titles, *All Summer Long*, was recently made into a Hallmark movie. Can you provide readers with more details on the movie?**

This is my first Hallmark movie—and exciting for me. I traveled to British Columbia to watch the production, which was very interesting since it was partially set on a cool old boat. I loved seeing the production crew and actors at work and hope this will be just the beginning of more film projects.



**You have a gift for creating delightful tales full of quirky characters, family drama, and sweet romance. When did you know that contemporary romance was your sweet spot when it came to writing?**

I guess I knew early on—after receiving some nice awards to confirm it. Being a prolific and somewhat restless writer, I played with those other genres as well. But I feel most at home with contemporary stories that include an interesting cast, some modern conflicts, a fun setting, and an element of romance. Not surprisingly, those are my favorite kinds of books to read as well. **FF**

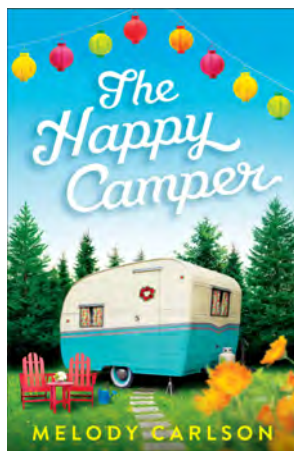
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Melody Carlson

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## ***The Happy Camper***

Melody Carlson

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**Conor Grennan** is the founder of **Next Generation Nepal** (NGN), a nonprofit organization dedicated to reconnecting trafficked children with their families in Nepal. He's also the author of the new speculative children's book ***The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted***



(Thomas Nelson), ideal for fans of the **Chronicles of Narnia**, **Maze Runner**, and the books of **Rick Riordan**. In this interview, Conor explains the parameters of the new book, how his work with NGN impacts his fiction, and the challenges of writing fantastical fiction that's grounded in the Bible.

**Conor, *The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted* has elements that would appeal to fans of all kinds of YA and children's science fiction and fantasy stories. How do you describe it?**

I've always loved the science fiction/fantasy intersection. *The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted* is fantasy in that the Hadley universe is a parallel one to our own, where every person is born with a gift that they can manifest into actual powers if they believe they are unique and if they are courageous enough to actually use their gift.

In Hadley, as in the real world, using one's gift can make you different—and kids are not eager to stand out. But *The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted* has a lot of sci-fi elements in it—you'll find cutting edge technology, artificial intelligence, and some seriously bright kids. It's that combination of deep faith and advanced science that I find so exciting about the story.

## **What inspired you to create this world?**

I wanted to tell the story of how battles are fought in this world against truly dark forces, and how the most dangerous enemies are the ones the world does not even believe exist. I wanted to explore how brilliant, battle-hardened warriors would react when faced with a decision of faith—how do they decide what is true when confronted with what may be myth and what may be fact.

From a personal standpoint, I grew up in the inner city in Jersey City, NJ, and every summer spent a couple of weeks on a small island off the coast of Maine. I used to wish I had a portal through time and space that would let me escape that hard city life and be transported to a place like Elk Island. I wanted to write about that experience.

## **How do you handle the challenges of writing fantastical fiction that's still grounded in a biblical worldview?**

I wanted to tell a story of spiritual warfare, of deep faith, and of reliance on a savior. The Hadley Academy gave me that opportunity. The principles of my Christian faith guided the entire process. In today's world (and especially in my life), we are so often challenged with the question of why we believe what we believe.

I wanted to put my characters in that situation. What do we do when we can sense dark forces rising in the world, when nobody else believes us? What do we do when we know that we have to rely on a savior, and when that reliance changes how we fight those battles? For me, *The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted* is a story of faith and a story of the courage in believing in yourself and what you know to be true in the world, even when you feel completely alone. And how that faith and courage can change the world.



**Your best-selling memoir *Little Princes* details your work as the founder of Next Generation Nepal. How did your experiences working with these children and their families impact how you approached writing *The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted*?**

Working with trafficked kids in Nepal had a huge impact on why I wanted to write Hadley. In Nepal, what I saw over and over were kids who were literally trying to survive, kids who knew that nobody was coming to save them. They had to fight for themselves and fight for each other, every day.

