

"Writing is the painting of the voice."
— Voltaire



- Hugh Blanton • Jim Murdoch • Louis Marvin
- Juliet Lockwood • John Grey • Billie Corley
- Katherine Hutchinson-Hayes
- C.C. Robinson • Tricia Copeland

February 2026

FROM THE PUBLISHER



I started Books & Pieces Magazine in 2017 with the hope that interest in the magazine would spur advertisers and help me to fund authors as well as make an income of sorts.

What I found was that submissions were never the problem, but getting advertisers was extraordinarily difficult. Go figure.

So, with a heavy heart, almost ten years later, I am shutting down the magazine after this issue. The site will remain with the archive issues.

With that said, enjoy this final issue. Thanks to all the writers and readers who have stuck with me. And my best wishes that you can place your work elsewhere.

Regards,

William Gensburger

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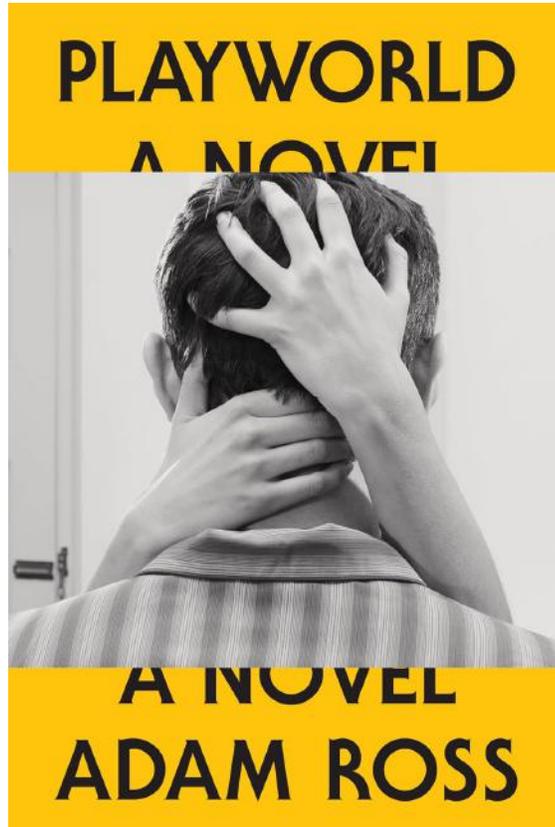
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Maxwell Perkins, Where Are You?

A book review of Adam Ross's novel *Playworld*, published by Knopf in January 2025, by Hugh Blanton

When Louis Menand reviewed Garth Risk Hallberg's 2015 novel *City on Fire* he said the "nine-hundred-and-forty-four page novel is about four hundred pages too long." Adam Ross's latest novel, *Playworld*, clocks in at five-hundred-and-two pages and never would have made it past the great editor Maxwell Perkins' desk without having at least a couple of hundred cut. Ross shows off his 1980's New York City chops by giving us minute, detailed directions every time a character walks or drives the Manhattan streets turn by turn, building by building, even window by window. Throw on top of that the overdescription that Ross indulges in, and you've got a bloated coming-of-age story going covering only a school year and summer vacation.

Griffin Hurt is a fourteen-year-old child actor starring in the Saturday morning television series *The Nuclear Family*. Griffin's father, Shel Hurt, is a voice-over actor and Broadway B-lister still waiting for his first big break. While Griffin's career is already surpassing that of his father's (in addition to his TV



series, Griffin gets an offer for a role in a major motion picture, and then another offer after completing that one), there's very little tension between the two of them; Shel is genuinely happy for his son's success. Readers already familiar with Adam Ross might suspect *Playworld* is autobiographical—Ross himself was a child actor who starred in the movie *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* when he was twelve

years old. And of course they'd be right. In an interview with Lit Hub Ross said, "I wanted to write a novel that captured the essence of my childhood, one that rhymed with my life as a young adult." Ross's mother was an instruction model for the famous Joseph Pilates, as is Griffin's mother Lily in *Playworld*.

Playworld is divided into two parts: Part One is "The Carter Administration," and Part Two is "The Reagan Administration." These are somewhat odd choices for titles, the politics of the time only hover in the background of the story. Although millionaire businessman Sam Shah, a friend of Griffin's family, is elated

at Reagan's election:

"The middle class grows," Sam said, "the middle class needs cheap clothes. When I was your age, when it was time for me to go into the family business, this fact was as bright as that lighthouse's lantern back there. But of this, I was sure: open up the borders, get rid of the tariffs, manufacture overseas to reduce your labor costs and increase your margins. Deregulate all of it, and then it's just an equation. You, the government, you cut my taxes to swell the middle, even if the middle isn't what it used to be, and guess what? The middle's less will become my more, and the only solution when the economy tanks will be to tax me even less, while I laugh all the way to the bank. The next few decades—it's going to be like having a bucket when it rains."

While Sam is gloating over his fortune to young Griffin, he's unaware that his wife Naomi has been seducing Griffin in the back seat of her Mercedes nearly every day after school.

Playworld is a Gen-X novel through and through. Kids grew up then with very little parental supervision; they walked to school alone, rode bikes without wearing helmets, played phone pranks, and had fake ID's. Griffin is left alone for long stretches—his father Shel, goes on tour with his play, his mother Lil, goes to stay with her parents in Virginia after Shel and Lil's marriage starts to crumble (she suspects him of having an affair with a co-actress). Griffin wonders why he hasn't seen his younger brother Oren in weeks—

turns out Oren got a job waiting tables in a high-volume restaurant and loved it so much he enrolled in cooking school. All the while that Naomi is seducing Griffin in the back seat of her car, Griffin has his eye on a girl closer to his age, Amanda. Amanda attends a private school across the street from where Griffin is working on his movie's set; it was love at first sight when he saw her walking up the steps to the school entrance. In something straight out of a bad RomCom, Griffin dashes across the street, connives entry, and crashes an audition for a school play that's in progress as Amanda watches.

Ross has no fear of name dropping, Griffin's father coached Lauren Bacall in *Applause*, and was a voice coach to Anthony Quinn. When Griffin was in first grade he was filmed with Muhammad Ali on Alan Funt's *Candid Camera*. Pulitzer Prize winning writer and director Joshua Logan casts Griffin's father in *Musical Moments*. Broadway aficionados will also recognize the composer Hershy Kay (Kay died in 1981) here trying for one last hurrah in a play that casts Griffin's father in a leading role. Griffin, his mother, and his brother go to watch the rehearsal. Hershy Kay, José Ferrer, and Abe Fountain (Abe at sixty-three is the youngest of the triumvirate), walk out onto the stage before the rehearsal begins for introductions:

So that even here, at the start, the rehearsal had about it an aura of a curtain call. But there was another layer that made these introductions so memorable. These men were so obviously

one another's people, a family, as Al Moretti liked to say, that they chose. They had gravitated to performance, here, to the stage, as a means of belonging. Here, where they put on the masks that had, by now, grafted to their skin, behind which they were at once safe and allowed to be successful. Here, where they could be at home and hide in plain sight, until opening night, when the world decided, once again, whether it approved.

After opening night, the cast gathers at Sardi's Restaurant for a party and to await the first reviews from the New York papers just off the delivery trucks. The New York Times comes in first and the review was devastatingly bad. "True, Fountain and Kay are still capable of the stratospheric showstopper, but in spite of these soaring moments "Sam and Sara" fails to launch." However, Griffin's father, Shel and his duet partner, Katie, get a mention: "These standouts, Shel Hurt and Katie Deal, are not only fully recognized characters, but also heartbreaking in their roles. Their final duet is by far the show's outstanding number." With the cast dejected by the stinging review, Shel is unable to celebrate.

