MISTERWRITER'S
BOOKS & PIECES
MAGAZINE
BOOKS ◆ STORIES ◆ IDEAS ◆ INSPIRATION
DECEMBER 2026



LISSALANI
The Story Behind
VEIL

Also:

- *Pamela & Lance Thompson*
- *Eric Stillwell*
- *Pawel Markiewicz*
- *Cherkasov Yegor*
- *William Gensburger*
- *Kalee Boisvert*
- *Humphrey Hawksley*
- *S. E. Tschritter*

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MISTERWRITER'S
BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE
DECEMBER 2026

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Pass It On

As the year winds down, this issue is packed. Our cover story heads into the haunted South with Lissalani, whose debut novel *Veil* grew from being born with a caul. Boise writers Pamela and Lance Thompson show what happens when you refuse the first no, and Humphrey Hawksley takes us to the Arctic border where two nuclear powers can see each other across the ice.

You'll also find Kalee Boisvert on raising kids who love to read, a moving essay on grief from S. E. Tschritter, fiction, poetry, and a crossword built from this issue. Every answer is in these pages, so no peeking.

If you enjoy what you read, please share this issue with a friend, a writing group, or anyone who loves books. Word of mouth is how a magazine like this grows. Then join our free list on the back page.

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Beyond the Veil

LISSALANI

Born with a caul in Vicksburg, Mississippi, the debut novelist turns Southern folklore, family secrets, and grief into a haunting new trilogy.

MEET THE AUTHOR



The Collector of Ghosts

✦ ✦ ✦

Lissalani is a storyteller who weaves psychological suspense, Southern Gothic dread, and urban horror into tales that echo in the dark corners of memory. Rooted in the haunted landscapes and folklore of the American South, her writing explores the places where memory, myth, and fear collide.

Her debut novel, *Veil*, introduces readers to a world steeped in ancestral secrets, ghostly visions, and the fragile boundaries between the living and the dead. Known for her lyrical prose style and visceral, atmospheric storytelling, Lissalani invites readers into unsettling realms where horror is never just about things that go bump in the night. It is about the truths we try to bury.

She collects ghost stories the way some people collect postcards. Wherever she goes, whether it is an abandoned house, a lonely backroad, or a forgotten cemetery, she always picks up a new ghost story, and more often than not, they follow her home.

Q&A With Lissalani

ON *VEIL*, FOLKLORE, GRIEF, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

Q. *Welcome! Would you please give a brief description of your novel Veil?*

Thank you so much for featuring me! I'm excited for this opportunity.

Veil is a Southern Gothic novel that blends psychological suspense, supernatural horror, and the haunting traditions of Black Southern folklore.

Set in Mississippi during the 1980s and 1990s, the story follows Elissa, a young girl born with a caul, or what some Southerners call being "born with a veil." According to folklore, children born this way are believed to possess extraordinary spiritual gifts, including the ability to see beyond the physical world.

Unfortunately for Elissa, what others might consider a gift often feels more like a curse. As she navigates childhood and terrifying encounters with things she cannot explain, Elissa begins to discover that the line separating the living from the dead is much thinner than she ever imagined.

But *Veil* isn't simply a ghost story. At its heart, it's about grief, survival, family, and the things we inherit without ever asking for them.

And I'll leave readers with one little warning: Not everything that follows you is meant to be seen. So seek... and you shall be found.

> "
>
> *Not everything that follows you is meant to be seen.*



VEIL

Book One. Releases December 4, 2026, through Crystal Lake Publishing.

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Q. *Where did the idea for Veil come from? How long did it take you to write it?*

The inspiration for *Veil* came from my own life.

I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, with a caul, and growing up in the South, I was surrounded by superstitions and religious beliefs that blurred the lines between the natural and supernatural.

If you grew up in a Southern household, you probably know there were certain things the grown folks simply didn't discuss. And if you were curious enough to ask questions, you might be told to stay out of grown folks' business!

Well, apparently, I never completely outgrew that curiosity. *Veil* grew from a desire to share those experiences and explore the unknown.

> *If you grew up in a Southern household, you probably know there were certain things the grown folks simply didn't discuss.*

Although it's a work of fiction, the story is deeply personal and inspired by true events. I wanted to write something that felt intimate and authentic, almost as though readers had stumbled upon someone's private diary and discovered something they weren't supposed to know.

As for how long it took to write, *Veil* was a story that spent years living inside me before finally finding its way onto the page. Once I began writing, it took approximately eighteen months to bring it to life.

Q *What are some messages and emotions you hope readers take away after reading Veil?*

Oh, I want readers to feel everything!

I want them frightened, curious, heartbroken, frustrated, and maybe even a little paranoid. But more than anything, I want them emotionally invested in Elissa's journey and the other characters whose lives intertwine with hers.

One of the central themes of *Veil* is the power of words. There's a biblical proverb that says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." That idea is woven throughout the story because words can nurture, wound, or haunt us long after they're spoken.

I also want readers to think about childhood through a different lens. Children often experience things they don't yet have the emotional maturity or language to explain.