I wanted desperately to write a book where the kids were empowered, where the tables were turned and the adults of the world were relying on them, not the other way around. This was my way of giving those kids a voice and a power that they sometimes don't have in the real world.

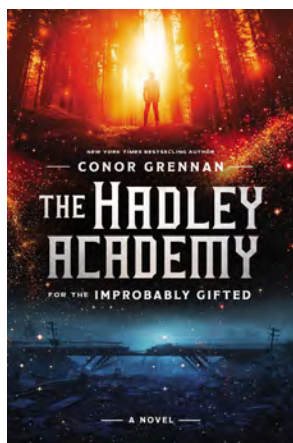
## **What do you hope readers take away after reading *The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted*?**

The biggest take away for readers, I hope, is that we really do all have a gift inside of us. That we are all born with a purpose. The challenge in this world is that we are told over and over not to stand out, not to believe we are special.

We are told to be normal. But we aren't—we are blessed with unique powers that can change the world, each one of us, and sometimes the biggest hurdle is just believing that we have them. In the Hadley Academy, the kids that become the world changing warriors against darkness are the ones who are not afraid to believe that truth. **FF**

### **Visit Conor Grennan's author page here:**

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### ***The Hadley Academy for the Improbably Gifted***

Conor Grennan

Thomas Nelson

Speculative, Children's, YA



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**Tom Threadgill**'s books have a distinct focus on clean, suspenseful action with strong character development. His new novel is ***Collision of Lies*** (Revell): San Antonio police detective Amara Alvarez discovers that a tragic accident involving a school bus full of kids may not be what it seems—and maybe everything law enforcement believes about the accident is a lie. In this interview, Tom shares a bit about his main character, explains how he keeps readers guessing, and reveals what he loves more about suspense fiction.



**Tom, tell us what sparked the idea for your new book, *Collision of Lies*.**

My wife and I don't do much texting. We were at lunch one day and everyone around us was on their phones. For whatever reason (because writers are like that, you know?), I wondered what would happen if a mother received a text from her deceased son.

I don't write paranormal, so I had to take that thought and figure out how to morph it into a realistic situation. That's how all my stories generate. A "what if" that grows into a novel.

**The main character, Amara Alvarez, is a San Antonio police detective. Can you tell us a little about her backstory and why you chose a detective as your main character?**

All my novels (so far) are police procedurals. I'm a sucker for a strong female protagonist, so I knew from the beginning Amara would be the headliner. She grew up in San Antonio and has a strong family connection there.





When the story opens, she's working in Property Crimes but wants to make the move to Homicide to prove she can handle it. Her father died when she was young, and her marriage ended in divorce. Her job is her life, though we get to watch as she questions whether her decisions are the right ones for her future.

Oh, and did I mention she has a three-foot pet iguana named Larry?

**A good thriller keeps readers on their toes and holding their breath with anticipation. How do you keep your readers guessing when you write your novels?**

I'm what's called a "pantser," meaning I write by the seat of my pants. I rarely do much plotting. As a result, I'm never quite sure where the story is going to go. I have an idea of the beginning and end but getting from one to the other is a winding path.

Many times I write myself into a corner and have to figure out how to get my characters out of the situation without crossing

the line into unrealistic action. It's not unusual for me to realize that a character is doing something behind the scenes I was completely unaware of. If I'm surprised, I think the reader will be too.

**What do you hope readers will gain from *Collision of Lies*?**

I write to entertain. My goal is to keep my novels real but avoid the graphic sex and profanity that's so prevalent in books today. I want readers to lose themselves in the story without rolling their eyes at unrealistic characters who make stupid decisions or can't complete a sentence without cursing (or cussin', as we say around here).