Griffin and his whole family, in fact, are in therapy and they all see the same therapist one after another on weekends. Griffin doesn't tell the therapist, Elliot, about his trysts with Naomi; he, in fact toys with him:

I'd continue talking as his lids got heavy—bemoaning my struggles in math, say, or expressing my excitement about

the approach of wrestling season—waiting for him to nod off, his body listing sideways while I counted his catnap's seconds, beginning a new subject the moment he snapped awake, just to see if he was listening, which he was not. "Is that right?" Elliot asked, his eyes red-rimmed and glassy, and I'd continue down this different path, enjoying myself in an animal-trainer sort of way, watching Elliot drift again, trying to beat his previous snooze's duration, counting Mississippi until his head jerked violently and he said, "How about we go for a walk?"

Griffin loves wrestling more than he loves acting. When his agent books him with a little too much acting work he puts his foot down and tells him no more work during wrestling season. (Griffin works on *The Nuclear Family* during summer vacations.) Griffin has trouble, though, keeping his weight down to stay in his weight class. His coach rides him so hard to lose weight, Griffin becomes ill and when his mother finds out about it she calls the school to complain. The coach is fired. Griffin did not like Coach Kepplemen anyway; Kepplemen often practiced-wrestled with Griffin in inappropriate places—including Coach Kepplemen's bedroom (Kepplemen in athletic gear sans underclothes).

Ross's debut novel, *Mr. Peanut* (Knopf, 2010), was a New Yorker Best Book of the Year and Michiko Kakutani proclaimed it "announces the debut of an enormously talented writer." It was a whodunit (kind of) about a woman who

died from an allergic reaction to peanuts. Waiting fifteen years between novels shows Ross is in no hurry to climb the literary ladder of success, letting his MFA from Washington State in St. Louis go yellow in a drawer. Playworld, the heap of a novel that it is, gets its vibrancy from Griffin's retrospective first person narration marking time with Gen-X mileposts like the Prince Charles/Lady Di wedding, the Iran hostage crisis, the shooting of John Lennon, the FAA strike. Studio 54 gets many mentions, although Griffin himself never goes there. Nearly all of his friends do, but the story itself doesn't go there either—it's just another one of those things that keeps us rooted in where (and when!) we are.

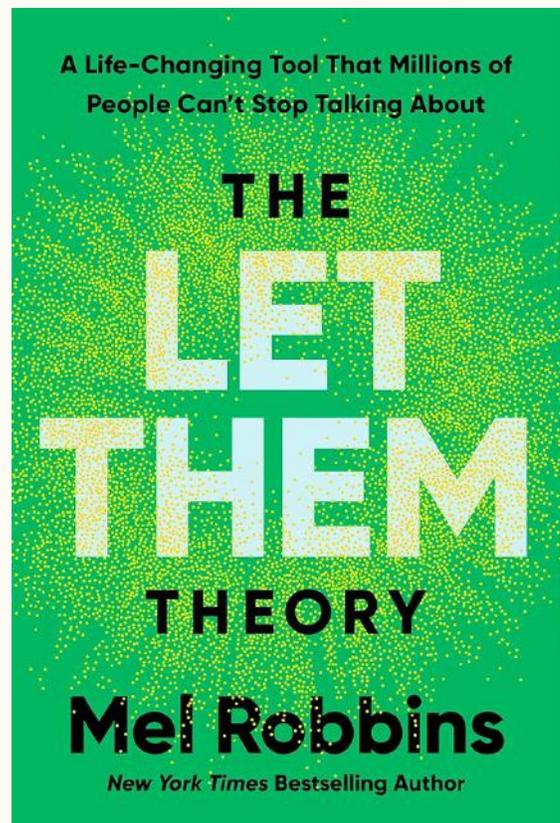
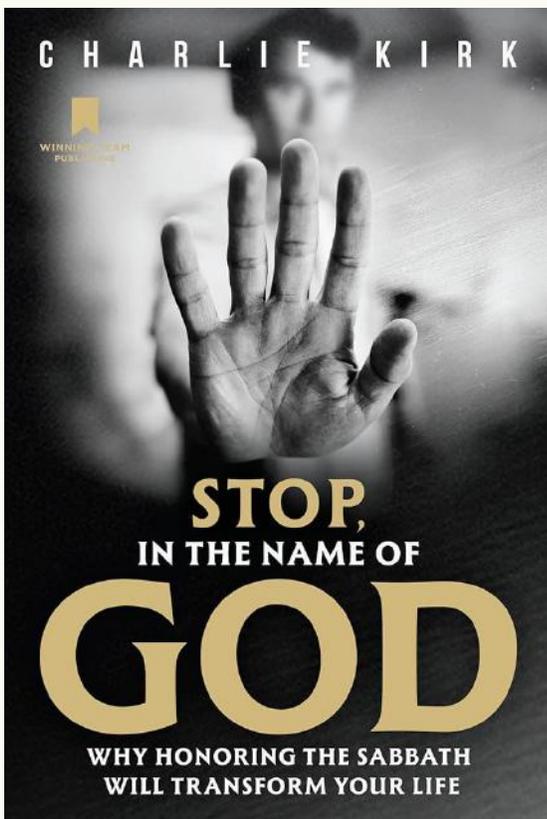
Autobiographical fiction gets a bad rap these days. Derided as "autofiction,"

critics tend to look down on it as a self indulgent way for narcissists to present themselves in meandering plotless stories. Whether or not a novel is autobiographical shouldn't be the question, the question should always be "Is this a good story?" However, I have to admit that as I read Playworld I couldn't stop wondering whether or not there's a real Naomi Shah out there somewhere reading it too—and begging her therapist for a higher dosage SSRI.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hugh Blanton's latest book is Kentucky Outlaw. He can be reached on X [@HughBlanton5](https://twitter.com/HughBlanton5).



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The Pooh Brooch

A story by Jim Murdoch

Some of this story is true. Most of it. Actually, all of it is and much of it happened more or less the way I tell it—but not all of it. Does that spoil it for you? Things don't need to happen to be true; truth is a part of everything, even made-up stuff. I won't tell you the bits I've made up or changed because there's no need. Let me play the omniscient observer and you'll never have to worry whether I was one of the leads, some third party who got told this in a pub or maybe I'm just the author. None of that is especially important and it won't be.

Neither of the individuals in our story understands love but we all know that it's the one emotional state that plays the most havoc with our senses: we see love where it is not, we hear it expressed in everyday conversation, we feel it because we need it. When one person is this desperate it is sad but when there are two people involved, it is tragic. She's in her late thirties, a widow, still pretty when she wants to be. Her husband could just have easily left her for another woman. That he left her for nothing was the hardest thing to take. It wasn't an accident. If it had been a drug overdose, she might've talked herself into believing he didn't mean it. No one cuts their wrists by accident no matter how drunk they are. She's a Liverpudlian. It was the accent that first attracted both her husband and our hero to her; she talked like The Beatles. He's about the

same age, our hero. He abandoned his wife to chase bright young things but couldn't keep up and lost heart. Don't be too hard on him, he was younger then and we all make bad calls from time to time, some that even affect the rest of our lives. He's a teacher and for a while they thought they were a couple.

Do you see that guy by the pillar box? That's him, in that baggy raincoat he thinks makes him look like Harrison Ford. He doesn't realise he'll end up as a character in a story any more than, one supposes, Harrison Ford ever imagined he'd wind up being the face of Han Solo forever. Our hero's life is very real to him and what he is doing this minute is particularly important. His has, up till now, been something of an uneventful life, the break-up of his marriage aside and that simply went by the numbers; she got the house, the car, the kid and he got to hold onto his Pink Floyd originals and all the photos. Even this event, the slipping of a small package into the slot, is nothing to write home about but it matters to him and, as such, since he is one of the subjects of our tale, its contents should be of interest to us.