And then there's grief.

I think we often imagine grief as a straight line, something we move through in predictable stages until we reach acceptance. But grief is anything but linear. It's more like a squiggly line, twisting, turning, doubling back, and sometimes dropping us

right where we thought we'd already healed. You can experience acceptance one day and find yourself right back struggling with it the next day. Grief doesn't follow a schedule, and healing doesn't mean we stop hurting.

> *Grief doesn't follow a schedule, and healing doesn't mean we stop hurting.*

That's something I wanted to explore in *Veil*, because grief can change the way we see ourselves and even the world around us.

And of course, if someone finishes *Veil* and decides to sleep with the lights on, I won't be offended!

More than anything, I hope the book gets people talking. I'd love to hear what frightened readers the most or touched them the deepest, and which moments stayed with them long after they turned the final page.



Q. *If or when Hollywood gets the rights to Veil, who would be your dream cast to play the characters you created?*

First of all, I love that we're speaking Hollywood into existence! Let's put that energy into the universe! Do your thing, *Veil*!

Because Elissa is a child throughout much of the story, I would love to see a talented young newcomer take on that role. I don't have anyone specific in mind, but I'm certain there's a young actress out there who would absolutely kill it! She would need to capture Elissa's vulnerability, curiosity, terror, and precocious personality. Someone whose expressions could tell an entire story without uttering a single word.

For the adult characters, I'd love performers who can capture the complexity of Black Southern life.

Now, if we're dreaming big, let me dream BIG!

Jenifer Lewis would be an absolute dream come true. I think seeing her bring one of my characters to life might genuinely move me to tears. I'd also love to see Jada Pinkett Smith, Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor, Brandy Norwood, Lynn Whitfield, Jamie Foxx, Orlando Jones, Samuel L. Jackson, Omari Hardwick, or Tyler Perry involved.

Ideally, I'd love a cast with Southern roots or a genuine connection to Southern culture. I want the accents and other dynamics to feel authentic.

Now, if Michael B. Jordan wants to join the cast, I'm willing to make an exception! Besides, I hear his family has Southern roots, so I think we can work something out!

And if Hollywood comes calling, I promise I'll answer the phone!

Q. *Is your next novel a sequel to Veil, or will it be a standalone novel?*

There's definitely more to this story!

Veil is intended to be the first installment in a trilogy, so readers haven't seen the last of Elissa or the mysteries surrounding her family.

The first book explores her childhood and the experiences that shape her understanding of the world. The second book will move the story forward, bringing her back to Mississippi under circumstances that force her to confront the past.

And I can tell you now, things are going to get darker and more visceral.

Without revealing too much, I'll say this: Home doesn't guarantee peace, and home isn't always where the heart is.

> *Home doesn't guarantee peace, and home isn't always where the heart is.*

And if readers think the veil has revealed all its secrets in the first book, they're in for quite a surprise.

Q. *Lissalani, would you please provide your social media links so that the readers of the blog and I may follow you and your work?*

Absolutely! I would love to connect!

And whether you believe in ghosts, inherited spiritual gifts, or things that go bump in the night, you're welcome in my little corner of the literary world. ✦

WHERE TO FIND LISSALANI

WEBSITE
lissalanilore.com

INSTAGRAM
@lissalani_lore

ORDER *VEIL*
Amazon: Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, and paperback

Veil releases December 4, 2026, through Crystal Lake Publishing.

Q&A With Lissalani, a Book Notions Author Interview. Interview courtesy of Book Notions.

FEATURE · IDAHO WRITERS

PAMELA AND LANCE THOMPSON

Refusing the "No!"

Married thirty-nine years, the Boise writers have each turned a flat rejection into a published book. More often than not, the door that opened was one the other had pointed to.



ABOUT PAMELA KLEIBRINK THOMPSON



Pamela Kleibrink Thompson is a children's author, freelance writer, recruiter, and career coach. Her picture book, *The Horse Who Wanted to Fly*, illustrated by Melissa Bailey, was published by Firefly Books in 2024 and earned the Gold Medallion at the Will Rogers Medallion Awards, among other honors.

Before turning to books, she held almost every job in the entertainment industry, with credits in television, feature films, commercials, and video games. She was production manager on *The Simpsons* and on Brad Bird's "Family Dog," an episode of Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories*, where she set up an animation studio from scratch, and ink and paint supervisor on Paramount's *Bebe's Kids*. She also wrote and produced training films for AT&T and IBM.

As a recruiter, her clients have included Walt Disney Feature Animation, LAIKA, Twentieth Century Fox, Digital Domain, and Framestore, and *Animation Magazine* named her one of its top ten recruiters. As "The Creative Career Coach," she helps clients with resumes, cover letters, portfolios, and interviews. She has spoken at SIGGRAPH and FMX in Germany, Boston, San Diego, and Singapore, created LA SIGGRAPH's Career Boot Camp in 1998, and is a founding member of Women in Animation.

