



Author Q & A

**Shorter answers are highlighted*

You write historical fiction for the inspirational market. What drew you to both?

Misery! That's the short answer. I started my first novel, *Missing Isaac*, during the recession that hit all of us hard back in 2008 or so. It was an especially unhappy time for me at a job where I had always been very happy—at *Southern Living* magazine. Writing that book was a way to free my mind from all the layoffs and stress and upheaval. And there was so much despair in the world that I just wanted to go back to a time and place where people felt more connected to each other, even though it was also a time of great upheaval. The characters I wanted to bring to life would have been people of faith, given their time and place. So for me, their Christian walk was just a natural part of their story. It wasn't contrived at all. It was just who they were. The book naturally fit in the inspirational market—and took me with it. Landing there has been a real and unexpected blessing in my life.

What makes your stories unique to this genre?

I don't consider myself a Christian writer who happens to be from the South; I consider myself a Southern writer who has a Christian worldview. Maybe it's a subtle difference, but it colors the way I approach stories. And the historical element is a function of my own fascination with the past. What makes my stories unique, I think, is that they're all set in places I know. I ground every story in a place I've lived or explored, either on my

own or for *Southern Living*, where I've been trained to "take readers there." And I've spent my entire life in the South. I think that—plus my tendency to dip into my own Southern family's oral history—lends authenticity to my stories.

Why is this genre important to you personally?

Christians and Southerners are, I think, two of the most misrepresented and misunderstood groups out there. So the idea of Southern stories with Christian characters gives me an opportunity to show both the way I know them to be. I'm attracted to the historical element because I'm fascinated with the past, and I'm fascinated with the past because I grew up in the rural Alabama of the 1960s and 70s—no cell phones, no internet, no streaming or cable. We entertained each other by telling stories. I have this wellspring of oral history from my family that I can draw on. And I've been to some amazing Southern places where I'd love to take readers.

How long have you been writing?

Forever. Just ask Mama☺ I've always written, even as a little kid. Literature and history were my favorite subjects in school. At Auburn and Baylor, I earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature. And then I've worked in magazines for nearly 30 years. I've been the senior travel editor for *Southern Living* since 2016, but I've been associated with the magazine, in one capacity or another, since the late 80s.

What are the most critical elements of a good story?

For me, everything starts with place and time. Then comes character. That's not exactly an original thought on my part—it's kind of a tradition in Southern fiction. But I do believe that everything starts with place—the place where you live, the place you love best, or maybe even the place you dread most—any of those can determine so much about you. Time is also critical. The Southern past is more fertile ground for the kind of stories I like to tell than the modern South, so that's where I gravitate. Once you know when and where, you can figure out who—who are the compelling characters that will live and breathe in your story. I always like to include a romantic element in my books because it gives the story heart—literally and figuratively—and readers just enjoy watching those relationships unfold.

Are your stories inspired by real people, places, and events?

In many cases, yes. My family's oral history is a huge part of my stories. *The Key to Everything* is inspired by a true story that a friend of mine told me about her dad, who rode his bike from Georgia to Key West when he was only 15. Most of my books aren't that closely based on real events, but I do cherry pick from family history. The cholera epidemic remembered in *Missing Isaac*, for example, really happened, and Picketts' Hollow in that story is based on a real place. *Almost Home* is based on family stories of World War II, when my great-aunt and great-uncle turned their old Southern homeplace into a boarding house. The tent revival scene in that book is loosely based on something I experienced in the Mississippi Delta while researching a *Southern Living* story.

How would you describe your voice as a writer?

Oh dear. I don't know! I can say that I strive for authenticity—believable, realistic dialog and narrative that doesn't distract. I don't want readers to be aware of me. I want them to be absorbed in the story. Many of them have told me they feel like they're watching my books instead of reading them, which I find interesting, though I'm not quite sure how it happens.

What universal themes do you think draw readers into your stories?

I'm very interested in community—how we're all connected as human beings in general but also within the defined spaces of a town or even a boarding house. Fairness and justice and the disparities that hinder both are often threads within my stories. And most of all, I guess, is the innate dignity of every human being by virtue of being made in God's image, regardless of social or economic status.

Where did you grow up, and where do you live and write now?

I grew up in a really small town called Harpersville, Alabama, about 30-ish miles southeast of Birmingham. Daddy is a retired millworker, and my mother's family has farmed cotton in that community for probably four generations. So I grew up wading creeks and playing in cotton wagons. Both of my parents are nature lovers, and they took every opportunity to instill that in me, which I'm very grateful for. My husband, Dave, and I live in Birmingham. He had my "Story Shack" built for me in our yard (so I would quit trying to take over his home office). It's definitely my happy place for writing.

When you aren't writing, what do you like to do?

Music has always been a huge part of my life, which you can probably see in my stories because I often mention particular songs or artists. My husband and I commute to my hometown on Sundays so I can play the piano for my home church—and so we can have Sunday dinner at Mama's table.

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