They've said their good-byes. They were simple, necessary, and painful. She made the decision. It was hard but she felt it was right. After her husband's suicide she'd strayed from one man to the next, like some lost puppy, trying to

make some sense out of what'd happened, looking for love, looking for sex, looking for some reassurance that it wasn't her fault. Now one of these past relationships had come back to life and had lured her away with promises of a good life, security. What's a girl to do? Look after Number One—that's what.

The parcel contains a letter—you expected to discover that much—and a brooch. Even though they have said goodbye, both are for her. It's a tacky brooch, cheap—more of a badge to be honest—but it caught his eye and sparked his imagination. He's nervous. You can see that. Our hero is human. He wouldn't be believable otherwise. It's understandable because once he lets go of that envelope, then he's committed. The brooch is of a cartoon, ceramic Pooh hanging onto a balloon for dear life from one of the original illustrations by Ernest Shepherd. He has no idea if it's her style but that's not its point. He's not even sure if she has any affection for Winnie the Pooh—strange the things they never found time to talk about—but what the heck? Would you like to read the letter? It's not long.

Dear Jill

It's hard holding onto things in this life. There's always something pulling you down. The same can be said of letting go. It's just as hard to know when to let go or how. You have to decide. You can hang onto what you have and see where the winds of change carry you or

you can let go and hope there's someone there to catch you. If what you have just now is precious then hang on with everything you've got but, if you have any doubts, then let go before this thing carries you too far away. I'm still here. Just be sure.

Love, Jack.

Of course that's not their real names. I didn't use them because they don't matter. Fill in any others that come to mind, Romeo and Juliet, Arthur and Marilyn, Fred and Wilma. Believe me, it's for the best that you don't know the names because that would cloud your judgement. She's not the first girl to turn back to an old flame and he's not the first man to do the decent thing.

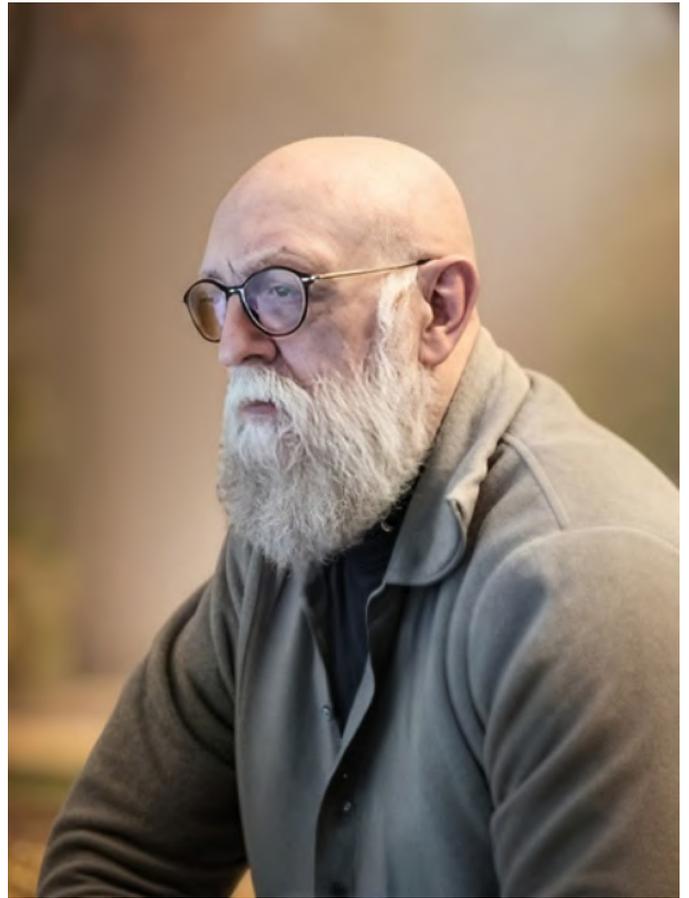
To his credit he never wrote again and she never replied but it brought some kind of closure to the relationship, for both of them. He couldn't know back then that he'd see her once more, two years down the road, at a funeral of a common acquaintance, and that their eyes would meet across the church and he'd know she's still hanging on but that her arms are getting tired. It's just as well we don't know what the future's likely to bring. If he had, might he not have waited to see and missed meeting the woman who'll be standing next to him in the pew, the one he'll end up spending the rest of his life with?

People should know when it's time to move on, when they've used up everything or everyone around themselves. With animals it's instinct.

Humans make such a palaver about it, we philosophise about it, anguish over it and sentimentalise it but, at the end of the day, we either let go or we get dragged off. It's as simple as that. You can sit there and have a think about it or you can just sit. It won't change anything or make any of this less true. Not even the made-up bits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Murdoch is a Scottish writer living in Cumbernauld. He's been writing for over fifty years and his list of rejections is voluminous but he keeps at it. He's written most things over the years—novels, stories, songs, even plays—but he thinks of himself primarily as a poet. For ten years he ran the literary blog The Truth About Lies but now lives quietly in Scotland with his wife and, whenever the mood takes him, next door's cat. He has published two books of poetry, a short story collection and four novels: Jim, not



the cat.

Read more at <https://www.pikerpress.com/authors/showauthor.php?aID=715>

A large, bold, serif letter 'G' in a dark brown color, set against a light beige background. The 'G' is the first letter of the name Greg Luti.

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An Ode to Rescuers

A poem by Louis Marvin

To the quick and the spirits who ride in my mind's stagecoach

I pen an ode to you rescuers one and all

For some redeeming value attracted me to you now and then

You pulled with love, deed, hands or gracious goodness

*Pulled me from life wreckage, wildfires of the soul,
catastrophes at work or destroyed relationships, bringing pops
and wails of those injured and lost in the flames*

*You fed me chicken soup, and bedded me in warm covers
changing my heart and soul bandages--the stink of infected,
sad life*

*But this putrid time, this pain and blight sets the scene for the
heavily heaved sigh and a coming up for air to smell the roses
again*

ABOUT THE POET

Louis Marvin has been published on the page, in anthologies, in the archives at ASU (Tempe), in spoken word where the Gin Blossoms played, in newspapers, and of course in this magazine.

BREAKFAST WITH TIA

A story by Juliet Lockwood

I stare out the diner window at the waves of the Atlantic scraping compulsively up the coast. The smell of the sea air wafts through the open window above my head, mixing with the smells of frying butter, bacon and brewing coffee.

So pleasant, I muse, so unlike the five long years of my life spent here. Tomorrow, I'll leave this urban sprawl forever, and I couldn't be happier about that. Like someone's henchman, this town, big, undereducated, just there to knock you on your ass with its meaty fists, and I've been thoroughly bloodied.

When Tia announces her arrival by tapping my shoulder, I turn, forgiving her instantly, like I always do. That unsinkable smile wins my heart every time, and I can't help but appreciate how earnest she looks, like this will mark the beginning of our friendship's renovation. I've believed it so many times; only now, it's too late no matter how genuinely glad we are to see each other.

"Hey, Sweetie," she begins, "did you eat?"

"No, but I ordered," I say, passing her my menu.

"Good," she replies, flipping it open. She's so petite, and I feel self-conscious for a moment. I've ordered eggs, pancakes, bacon, and toast, way more than I should probably be eating, but Tia, as if she understands and wants to put me at ease, orders an omelet, French toast, and sausage.