She has been a freelance writer since 1987, when her first article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. Her articles on careers, business, and management have appeared in more than 150 publications, and she writes the monthly column "The Career Coach" for Animation World Network. She is finishing a book on networking and is in a writing group for middle grade fiction.

WEBSITE pamrecruit.com

ABOUT LANCE THOMPSON



Lance Thompson has been a script doctor for motion pictures (*The Two Jakes*, *The Honeymooners*) and written for television (*Mr. Belvedere*). As a motion picture advertising consultant on over 500 campaigns, he earned two Key Art Awards and an International Broadcasters Award. His studio clients include Paramount, Fox, and Disney. His play, *Poison Pen*, debuted at the Boise Acting Studio Black Box Theater in 2026.

He has presented at the Osher Institute, the Scriptwriters Network in Los Angeles, and the Idaho Scriptwriters Association, and conducted screenwriting workshops for the Idaho Film Office. He was founding president of Idaho Media Professionals.

He has co-written two books on military aviation: *Shatter the Sky*, with Merryl Tengesdal, published in 2021, and *Achieving Air Supremacy*, in 2025. His writing and photography have appeared in magazines (*Air & Space Smithsonian*, *Cowboys & Indians*, *Hemispheres*, *Delta Sky*), books (*X-Plane Crashes*), and newspapers (*Los Angeles Times*, *Dallas Morning News*).

As an actor, Lance has appeared on stage, film, and television, including "I Was Murdered" on the Investigation Discovery Channel. He helped train law enforcement officers as an actor in live training scenarios at the Idaho Peace Officers Standards and Training academy. He has hosted two television series.

INTERVIEW BY WILLIAM GENSBURGER

How They Met

When did you two meet, and how?

LANCE I was a driver at a two-person company that wrote copy for motion picture advertising. This was before fax machines. Pretty quickly I became a writer there, so they said, "We're going to have to hire another driver."

We went through lots and lots of resumes, mostly from people who were overqualified. Finally we found this one girl. This was before computers too, so she had typeset a resume that looked like a menu. It was beautiful, and she had an immaculate pickup truck. I told the boss, "She is the one."

He said, "Well, I've got this." He had a piece of binder paper with torn edges, and on it was a poem that looked like a middle school assignment: "Answering ads is not all I do. I work hard and I'll work hard for you." Then there was a resume covered in Liquid Paper, like it had been cranked in and out of the typewriter several times. It looked like a ransom note.

I said, "You've got to be kidding." He said, "Well, look, she's creative." I said, "Did you see the truck?" So the girl with the ransom note came in. He liked her, I liked her, and he said, "Okay, we'll hire her."

The first day she came to work. The second day, Tuesday, we got paid. The third day she asked for a raise. On the fourth day the boss said, "I can't give you a raise, you've only been here four days." Friday was her last day, and that was also our first date.

Pamela, from your side, was it the job, or had you already seen him and decided you were going to go out with him?

PAMELA He was always talking about "we." So I thought, oh, he already has somebody. But I looked at his left hand, the first time I had ever looked at a man's hand to see if he was wearing a ring, and he wasn't. So I thought, well, I don't know who this "we" is, but it doesn't really matter. I didn't know if he was going to ask me out or not, so I approached him about two hours before quitting time.

LANCE She had nothing to lose.

How many years have you been together and married?

LANCE We met in ’81 and married in ’87, so we just celebrated our thirty-ninth anniversary in October. It’s been fun.

The Hollywood Years



Lance, was your background military?

LANCE No. That was my backup plan in case everything else didn’t work out. Then I got this cool job working for $150 a week at a place that did advertising copy for movies, and I thought, well, I guess it’s going to work out.

PAMELA He worked on a lot of different campaigns, like *E.T.* He saw *E.T.* before everybody else. He came home one day and said, “I just saw a film that you’re going to like. I can’t tell you anything about it, but we’re going to have to see it when it first comes out.” And he came up with lines like “In town with a few days to kill” for *The Terminator*.

LANCE A lot of lines for posters and TV spots. It was a good living. They don’t do that anymore, though. They don’t have writers for it.

How much script doctoring do you do?

LANCE I’ve gotten a lot of script doctoring work here. It’s all word of mouth. I also did script doctoring when I was in motion picture advertising, because things would come in. There’s a movie called *The Honeymooners*. It was completely done, and they said, “We think we should punch up the jokes a little bit.” I said, “Aren’t we done with principal photography?” They said yes. So I asked who in the cast was available, be-

cause they had all gone on to other things, and what sets were available. They said, "Oh, just wherever you think there might be jokes." Eventually I just did one scene with two of the principals on one set. I don't think they ever used it.

PAMELA What about *The Two Jakes*?

LANCE I got to do the *Chinatown* sequel. At the test screenings nobody could follow it, and I don't blame them. Since I had done the trailer narrated as the character Jake Gittes, they said, "You captured the voice. Maybe you could do voiceover that would explain the plot." But they weren't going to recut it. The narration had to go into places where there was no dialogue and no action, wherever there were twenty or thirty seconds of nobody talking. It was really fun. I got to work with Jack Nicholson, but it was all so last minute.