**You serve on the thriller/suspense publishing board for Lighthouse Publishing of the Carolinas. What do you love most about reading suspense novels and writing them yourself?**

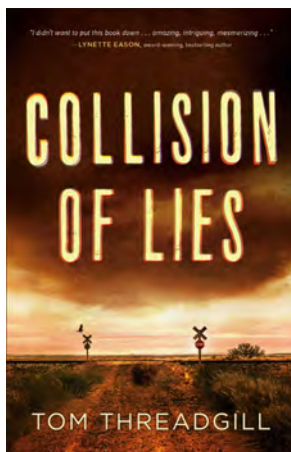
Without question, it's the surprises. The "I didn't see that coming" moments that good novels offer. When an author does it correctly, everything you thought you knew about the story and the characters can be flipped on its head. When I write, my characters often surprise me. They take on their own lives, and there's no point trying to force them to behave. If the characters aren't real, the story isn't either. **FF**

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## ***Collision of Lies***

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Jelly beans, decorating eggs, new clothes, and going to church as a family. For many children, those all represent Easter. However, it's important for them to learn what Easter is really all about. That's where ***Jesus Rose for Me:***

***The True Story of Easter*** (New Growth Press), written by **Jared Kennedy** and illustrated by **Trish Mahoney**, comes in:



The book helps toddlers and preschoolers understand the true meaning of Easter in a personal, memorable way. Created for children ages three to seven, this beautifully illustrated board book begins with Palm Sunday and ends with Easter, when Jesus rose for us. In this interview, Jared explains approaching the material for young readers, how he makes the Bible account more accessible for little ones, and gives us a preview of his upcoming worship book.

***Jesus Rose for Me* sets out to teach toddlers and preschoolers about the true story of Easter. How much are children that young able to grasp about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus?**

You know, toddlers and young preschoolers are learning by rote and by recognition. Here's what I mean by that. Little kids are learning to repeat back stories, verses, and biblical truth; sometimes they do that without a whole lot of thought about what the words and stories mean. But those basic concepts are foundational; learning these truths are essential for kids if they're going to grow up to have a more mature faith later in life.

Think about this for a moment. A two-year-old typically has a 200-word vocabulary while a three-year-old has a 1,500-word vocabulary. That's 1,300 words in a year! Even if we're faithfully learning the "word of the day" along with Alexa, adults might learn 350 or so new words in a year.

But our youngest kids are learning so many brand-new truths! So, when you read to your preschooler about basic Bible concepts—sin, salvation, the cross, the resurrection, Easter, or even the name, Jesus—they're just learning those words and their significance for the first time. Later on, preschoolers will be able to recognize biblical concepts that have been taught before. And, by God's grace, they'll spend their whole lives learning to trust the God those stories point them to.

### **Do you begin the re-telling of the story at the empty tomb or do you start with earlier events?**

*Jesus Rose for Me* tells the events of holy week for preschoolers. It begins with the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, and it includes the last supper in the upper room, and Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. The book ends with Easter, when Jesus rose for us! Children will learn that Jesus is our king, that everyone who trusts Jesus is part of his forever family, that Jesus died for us, and that Jesus rose from the dead; Jesus is alive!

### **How do you interject thoughts and questions into the book to make the Bible story more personal to the little readers?**

Each of the four stories is accompanied by brightly colored illustrations by Trish Mahoney that both highlight the story and add fun interactive elements to keep even the youngest child's attention. I'd encourage parents to read the book slowly, to point out the facial expressions on the Bible people's faces and talk

with their children about how the Bible people in the stories reacted to the events of Easter week. Each of the stories also ends with a question that parents and caregivers can use to further reinforce the key truth of each story.

### **What's the best way to communicate the message of the resurrection to your toddler?**

I can't emphasize enough how important it is just to read and tell the story. According to child psychologists, a "narrative" function emerges in children by age three. That's just science recognizing the truth that God made the human brain so that we think in stories.

Preschoolers are definitely able to grasp the basic plotline of a good story. And, from a young age, toddlers also begin to *tell* stories about their daily lives. As they grow, kids begin to make up even more stories about themselves—about their toys and about imaginative adventures they're going on.

Hearing and telling stories give kids a sense of rooted identity. We want their identity to be rooted in the story of the gospel (Psalm 78). So that's a story we need to tell them again and again. So read the story of the resurrection from a Bible storybook like *Jesus Rose for Me*, and, as your kids get older, have them act out the story. (Peter and John's race to the tomb in John 20 is really fun to act out!)