The sounds of sizzling from the grill, conversation from the five other stools at the bar and the breaking of the waves on the shore outside parse together dissonantly, much like the contradictory feelings I've had about this friendship over the past 12 months.

Tia used to be one of the few people in this crappy city who I knew would call me back, and then about a year ago, she just stopped. Message after message, and finally I gave up. Women treating each other poorly, or more often outright cruelly, certainly accounted for a large part of this city's brass knuckles, but that was not the Tia I knew.

Then, she'd pop up out of the sand again, just long enough to make plans that she would later call to cancel. I told myself time and again that no one who acted that way could really care about me, and then some snippet, some short visit, even a phone conversation, and I'd

forgive again. When I was with her, when I talked to her, I never doubted her sincerity.

My food arrives. I look over at Tia who hasn't gotten her breakfast yet. "I'll steal this piece of bacon," she says, "and that way, you can go ahead and eat. I'm sure mine's almost ready."

"Thanks," I reply. "So how did your show go?"

"It was awesome," Tia says excitedly. "Those girls practiced every night the past two weeks. They were so committed." I can just picture Tia out in the middle of the studio floor, the same studio where we met in adult ballet, powering five teenage dancers through their paces. She would be shorter than most of them, but emitting that energy that made her seem so tall, so very irresistible. "How's your week been?" she asks.

I laugh. "Completely crazy! My brother and his fiancé drove back from my parents' house in Kentucky on Monday, we packed up the moving truck on Tuesday, they left with it Wednesday morning, and Todd and I made two trips to the dump on Thursday, not to mention how many hours I've spent at work tying up loose ends. We have that going-away party tonight; then, we have to get up at 4:00 a.m. tomorrow to give the cats their tranquilizer pills. We have to be at the airport at 4:45."

"I am so sorry I can't make the party tonight," Tia says as two plates of food are set in front of her. "It's just that Mark

and I have these tickets, and he's being such a sweetie lately."

I can't help frowning a little at the mention of Tia's boyfriend. All I usually hear about him is how he loses his temper and throws furniture around, how he threatens to throw her out and then begs her to take him back. It's hard to say whether it was more his Jekyll-and-Hyde routine or Tia's unwillingness to cut him out of her life that most damaged our friendship. She knows my feelings, and I have no doubt they are part of the reason she stopped calling me.

Tia sees the look on my face. "He really has. He's going to counseling, and he got us these tickets. He's a changed man, I'm telling you." I think back on all the times I've heard this before, but I look at Tia and soften my eyes.

"Well good, he better stay that way this time, because if he doesn't, I'll personally come back from Oregon and kick his ass." We both laugh, our giggles drifting up to the ceiling along with the steam from the coffee pot and the vaporous heat from the griddle. Over the next several minutes we sop up as much friendship as we can, dipping into conversation again and again and sucking the fat out of it.

With cleaned plates, we pay our tab before walking out to the ocean where I've vowed to put my feet into the Atlantic one last time before flying away to the opposite coast to begin a new life. I spent some of my very best times in this wretched city right here on this piece of

shoreline. It seemed the one place to gain clarity, to remember how much more the world had to offer me than what made up my life here.

I hold my shoes and socks in a bundle in one hand. On this first week of May, the winter-cold water makes my toes cramp. I kick up the spray, sending it in small droplets back at the oncoming waves, their tiny splashes silently saying all that's in my heart.

My other hand holds Tia's, and we both stare out to sea, stomping our feet in the surf, looking I imagine, a lot like the wild ponies who live just a few miles down the beach in the wildlife refuge.

In this moment, inspired by the hold I have on Tia's hand and the way I feel about her, I forgive this crummy town too, for being too full of people who have no desire to see beyond its borders, for being a community that fails to understand the value of the arts, for being a city where it's every woman for herself and speaking to another causes her to raise her eyebrows in distrust.

I pardon it all, only for these precious few seconds when I can hold Tia's hand and stare out at the expansive Atlantic. I am the wave cresting, pulling everything into me, ready to crash into the next chapter of my life, and being this high and riding this close to change, for this split second, forgiveness comes easy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Poet and author Juliet Lockwood (she/her) enjoyed her first literary acceptance at 18 with a poem in "The Magnetic Poetry Book of Poetry" under her maiden name



Juliet Bishop. Her short stories have appeared in several publications including "Scarlet Leaf Review," "Brown Bag Online," and "New American Legends." Twice a finalist in the Daisy Pettles Women's Writing Contest, she has advanced to round two (or better) in NYCMidnight's fiction challenges six times since 2016. In 2021, she published "Lockwood Legacy: Three Generations of Poetry" with her mother Catherine Bishop. She is a member of Wordcrafters in Eugene and has held various leadership/teaching roles through Willamette Writers and Rogue Writers Collective. In her small Pacific Northwest town, she's as likely to be found marveling at her older son's virtual inventions as trying to keep up with her younger son on his unicycle. Read more of her work on Patreon.

<https://www.patreon.com/lockwood5>

Five Poems

by John Grey

KICKING THE HABITS

My shift starts when the streetlights blink on.
Some blokes dig ditches. I kick habits.
There's no season for habits,
but the worst of them slink out sundown
like fireflies drunk on their own lights.
I spot them - we get twitchy together.

People can't help themselves, sometimes.
We need habits to keep us going.
Swiss army knife habits,
multi-tool, something small and handy.
They help with the grip.
And the wide-awake eyes.
But we need to kick them
just when they feel most good to us.

Saw my mother drink from a secret stash once.
And my old man, many times, home from the bar,
full to the tonsils and jangling.
Their habits were like seeds sown in their teenage years,
that'd been sprouting for years.
To kill them would have taken a poison pill.
They didn't have the heart.

Habits can be cruel
when they sniff out dependencies.
Like I need to eat
and I don't like emptiness.
I need to think
but I've nothing to think about.

They depend on me, those habits,
build off my surrenders.
They tell me kicking them out could be fatal.

I show them the door anyhow.
It's not easy watching habits leave.
But kicking them up the rear end helps.

SETTING A GOOD BAD EXAMPLE

It's the fiftieth time this month
that Dave's been pointed out
by a mother dragging
her young son behind.
"That's how you'll end up if
you don't do your homework,"
she says.
Or if he doesn't wash his hands
before dinner.
Or say his prayers.
Or kiss his wrinkled grandmother
on the cheek.

Dirty shirt,
unwashed hair,
holes in pockets, in shoes...
how many people's futures
can one man be?

THE ONE AMONG US

He showed up
as the gathering was winding down.
He did say his name
but no one quite heard it.

But he looked like he belonged.
There was so much
of our extended family in his face.

His age was difficult to determine.
The corrugated tin face,
torn leather hands,
spoke more of hard work
than years.

And he didn't come by car or taxi.
He must have walked
though I've no idea where from.

Instead of explanations,
he told stories,
invoked memories
that others no longer had.

Of course, everyone knew him.
At least, they recognized him
in themselves.
They just couldn't put a name to the man.
And they would have felt dumb
referring to him by their own.

THE NEIGHBORLY WATCH

From the kitchen window which looks
out on the house next door,
I see a color paint I would never choose,
and curtains so dark and dismal,
they belong in a funeral parlor.

And then there's the ones who live there.
I'm sure they are fine and respectable people.
At least, I've never seen a cop car at their door.
But they are forever in my eyeline.
I can almost smell their sweat.
And who knows how much they steal
of the oxygen intended for my lungs.

They don't stop getting my attention:
their barbecues, their arguments,
the sprinkler system, the roof tiles,
the fence, the dog, the driveway.
Their lives are no better than mine
but I don't have front seats to what I do.
There's days I feel like nothing more
than their unintended audience.