Was that work enjoyable or stressful?

LANCE I always thought, I'm getting paid way too much to do this. This is silly. But I knew it was over when stand-up comedians started parodying trailer narration. A lot of mine started out, "In a world where..." Pretty soon stand-up comics were saying, "In a world..." and I thought, oh no, this is a joke now. Soon after that, they stopped hiring writers altogether. They got rid of the writer, and the producer became the editor and also the writer, so they called him a "preditor." It wasn't like telling a story anymore. It was more like a music video.

PAMELA A montage.



Pamela Kleibrink Thompson with The Horse Who Wanted to Fly.

Pamela, what did you do after leaving that first job?

PAMELA I have a lot of background in different production jobs, and I worked in animation for a while.

LANCE And she can't draw.

PAMELA I can't draw. I was a production manager. I made sure the production got done on time.

When did you decide writing was something you wanted to do?

PAMELA I've wanted to be a writer since fourth grade. My teacher had a shoebox on her desk with a slot in the top. During the week we would write things and put them in the box, and on Fridays she would read them out loud to the whole class. I always made sure I had something in there. But I had a teacher in eleventh grade who did not like anything I wrote, so I put writing on hold for a while. After I met Lance, I started freelancing.

My first article was about the ten best chocolate cakes in Los Angeles, so I did some great research there. It was for the *Los Angeles Times*, and when it came out, there was a thank-you note and a slice of chocolate cake from one of the restaurants in my mailbox. I said, oh, there are perks to being a writer.

And then the transition to what you're doing now?

PAMELA I had wanted to do picture books for a long, long time, and I had a manuscript that was ready to go. One of the characters is Eadweard Muybridge, a pioneer of motion pictures and animation. We were in Half Price Books, and Lance held up a book about Muybridge and said, "Look, a book about Muybridge. You won't have to explain to this publisher who he is. You should send your manuscript there." So I sent it to Firefly Books, and at first they rejected it, because their first Muybridge book did not do well.

LANCE She sent it to several people at Firefly Books, including the head guy. He was the first one to respond. He said, "We just did a Muybridge book. It cost us so much money. I never want to hear the name Muybridge again." Manuscript unread.

PAMELA But I also sent it to the head of the sales department, because that's posted on their website. So Brad, the sales guy, read it and forwarded it to the editor, who read it and forwarded it back to Lionel, the publisher. Lionel had only read my query letter, not the manuscript. About a week after the rejection, he wrote me and said, "I was hasty in my assessment. This really resonated with me. When I started my publishing company forty years ago, everybody said it was going to be a failure. But I went ahead and did it anyway. So if you're not already with another publisher, I'd like to publish it." And I said, "Yes, let's go for it."

There are always more doors. You have to try all the doors.

PAMELA KLEIBRINK THOMPSON

So covering all your bases made the difference?

PAMELA There are always more doors. You learn that in film. There's not just one door; you have to try all the doors. I do career coaching, and I'm always surprised that people apply for a job and only send it to the HR department. Why not also send it to whatever department you want to work in?

LANCE That's what Pam tells her career coaching clients. No matter how the interview goes, you have to ask for the job. You have to say, "I want to work here," and prove it by following up and calling back.

Once you have an idea, how do you work the story around it?

PAMELA With *The Horse Who Wanted to Fly*, I came up with the idea from a book about Muybridge and Stanford and their relationship. On one page of that 400-page book, they talked about the photographs Muybridge took of the horse, because Stanford had become obsessed with how horses move. I said, oh, there's the gem of a story right there.

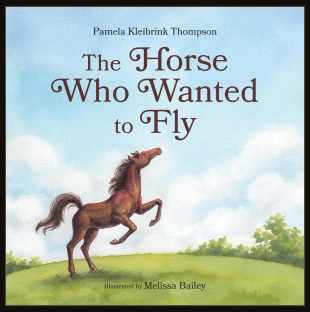


How was it working with a traditional publisher? Did they make many changes?

PAMELA I thought they might have more changes. They only changed the spelling of one word.

THE HORSE WHO WANTED TO FLY

by Pamela Kleibrink Thompson, illustrated by Melissa Bailey



- Gold Medallion, Will Rogers Medallion Awards
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The Frugal Frigate in Redlands, California (a former pony stable, and the site of her first book signing), Barnes & Noble, Rediscovered Bookshop, or your favorite bookstore.

WHERE TO BORROW

Libraries in Meridian, Boise (downtown), Kuna, Emmett, Star, Middleton, Kimberly, and Pocatello, and the Ontario, Oregon, Community Library. It is in fifty-two libraries listed on WorldCat.org.

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Pushing Each Other

Lance, have you thought about writing novels instead?

LANCE I did, at Pam's suggestion.

PAMELA Harassment. It took years.

LANCE At Pam's harassment. I had this script about Civil War reenactors who get lost in the woods and run into terrorists, so it's Civil War equipment versus modern machines. I pitched it all over when we were in LA. People would say, "Oh, is it a comedy?" I said, "No, it's like *Die Hard*." I could not get anybody interested at all.