Another key way to communicate the message of the resurrection is to make it a part of your family traditions. I don't remember how old I was when I learned the Easter greeting, but I do remember my dad waking my brother and I up on Easter morning with the words, "He is risen!" I learned from a very young age what to echo back, "*He is risen, indeed!*"



**In addition to *Jesus Came for Me*, you have another book for kids coming out later in the year. Can you tell us a little bit about it?**

I'm really excited about *God Made Me for Worship* that is coming out in October. The idea for this book came from the fact that as a dad and a children's pastor I understand sitting in a worship service can be a difficult experience for a young child.

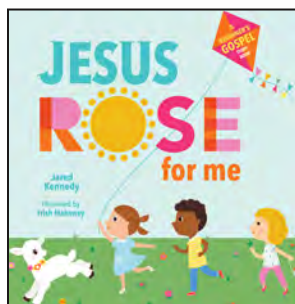
One minute we're singing loudly. The next we have to sit and listen quietly (without talking). Next minute—especially if you're in a more liturgical tradition—the adults are all saying something in unison like "Thanks be to God!"

My goal in *God Made Me for Worship* is to make the complexity of a Christian worship gathering understandable for kids. It uses the story of the prophet Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6 to teach kids (and maybe parents too) that all the parts of worship work together to tell the story of the gospel. **FF**

**Visit Jared Kennedy's author page here:**

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***Jesus Rose for Me***

*The True Story of Easter*

written by Jared Kennedy,

illustrated by Trish Mahoney

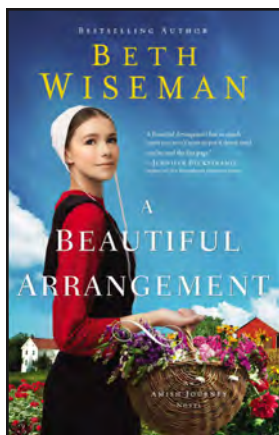
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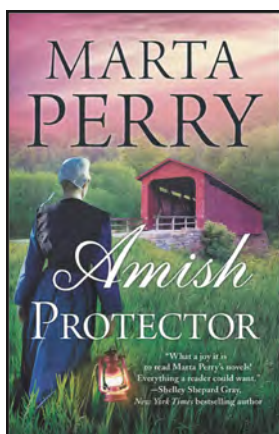
## ***The English Daughter***

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*River Haven #2*

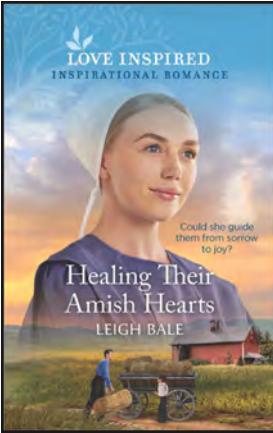
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***Healing Their Amish Hearts***

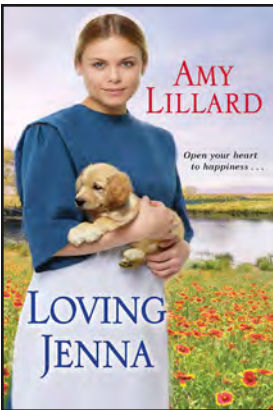
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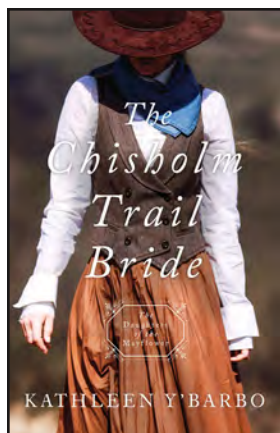
*Carolina Coast #1*

T. I. Lowe

Tyndale House

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### ***Chisholm Trail Bride***

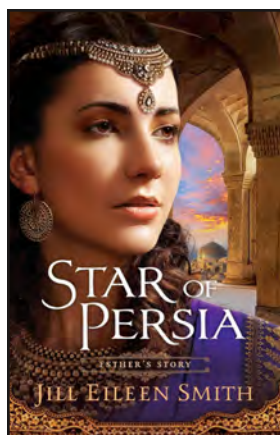
*Daughters of the Mayflower #12*

Kathleen Y'Barbo

Barbour Books

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### ***Star of Persia***

Jill Eileen Smith

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### ***Home to Stay***

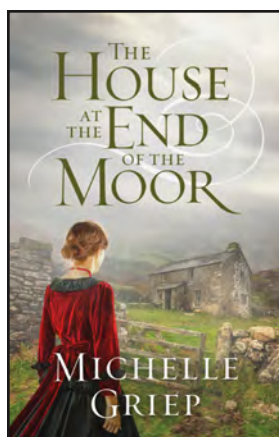
*A Little Child Shall Lead Them #2*

Loree Lough

Zebra Books

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### ***The House at the End of the Moor***