And now this neighbor is at my door.
He wants to borrow something.
I give it to him freely.
It's my chance to get in on the act.

HOW IT USED TO BE

Close to ninety years of age,
she remembered a time
when husbands left for work at eight,
all in gray suits, topped off with hats,
a kiss on the cheek, and a muttered "Goodbye."

Door barely closed
and she'd swept the breakfast things away,

washed and dried, vacuumed the rug.

Keeping a house clean:
as she explained it,
was like being blown by a gust
from room to room,
until the wind dropped,
her contented disguise with it.

Then came the pack of cigarettes,
the second and third coffee,
the jabber with a neighbor across the fence,
old songs on the radio that she'd forgotten,
new ones, she had no wish to remember.

Early afternoon,
she began preparing dinner
so that all would be ready
when her husband came home from work.
No kiss then, just a weary shrug,
more sound from his boots on linoleum
than out of his mouth.
Finally, glazed-eyes stared at TV from the couch,
before he sleep-walked up the stairs and into bed.

Every day was the same, she admitted.
Until he died.
And then every day was still the same,
except he wasn't in it.

ABOUT THE POET



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Shift, River And South and Flights. Latest books, “Bittersweet”, “Subject Matters” and “Between Two Fires” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Levitate, Writer’s Block and Trampoline. Read more at <https://writingdisorder.com/john-grey-poetry/>

An Interview with **BILLIE CORLEY**

Writer, Speaker and Bible Teacher



Billie Corley is a writer, speaker, bible teacher and founder of Billie Corley Ministries and has been in Women's Ministry for over twenty-one years. Her heart's desire can be summed up in her ministry's slogan "Seeking to Teach, Inspire and Encourage Women Everywhere for Jesus Christ."

Billie's life drastically changed when she surrendered her heart to Jesus Christ in her late twenties. Immediately, she had a burden for ladies' ministry and after a thirty-one-year career in Corporate America, entered full-time Christian service.

Billie shares her love for God's word through her speaking and writing. When she's not writing, Billie spends time hosting and preparing for her annual women's retreat and monthly bible studies.

Billie is a published author of several articles both online and in print through Lighthouse Bible Studies and Dressed in Love Press.

Billie serves with spiritual vigor, joy, and enthusiasm, and welcomes the opportunity to share at your ladies' events.

Billie is a wife, stepmom, grandmommie, and great-grandmommie and lives in south Georgia with her soul-mate, Ben and cat named, Blue.

You can follow Billie on FB @ Billie Sue Strawder Corley or on her ministry page, Billie Corley Ministries. She can be found on Instagram @billiesuecorley.

Check out her website www.billiecorley.com for more information

Billie's debut book is titled **Winning The War Over What Ifs!**

Q: Can you give a brief description of *Winning The War Over What Ifs?*

A: *Winning the War Over What-ifs* is a practical guide on how to live empowered. What this means is there are times the what-ifs threaten to overcome us, standing between us and God's best. Throughout my book, you'll read about common, everyday struggles and insights on how conquer your what-if.

On page 7 in my book, I describe the what-if concept.

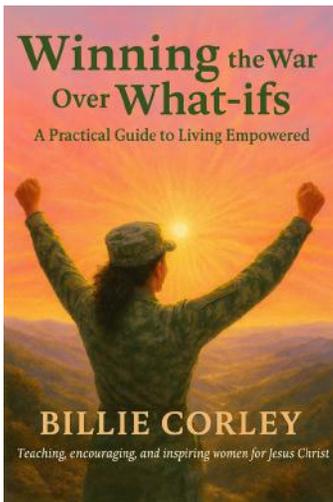
"The what-ifs are where the enemy is defeated, and God is glorified.

What-if moments are the safest place to be because God is there. You'll discover

throughout the chapters of this book that winning the war over what ifs will require risk-taking, quick decisions, faith, and self-denial. You'll encounter moments of tears, prayers without ceasing, discouragement, depression, and a determination to withstand the strain."

At the end of each chapter is a call to action. For example, at the end of Chapter 2, *Empowered to Live Fully Charged*, the reader is challenged to contemplate what it means to live fully charged and take action.

"Reflecting on the phrase 'Empowered to Live Fully Charged,' I invite you to consider what it truly means to feel empowered and how that influences your daily life. Being fully charged suggests vitality, motivation, and a readiness to engage with the world around you. As



yourself: In which areas of your life do you feel most empowered? Where might you need to recharge or seek additional inspiration?”

Q: How long did it take you to write **The War Over What Ifs**? I think many of us fall into the trap of wondering “what if”. Like what if I did this differently or what if this happened, etc. What do you hope readers learn after they read your book?

A: I signed the contract on June 11, 2025, and **Winning the War Over What-ifs** launched on November 4, 2025. It was an interesting and intense 5 months. Right after signing the contract, I tested positive for influenza A and a week later, for COVID. Because of time restraints, I was under a strict deadline with little flexibility. Many days, I pushed myself to write while under great distress. Lightning struck my home taking out our wi-fi, our T. V, air conditioner, dishwasher, and other various items. Many people trampled in and out making repairs, while I sat at my computer faithfully typing. My greatest what-if moment was writing my book. My desire is for my readers to understand they're stronger than they realize and can achieve great and mighty things no matter what comes against them.

I titled Chapter 14, “Empowered to Finish.” I

begin with a quote from Author, John Mason that kept me motivated to not quit. “We’ll be judged by what we finish, not by what we start.” Had I allowed my what-if to deter me, I wouldn’t have this opportunity today to share with my readers that they too are empowered, they’re overcomers and can accomplish their biggest dreams.

Q: Are you currently writing another book like **The War Over What Ifs** or will it be something totally different the next time around?

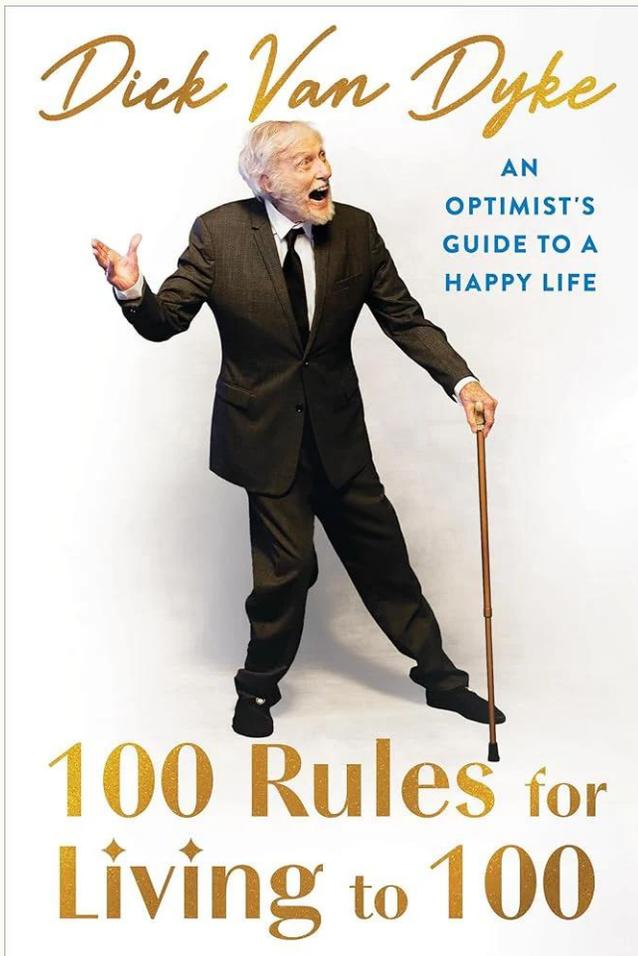
A: I'm thinking of a couple of books. Motivational books appeal to me, I’m presently reading a few. Thus, I am inclined to write in a motivational style. My upcoming book is titled: **Why Flounder When You Can Flourish: How to Grow Through What You Go Through**.