So Pam said, “Why don’t you just write it as a novel?” I said, “Novels, I can’t do that. That’s hundreds of pages.” She said, “It can’t be that hard. You’ve got it all.” It was harder than I thought.

Then we went to Tulsa, where Pam’s book won a Will Rogers Medallion Award. I was sitting at the table talking to somebody, and she kept saying, “Hey, come here, come here.” Finally she pulled me away. There was a man from a German publishing company that does Westerns. He said, “Tell me about your book.” I said, “Well, it’s not a Western.” He said, “That’s all right.” So I gave him a pitch, and he said, “That sounds pretty good.” One thing led to another, and supposedly they’re publishing it in spring 2027.



Pamela and Lance at the Will Rogers Medallion Awards.



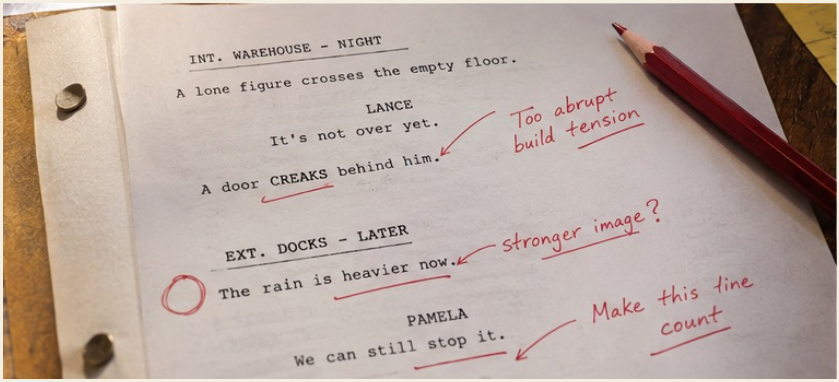
Pamela with her Gold Medallion.

What is it called?

LANCE It’s called *Militia*. They said, “We’re a German publisher, so it’ll be in German. You can retain the English rights.” I asked if they do English publication, and I said, “Well, yes, do that.” So it will be in German, and there will also be an English version.

PAMELA The publisher is EK2.

LANCE I think it means Iron Cross Second Class. They started out doing military history, and then they took up American Western novels.



Does Lance play story doctor instead of script doctor? Is that easy, being married to the story doctor?

PAMELA It's helpful. But recently I've been writing a lot of nonfiction articles for magazines like *Boise Lifestyle* and *Sun Valley Magazine*, and I haven't even shown them to him. I think I now have more confidence in my writing. I used to always ask, "What do you think?" and there would be less and less revision, until it was one sentence. I felt like I was bothering him.

Lance, did you feel it was a bother?

LANCE No. I was at an AFI event once where everybody else around the table was an artist, and I was the only writer. They said, "Your wife is a writer. Do you edit each other's stuff?" I said, "Oh yes, all the time." One of them said, "If I had a painting and my husband came in and said, 'That needs a bird,' I would kill him."

"If my husband came in and said, 'That needs a bird,' I would kill him."

A PAINTER, TO LANCE, AT AN AFI EVENT

Have you ever thought about collaborating on a book together?

LANCE No, I don't think it would work. I used to work with a partner writing comedy, and I wanted to kill him every day.

PAMELA When I was writing screenplays, I often wrote with partners, and Lance would say it was like writing with an albatross, or an anvil, because they weren't as enthusiastic about the writing process as I was.

Writing Under One Roof



What is the absolute worst part of writing?

PAMELA I think the worst part is the frustration of not being able to come up with the right thing. And the discipline. He's very disciplined. I'm not so good. I'm more extroverted, and he's more introverted. I'm working on a networking book, and I have about four chapters left to write. He's always saying, "Let's get that done."

How do you find revision?

PAMELA Revision isn't a problem for me. I put it away, and if you put it away for a couple of weeks and come back to it, you go, "Who wrote this?" I view writing like sculpture. The beautiful thing is within it; you just have to cut away enough to get to the beauty.

One of my best friends wrote a sci-fi novel, and when I saw an early draft, she had a 9,000-word prologue. I cut it down to about 650 words, because it took away from getting into the rest of the book.

LANCE The prologue was like homework.

Why do writers have such a hard time cutting?

LANCE They want you to know how much work they put into it. They say, "I thought of this whole world, and here's what the atmosphere is like."

PAMELA Being an editor is a totally different mind space. He tends to edit while he writes. I tend to edit after I finish the first draft, so I have more distance.

Do you save what you cut?

LANCE Yes. Nothing's wasted.

PAMELA The worst part about writing is the paper collection.

LANCE The garage is full.

Lance, your Sherlock Holmes play, Poison Pen, which played to a full house at the Boise Acting Studio on September 12, 2026, had a twist that wasn't readily guessable. Did you expect the reaction it got?

LANCE To me it was just a cool Sherlock Holmes story. But many people who saw it said, "That's about writers. It's all about writers." I didn't realize that until they said it. That means so much, because when you write mysteries, you think people are going to see the ending coming a mile away.