Michelle Griep

Shiloh Run Press

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### ***Isaiah's Legacy***

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### ***Promise at Pebble Creek***

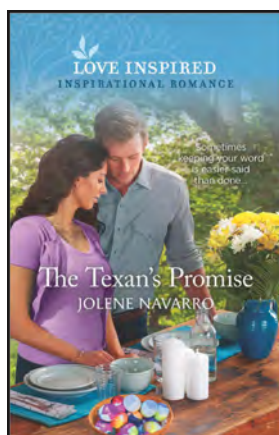
*Hope Chest of Dreams #6*

Lisa Jones Baker

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### ***The Texan's Promise***

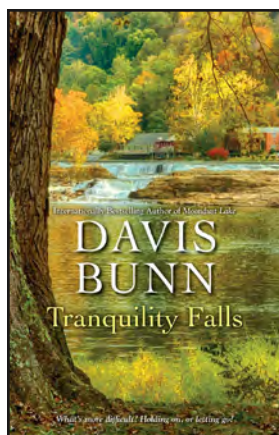
*Cowboys of Diamondback Ranch #3*

Jolene Navarro

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*Miramar Bay #4*

Davis Bunn

Kensington

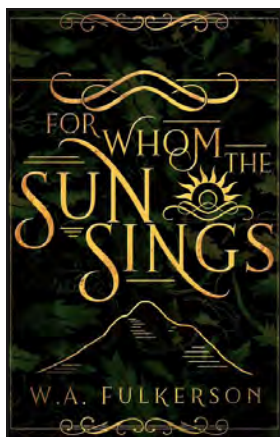
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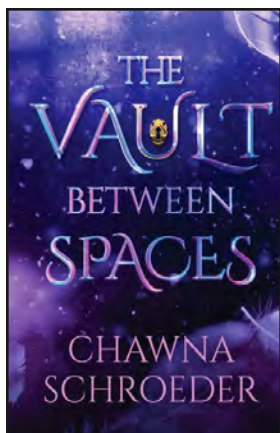
### ***For Whom the Sun Sings***

W. A. Fulkerson

Enclave Escape

**Genres:** Speculative, YA

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### ***The Vault Between Spaces***

Chawna Schroeder

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### ***Hidden Current***

*The Dancing Realms #1*

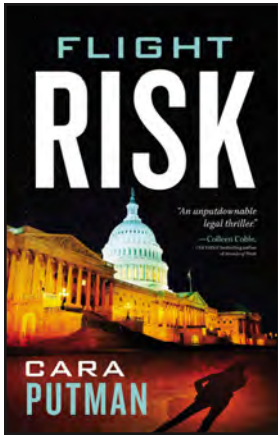
Sharon Hinck

Enclave Publishing

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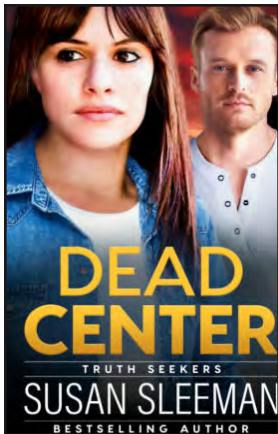