Life is filled with difficulties, and as long as we’re breathing, we’re certain to meet trouble. My book will remind the reader that no matter what, they can flourish (thrive, blossom, prosper) even in the “lean” times. Every situation has an upside. When we struggle, it's like a fish flopping around, and we flounder. Flourishing comes from accepting circumstances and meeting them with gratitude and determination to thrive, not just survive.

Learn more at <https://www.billiecorley.com>

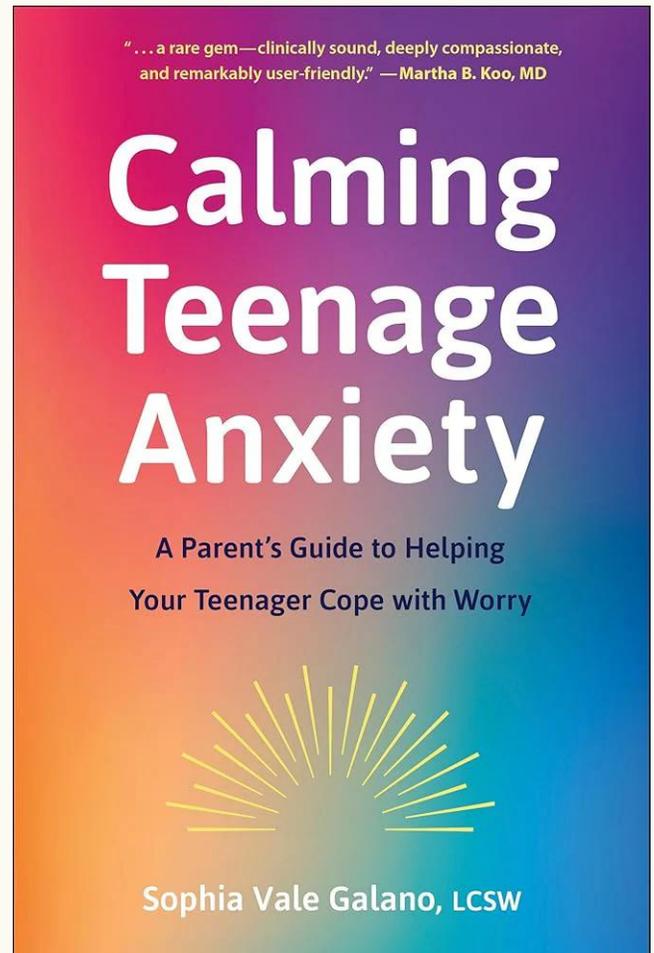
Interview by Book Notions

Great Reads



Dick Van Dyke danced his way into our hearts with iconic roles in *Mary Poppins*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Now, as he's about to turn 100 years old, Dick is still dancing and approaching life with the twinkle in his eye that we've come to know and love. In *100 Rules for Living to 100*, he reveals his secrets for maintaining your joie de vivre and making the most out of the life you've been given.

Through stories of his pivotal childhood, moments on film sets, his expansive family, and finding love late in life, Dick reflects on both the joyful times and the challenges that shaped him. His indefatigable spirit and positive attitude will surely inspire readers to count the blessings in their own lives, persevere through the hard times, and appreciate the beauty and complexity of being human.



Parenting a teenager in today's high-pressure world can feel overwhelming—especially when anxiety enters the picture. *Calming Teenage Anxiety* is a compassionate, practical guide designed to help parents understand, support, and empower their teens as they navigate emotional challenges and everyday stressors.

Drawing on expert insights, real-life case studies, and reflective exercises, *Calming Teenage Anxiety* equips parents with the tools to recognize the signs of anxiety and understand its root causes; Learn to identify anxiety and the factors that contribute to it; *Helping Your Teen Cope – A hands-on guide with proven strategies to reduce stress and build coping skills.*

Click cover to buy at the B&P Bookshop

An Interview with Dr. Katherine Hutchinson-Hayes



Dr. Katherine Hutchinson-Hayes is an editor, author, speaker, podcaster, and educational consultant. She is Embolden Media Group's production editor and a Word Weavers International member, serving as an online chapter president and mentor. She belongs to EFA (Editorial Freelancers Association), FWA (Florida Writers Association), ACFW (American Christian Fiction Writers), CWoC (Crime Writers of Color), AWSA (Advanced Writers and Speakers Association), and AASA (American Association of School Administrators). She serves on the nonprofit organization Submersion 14 board and the 540 Writer's Community board and is an art instructor for the nonprofit organization Light for the Future in Guatemala.

Katherine hosts the podcast *Murder, Mystery & Mayhem Laced with Morality*. She contributes regularly to several magazines, blogs, and newsletters. She authored a Bible study for women, a collaborative anthology of devotions, and is currently working on the sequels of her first general market thriller novel. Her thriller *A Fifth of the Story* debuted in February 2024 through Endgame Press.

1. Your background is vast and diverse. When did you first start writing?

I started writing as a young girl, journaling my prayers and poems. Writing became a sacred space where I could explore my thoughts, process emotions, and express faith. Professionally, I began writing more intentionally during my years as a school administrator, crafting devotions and educational materials for staff. Over time, that grew into writing books that blend faith, suspense, and emotional healing.

2. *A Fifth of the Story* is an incredibly punchy title. Can you tell us a little bit about the story and how you came up with the title?

Thank you! The title **A Fifth of the Story** plays on the dual meaning of a "fifth"—both as a fraction and as a bottle of liquor. The story follows Brock O'Reilly, a CIA operative with a complicated past who uncovers dangerous secrets about his own family. His journey is about confronting generational trauma, addiction, and betrayal while trying to hold onto faith and purpose. The title hints at how we often only know a portion of the truth—whether about others or ourselves—and how dangerous that can be. Finally, the premise draws on the idea that if we live for that fifth of our lives (the part God knows and approves of), we will have

lived a good life.

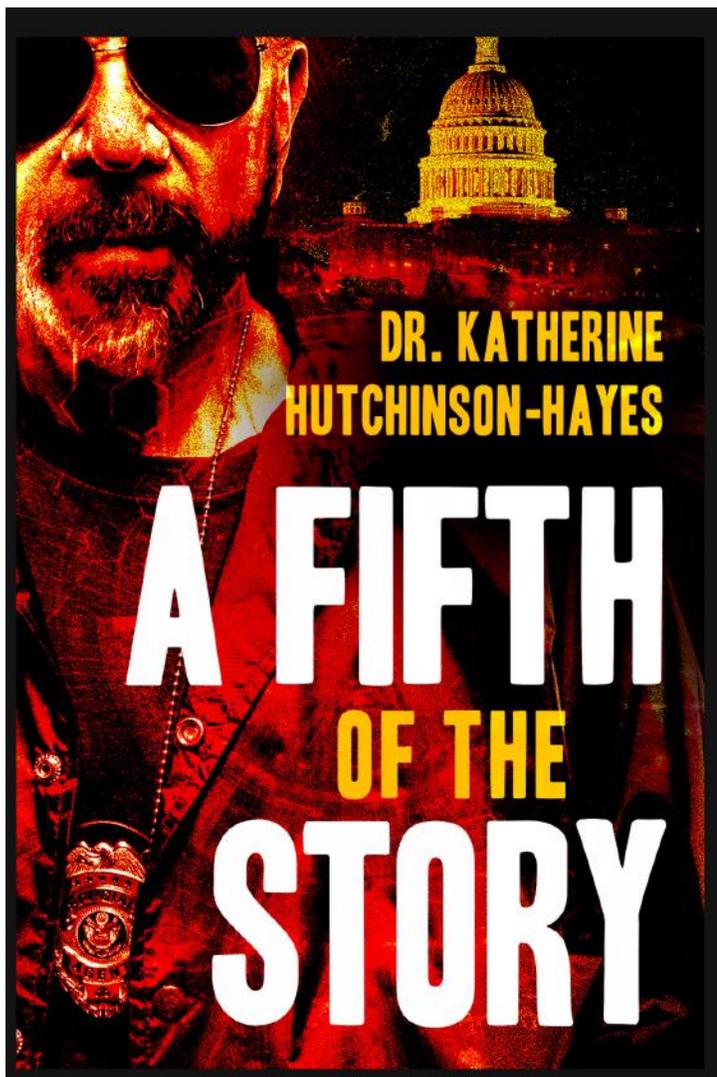
3. If it were to be adapted for TV or film, how do you envision the cast for it?