Do you have more coming up?

LANCE I'm doing one next year where April and I would be the actors, and Matt, who played Conan Doyle, would direct.

PAMELA And it's about actors.



Lance Thompson (left) and Matthew Melton (right) in Poison Pen, Boise Acting Studio.
PHOTO: KEARNEY THOMPSON

What's Next

What are your future plans?

PAMELA Finishing the networking book. I have to do that before I turn seventy, so it's imminent. Then more picture books. I'm also in a writing group for middle grade.

Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about?

PAMELA I think not enough people get encouragement when they're writing. You only become good at something when you practice it, no matter what it is. Lance did a mentorship program in LA in screenwriting.

LANCE It was the best thing I've ever done. It was high school students from all over Los Angeles County, and several screenwriters were there to mentor different aspects. I thought we were going to get the teenage version of whatever was popular at the time. None of it was that. It was very heartfelt, very honest, about their everyday lives. It was eye-opening, so eloquent, and heartbreaking. Encouraging young people to write is so therapeutic, positive, and enriching.

What about something like that in Idaho?

LANCE I proposed something like it to the film office.

PAMELA And didn't we also approach the school superintendent?

LANCE Yes. We couldn't get much traction.

PAMELA Do you know about the Harriman Writers Camp? It's a program for high school students who go off to a camp for a week. It used to be in East Idaho, but now it has moved to the McCall area. Idaho writers can be instructors.
https://www.writersatharriman.org ✦



A miniature The Horse Who Wanted to Fly, worn as an earring.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

My thanks to both Pamela and Lance for taking the time to share this with me. Lance has been a friend and past contributor to Books & Pieces Magazine, and I am grateful to them both.

If you are an Idaho author and would like to learn more about gaining exposure for your stories or books, contact me from our website at www.BooksNPieces.com.

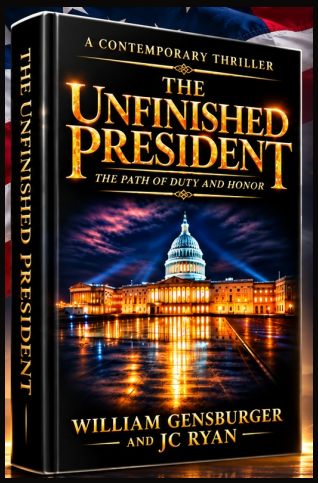
WILLIAM GENSBURGER, PUBLISHER

A CONTEMPORARY THRILLER

THE UNFINISHED PRESIDENT

THE PATH OF DUTY AND HONOR

What if George Washington returned to modern America?





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FICTION

Two Stories by Cherkasov Egor

SNOW · THE URGENT ANGEL



ABOUT CHERKASOV EGOR

Cherkasov Egor is a writer from Russia. He took part in the All-Russian Meeting of Young Writers, organized by the Writers' Union of Russia in Moscow in 2019, and has been a participant and speaker at the Gorky International Literary Festival every year since 2023. He is Deputy Editor-in-Chief for internal and external communications at the literary journal *Arina-NN* and a member of the Russian Union of Journalists.

His work reaches well beyond Russia. He coordinated the Russian side of the "Balakavi Poets" literary-pedagogical project in Kerala, India, wrote a scholarly article on the V. M. Terekhov Memorial in India, and has served on the juries of the Arina Gold and Arina Silver international awards and the "Firebird" International Music and Poetry Contest in Bulgaria. In 2026 he received a special diploma, "For Preserving Women's Folk Wisdom," in short prose at the Slavic Word 2026 International Literary Contest, took part in literary gatherings in Mexico and Colombia, taught as an invited educator in Egypt, and won the vocal category at Art Expo 2026 in Abu Dhabi.

He is a member of the New Associative Cinema (NAK) creative group and organized its second festival in Nizhny Novgorod.

SHORT PROSE

Snow

CHERKASOV EGOR

It seems like it will never end... Or maybe it doesn't. Snow mercilessly covers everything man has ever created. Everything precious to him—it's all buried.

Now the snow is creeping up on the creator of all beauty himself! It's scary! Cold and silence, an indifferent white. Everywhere. No more color—only burial mounds in which our civilization lies hidden. Only the patent for eternity that the snow has acquired.

First, you can't drive away and escape the snow because the roads are blocked, then your car turns into an icy sarcophagus, then you try to get back to find your home already buried up to the windows. Having dug out the entrance, you hastily light the stove or fireplace—trying to find warmth.

But when you look out the window, no light comes through—it's already completely blocked by snow! You fight for the warmth they're trying to steal from you. It's dwindling—the snow is creeping into your home, onto your threshold. And then you crawl under the covers and remember those you loved, your breath warming their barely warm palms.

The closer the snow gets, the more apathy overwhelms you. You stop fighting for warmth. You don't care. You no longer write poems or sing songs. It's getting colder. The snow is sinking right into your soul...