***Flight Risk***

Cara Putman

Thomas Nelson

**Genres:** Suspense, Romance



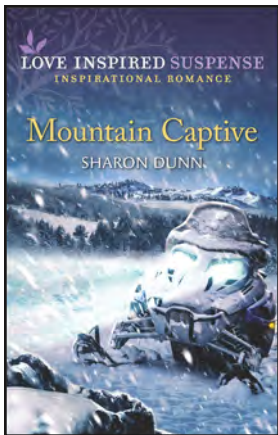
***Dead Center***

*Truth Seekers #5*

Susan Sleeman

Edge of Your Seat Books

**Genres:** Suspense, Romance



***Mountain Captive***

Sharon Dunn

Love Inspired Suspense

**Genres:** Suspense, Romance



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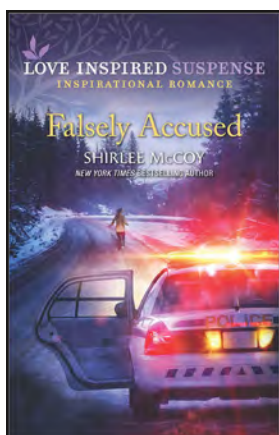
### ***The Traitor's Pawn***

Lisa Harris

Revell

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### ***Falsely Accused***

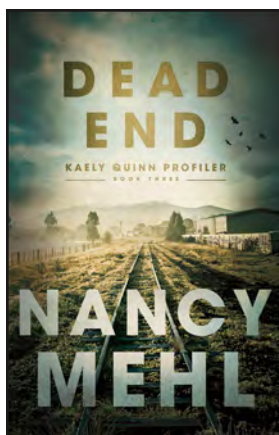
*FBI: Special Crimes Unit #5*

Shirlee McCoy

Love Inspired Suspense

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### ***Dead End***

Kaely Quinn Profiler

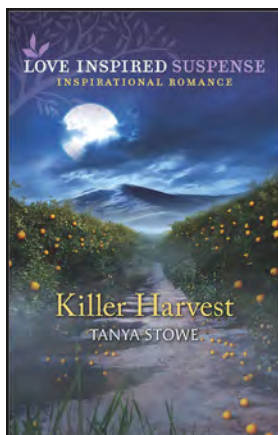
Nancy Mehl

Bethany House Publishers

**Genres:** Suspense

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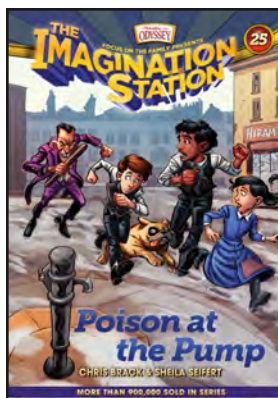
### ***Killer Harvest***

Tanya Stowe

Love Inspired Suspense

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### ***Imagination Station***

*Poison at the Pump*

Chris Brack and Sheila Seifert

Focus on the Family

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### ***Hunger Winter***

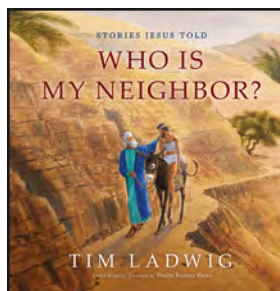
Rob Currie

Tyndale House Publishers

**Genres:** Children's, Historical

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### ***Stories Jesus Told***

*Who is My Neighbor?*

Tim Ladwig

Our Daily Bread Publishing

**Genres:** Children's

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### ***On the Edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness***

*The Wingfeather Saga #1*

Andrew Peterson

WaterBrook

**Genres:** Children's

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### ***North! Or Be Eaten***

*The Wingfeather Saga #2*

Andrew Peterson

WaterBrook

**Genres:** Children's

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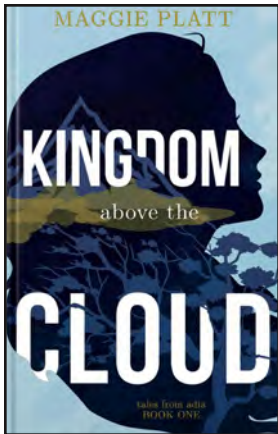


***Once Upon an Irish Summer***

Wendy Wilson Spooner

Ambassador International

**Genres:** YA, Historical, Romance



***Kingdom Above the Clouds***

Maggie Platt

Ambassador International

**Genres:** YA, Speculative



***Ansley's Big Bake-Off***

Faithgirlz/The Daniels Sisters #1

Kaitlyn Pitts, Olivia Pitts & Camryn Pitts

with Janel Rodriguez-Ferrer

Zonderkidz

**Genres:** Children's



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