I would love to see someone like Michael B. Jordan play Brock—he has that mix of intensity, vulnerability, and charisma. For Matthew Shuggs, maybe Oscar Isaac, bringing depth to a loyal but conflicted character. Andrew Pang would be great with someone like Steven Yeun, who can balance quiet strength and emotional nuance. I see the show or film having the vibe of **Jack Ryan** or **The Night Agent**—high-stakes action blended with emotional suspense.

4. How does mystery/suspense writing intersect with devotional writing for you?

At first glance, they seem worlds apart, but they both explore the human condition and our need for hope. Suspense writing lets me delve into the darkness people face—grief, betrayal, danger—while devotional writing allows me to anchor those themes in biblical truth. Both genres are about tension and resolution. The thrillers challenge the mind and heart; the devotionals restore the soul.

5. In addition to being a writer and a speaker, you're also an educational consultant. Tell us a



bit about your work in education and how you feel it influences your writing.

As an educational consultant, I work with schools and organizations to create trauma-informed, culturally responsive environments. I also coach leaders and help design professional development. This work deeply influences my writing—I'm constantly observing human behavior, communication, and conflict resolution. It helps me write layered characters and realistic dialogue. Plus, my heart for teaching shows up in my devotionals, which are often written to inspire, equip, and educate readers spiritually.

6. What is your favorite genre to read?

I love thrillers and romantic suspense—stories that keep me on the edge of my seat, but also dig deep into emotional and spiritual arcs. But I also enjoy devotional literature, historical fiction, and well-written memoirs. If it has heart, grit,

and truth, I'm in.

7. What are you currently reading?

Right now, I'm reading **The Warsaw Orphan** by Kelly Rimmer. It's heartbreaking and beautiful, set during WWII, and really captures the resilience of the human spirit. I'm also reading **Embracing Trust** by Joanna Weaver—it's a powerful devotional on surrendering to God's plan.

8. Tell us a bit about *Christian Bible Study for Women* that you authored. More specifically, how do you find writing in that genre different from thriller writing in terms of your process?

Christian Bible Study for Women was birthed out of a desire to walk alongside other women in a deep, intentional way. It offers reflection, scripture exploration, and real-life application. Writing it required a different posture—one of stillness, prayer, and deep listening to the Holy Spirit. Thriller writing is more dynamic and intense, while Bible study writing is more contemplative. But both require discipline, empathy, and a heart for the reader.

9. Are you a plotter or a panster?

I'm a bit of both—a "plantser," if you will. I love outlining the big picture and knowing my destination, but I leave room for organic moments of discovery. Characters sometimes take me places I didn't expect, and I've learned to trust that process.

10. When you're driving alone in your car, what do you find yourself thinking about?

Often, I'm thinking about my next story—dialogue, plot twists, or character arcs. Other times, I'm reflecting on scripture or praying. Driving is one of my sacred spaces. It's where I listen to worship music, podcasts, or just the silence. It's also where God often downloads ideas or gives me clarity on something I've been wrestling with creatively or spiritually.

Learn more at <https://www.drkatherinehayes.com>

Interview by Marina Raydun

CRAVING MORE VAMPIRE LORE?

by Tricia Copeland

If you're a vampire lover like me, you might always be on the lookout for more vampire content and lore. New characters? New twist on the lore?



What are the vampires doing in this new, everyone's watching, age? Well, the vampires are still alive, not surprisingly, and thriving, especially in Tricia Copeland's *Realm Chronicles* world.

Self-admittedly, Tricia's first fantasy goal became writing a vampire novel. Tricia would say she didn't quite reach that goal, but we disagree. Her first quasi-vampire novel, *Kingdom of Embers*, the first book of the *Kingdom Journals* series, features a vampire-witch hybrid teen desperately trying to figure out where she belongs. We learn a smidge about the origins of witches and vampires through this novel, but Tricia really delivers in a prequel to the series, *Of Witches and Vampires*.

Of Witches and Vampires is a short story prequel to the *Kingdom Journal's* prequel, *Kingdom of the Damned*, Tricia's only self-proclaimed true vampire novel. In the *Kingdom of the Damned*, vampire Anne Scott, born in the 16th century, seeks a truce between the warring vampire and witch lines

after her family is burned by witches and her fiancé staked by one of his own clan. Throughout the quest, which spans from 16th century England to the 20th century new world, one

powerful witch, Sonia, becomes increasingly brutal in her attempts to thwart a treaty.

Sonia reappears in the *Kingdom Journals* series, determined to stop the heroes from breaking a curse which damns witch souls to purgatory. But why? Why would a witch not want her people released from eternal damnation? *Of Witches and Vampires* begins to unwrap Sonia's origin with a tale that traces back to the beginning of humanity. We learn Sonia is the first recorded witch ever sired, and her half-siblings, the first vampires. Is your skin tingling yet?

The next question screams: How does the *Realm Chronicles* series bring Sonia's story, and vampire lore, into the 21st century? The *Realm Chronicles* main character and heroine, Queen Titania, aids the *Kingdom Journals* crew in a battle against Sonia and her witch-spirit imbued vampire army. Then Sonia decides Titania is her next target. Hunted by Sonia, Titania uses all her resources in the fae and human realms, where she again teams with the *Kingdom Journals*

characters to limit Sonia's power. But luring a six-thousand year-old witch soul to their demise requires information that the Guardians, a group that considers themselves to be the last true vampires, has. *To be a Fae*, the 2025 Bronze Global Book Award in Vampire Novels, and the preceding *To be a Fae Rogue*, finds Titania, and her vampire hybrid and witch friends, brokering a treaty with the Guardians and scouring the realms for the key to stopping Sonia.

Need all this newest vampire lore? Tricia's [Realm Chronicles and Kingdom Journals reading guide](#) outlines just how to devour all her stories. We're hoping Tricia returns to this

world filling in the time between *Of Witches and Vampires* and the *Kingdom Journals*. What's better than a villain story? Until then, sink your teeth into the *Realm Chronicles* and *Kingdom Journals* world along with *Of Witches and Vampires* by Tricia Copeland.

Tricia Copeland is the critically acclaimed and award-winning author of *Kingdom of Embers*, *To be Fae Queen*, *Lovelock Ones*, and *Azreya, Aztec Priestess*, and dozens of other titles. She is the host of the *Finding the Magic Book Podcast* who weaves magical stories about love, courage, and finding your passion. Find her at <https://triciacopeland.com>



A FANTASTIC MUST READ

Old Man's War is a 2005 military science fiction novel by John Scalzi, the first in a series, about 75-year-old John Perry who joins the Colonial Defense Force (CDF) for a new life in space, only to find himself in a brutal interstellar war, fighting in a genetically enhanced new body. The story follows his journey as he's recruited from Earth, given a new, younger body, and sent to fight hostile aliens for humanity's survival, discovering the universe is far more dangerous than he imagined.