I... I'd like to lie down and freeze, so no one can find me. Skeptics say snow will conquer all living things. But I... I still write letters about how we've forgotten how to write letters to each other. I write about love, to warm myself and to give warmth. I'm standing under your balcony, my imaginary love! Look! I brought you flowers that you won't find among the snow dunes! I call them "snow-resistant."

The most terrible and terrifying thing is to freeze. I heard that a famous writer was buried under snow the other day. They barely managed to dig him out. But no one came to identify him because of the snowfall. And so he remains unidentified and unknown. I don't want that! But I'm starting to lose heart, and I'm starting to doubt whether there were once civilizations here with inimitable and great histories, minds of the world, people of the world, kindness and harmony, a striving for beauty and perfection. Maybe... maybe it was always cold here, and white, indifferent snow lay everywhere? It depends on how you look at it... ✦

SHORT PROSE

The Urgent Angel

CHERKASOV EGOR

There are pills that make you dial numbers on your phone and call emergency Angels. Not the ones who are nearby but seem far away, but the ones who come quickly and urgently.

I had these pills, and they helped me reach my loved one's voice again. Despite the fact that the conversation was being recorded from above, she even cursed into the phone.

The Angel arrived with a delay, as expected. Russia, roads, fools, traffic lights, and reasons unknown even to him... he didn't take off his wings, didn't put on a mask, and walked into my room with dirty shoes on. There were many challenges, but he didn't have time for them.

"Where are we going this time?" he asked.

"To 2008!" I clapped my hands in joy.

"You understand, crazy, that you can't live like this anymore! You don't live this life! You live years that will never be again, do you hear? Never!"

"Then you should have killed me back then, you all-powerful one! That was life, but now it's just a waiting game for your new life, which the wise men in their books just make up. And since I can't reach you normally, I have to resort to forbidden methods."

And there... in 2008... Maxim's concert. I'm in love, and she's sitting on my shoulders because she can't see a damn thing behind the crowd of fans. I don't give a damn about Maxim. I came here for her. Like a true guard, I won't leave my post and will stand with her for about forty minutes: me and her, sitting on my shoulders. For this loyalty and devotion, I will earn our first kiss. And then... she'll take me home to tell me all the important things that you can't write about in a girl's diary. She'll show me her favorite movie posters and give me a bracelet she made just for me. We'll get tired of watching a long movie and want to sleep at the same time.

We'll lie down on her bed. It'll be exciting, but not in a creepy way. I won't touch her tonight. I'll fall asleep on her small but loyal chest. Not under the influence of pills, like I am now, but with the comforting feeling that we are alive, that we love, and that love is the most powerful elixir against the madness that sur-

rounds us. There is us. And everything else. It will seem wild and hostile to me. I'm going to hold my little girl even tighter.

And she's a little girl, fragile, naive, and she'll give me faith in tomorrow. And even though she's wearing ridiculous emo makeup, and even though she's wearing acid-colored leggings, and even though my friends won't understand me, and even though she can't pass any metal detectors because of all the metal on her face, she's more alive than anyone else, she's purer than anyone else, and she believes in love like a god, and she'll fight for it.

I finished my speech. The Angel remained silent. Then he decided to summarize.

"Love, you say... and then you broke up, like all stupid teenagers. And anyway, she didn't love you. I knew better."

"So be it. And I want to go back to where I believe in what I believe without you. Where I touch my life with my hands. Where I see not a fence, but everything beyond it. Where subtle means GENTLE! This is my fairy tale. This is my 2008. And you don't get involved. Let's go to the concert before we're late!" I patted the Angel on the shoulder. "Let's fly. I think you'll like a couple of Maxim tracks. They're about love, not money."