Steven Spielberg is set to direct a film adaptation of John Scalzi's 'Old Man's War'.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH CC ROBINSON

by Marina Raydun



CC Robinson has over two decades' experience in cross-cultural settings as a medical doctor working in post-civil war nations and as an Associate Pastor at a multi-ethnic congregation led by an African-American man in Cincinnati, the setting for *Divided*. When she's not throwing on her superhero cape to save her characters from their dystopian antics, CC enjoys hiking, gardening, dancing, swimming, and driving her jeep through the woods with her husband and three kids.

1. Your *Divided* series paints a vivid and chilling dystopian future — complete with racial segregation, resistance networks, and totalitarian control. What sparked the idea for this world, and how much of it is rooted in your real-life experiences in post-conflict zones and cross-cultural work?

I had an all-night dream in 2012. In America, we thought we'd conquered prejudice and our history of racial division when we elected Obama as President. Then Trayvon Martin was murdered and I knew we hadn't. In my all-night dream I saw America fight a civil war over racial issues, powerful gangs rise up after an electronics-busting EMP, and a druglord-turned-dictator seize power with his promises of restoring the electrical grid.

I woke up in a cold sweat and filled with anxiety, only to calm down and go back to sleep. The dream resumed as if I'd never awoken, except fast-forwarded

forty-five years later.

I met my four main characters, one from each of the main ethnic groups that dictator had divided the remaining US population into and locked behind impregnable walls. These teens, who'd never met someone from another ethnicity, had none of our prejudices. But they were curious about each other and begged me to free them. I woke up the next morning and knew I had to write their story.

2. Sophie's story in *Deception* is a side quest, but it sounds just as emotionally charged as the main novels. What drew you to her perspective in particular, and what new layers did she let you explore in the world of *Divided*?

Sophie's story was born before I even knew who she was as a character. My family and I toured a series of underground caverns in the Appalachian foothills of Kentucky. I realized the

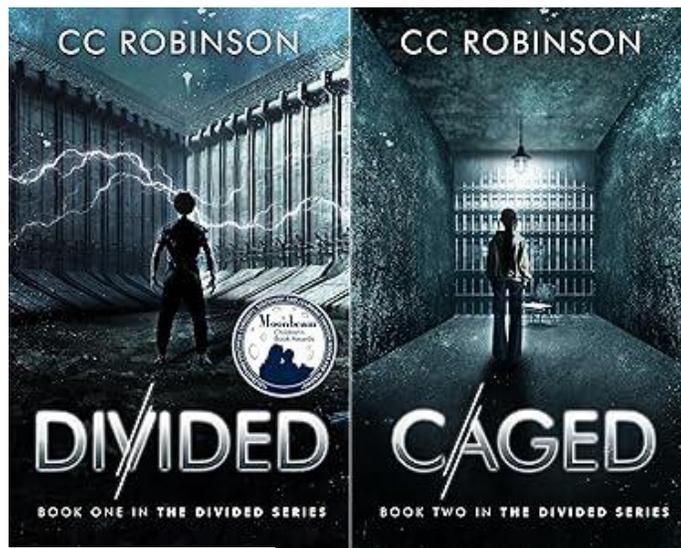
setting would make a perfect national headquarters for the Underground.

When I was writing the prequel to the Divided series, *Upheaval*, I sent a group of refugees fleeing Cincinnati into the saltpeter caves of Kentucky, forming the basis for the Underground headquarters there. While writing *Divided*, Sophie “volunteered” to leave Queenstown and head to the Underground’s national headquarters, and her story was born.

Sophie is a complex character. She’s a secondary character in the main novel series, but has strong opinions and is very brave. She’s risked her life for the Underground and for her boss, Mayor Kim. But she’s not the greatest parent, a fact Rose struggles through in *Caged* (Book Two in the Divided series releasing in June, 2025) and that Sophie has to face in *Deception*.

3. In a landscape filled with dystopian YA, what do you hope sets *Divided* apart for readers — especially teens navigating real-world divisions and uncertainty?

In our world today I think it can be easy for teenagers to feel like they don’t have a voice or any power to change our culture. Yet, teenagers have been the generation defining and leading culture. They make up our slang, define the music trends, and either reject or accept fashion trends set by the older



generations.

I want young adult readers of *Divided* to realize their actions have impact and, if they choose, to embrace cross-cultural community, our nation will be better for it.

4. You’ve worked in incredibly intense environments — post-civil war nations, multi-ethnic faith communities. How has that shaped your characters’ moral dilemmas, resilience, and the emotional depth of your plots?

I’ve witnessed people surviving the unthinkable – wars, divisions, slaughters / massacres of entire villages, and the loss of family members – and not only survive, but forgive, reconcile, and live in community with their opposing side. As a pastor I’ve seen marriages and families reconcile and people who once hated another ethnicity come into community.

I want readers to see my characters doing hard things, surviving whatever their oppressive government and difficult circumstances throw at them, and relying upon each other’s strengths rather than going it alone.

5. There’s so much at stake in your stories — betrayal, captivity, death, hope. What’s the emotional toll of writing this kind of high-stakes fiction, and how do you balance the darkness with light?

By nature I’m a glass-half-full kind of person, and I want that optimism to

shine through in my writing, even in tougher or darker scenes. This comes through in my main character's resiliency and even their stubbornness. While my writing contains some darker elements, these scenes always give us a glimpse into how the character is handling the situation instead of dwelling on the evil actions.

And yes, there are times I have to walk away from my laptop and take a walk, wiping tears from my face and telling myself "these are fictional characters, not real people."

6. This series features multiple protagonists — Rose, Marcos, Harriet, Jason — each with unique perspectives. Do you have a favorite to write? Or one who surprised you as the story evolved?

Harriet is my favorite character to write, but she is also the most complex. She's had a uniquely difficult life under this totalitarian regime and her journey through the four books will reflect what she needs -- healing, deepening trust of others, and allowing friends into her inner life.

While Rose is the most difficult character to write, Marcos and Jason surprised me with how much I've loved writing young male characters. I have a Gen Z son which has helped me get into these young men's heads.

7. Let's say *Divided* is being adapted for the screen — who would you dream-cast as Sophie and the other leads? (And who's scoring the soundtrack?)

I would want young, undiscovered actors in the main four character's roles. I'd love to cast Rob Lowe as Hudson

Britwell, my main antagonist in the first few novels, and for Sophie I'd love Maggie Q.

8. Your series is often compared to *Legend* and *Red Rising*. What books or authors have shaped you most — either as a writer or as a person?

The authors who shaped me the most as a writer are Veronica Roth and Suzanne Collins, but I love reading the classics for character development including *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *War and Peace*.

9. When you're alone in your Jeep, driving through the woods — what do you think about? (Besides whether one of your characters might try to kill someone off in the next chapter..)

I'm usually thinking about possible spin-off series and ideas for new series. I've written the *Divided* series to the end and, when I'm writing, the characters often negotiate for a different course through a scene or inside a book.

10. What do you hope young readers walk away with after finishing a book in the *Divided* series — especially in a time when the real world can feel just as fractured as your fictional one?

I want them to walk away with a feeling of hope and that they can survive anything life throws at them, whether that's a bully at school or an impending war in the world, if they're willing to do life in community, across cultural barriers.

Learn more at

<https://www.ccrobinsonauthor.com>