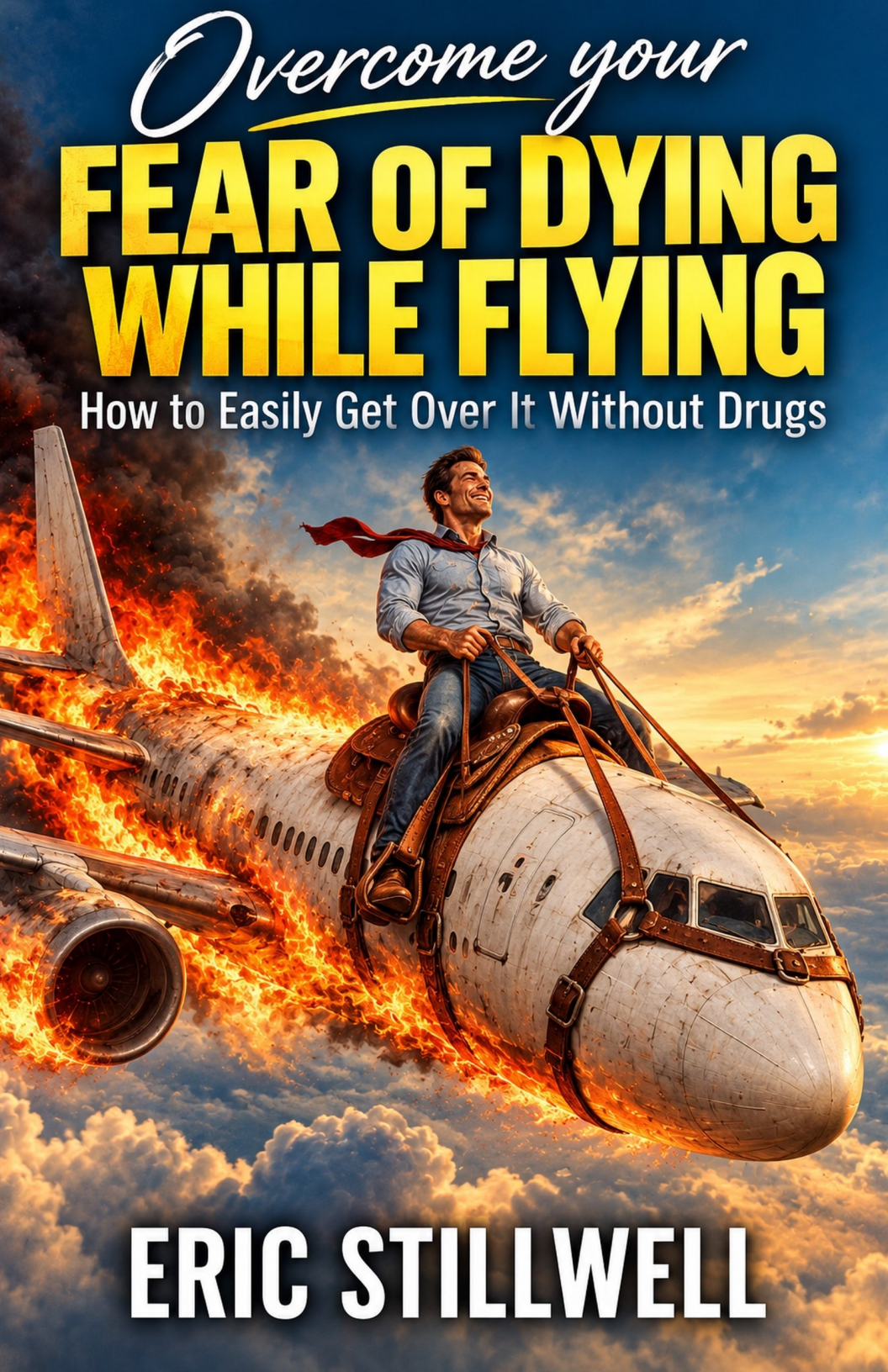
"Let's go, asshole! Do you even understand what else I have to report about you? And what will I report up there? That you're incurable?!" the Angel scolded while I climbed into his ambulance.

"Write whatever you want! Let's fly, darling! Let's fly!" ✦

Overcome your

FEAR OF DYING WHILE FLYING

How to Easily Get Over It Without Drugs



ERIC STILLWELL

BOOK EXCERPT

Overcome Your Fear of Dying While Flying

ERIC STILLWELL

Introduction

If you picked up this book, there is a good chance your hands get a little damp just thinking about your next flight. Maybe you've already booked it, and you're dreading the date, or maybe you've been turning down trips, weddings, and vacations for years because the idea of sealing yourself inside a metal tube at 35,000 feet feels like too much to ask. Either way, I want you to know two things right from the start.

You are not weak, silly, or irrational for feeling this way, and you are far from alone.

Millions of people share this fear, including plenty who fly every week and quietly grip the armrest on every takeoff.

My name is Eric Stillwell. I'm a certified hypnotherapist with a background in general psychotherapy; I've spent years working as an investigative author, and I fly a lot. Each of those roles shaped this book.

The therapist in me knows that fear is not a character flaw but a protective system that has wandered a little off course, and that it can be retrained. The researcher in me doesn't take anyone's word for anything, so every statistic and safety claim in these pages comes from a source you can check yourself, and you'll find them all listed at the end of each chapter or at the back of the book. The frequent flyer in me has heard every bump, chime, and whir an airliner can make, and I'll explain what each one means so that none of them catch you off guard again.

You're not sick.
You're not insane.
You're not a wimp.
You are hypersensitive, and you have learned to stay that way.

Here is the promise of this book. I am not going to tell you to "just relax," and I'm not going to bury you in engineering. Instead, we'll work on your fear from several directions at once.

How to Use This Book

The book is divided into four parts, and you can read them in order or jump to what you need most. Part One explains the fear itself, how common it is, and what the numbers really say about flying. Part Two opens up the airplane, covering how it stays aloft, what turbulence is, the safety systems you never see, and a field guide to every sound you'll hear. Part Three covers everything you can do before you fly, from rehearsing in the passenger seat of a car to picking the right seat and packing a comfort kit. Part Four takes you through the flight itself, from boarding to landing, with a chapter on self-hypnosis and another on what happens when things don't go exactly to schedule. Part Five is your toolkit, with checklists you can print or keep on your phone, along with recommended resources, free recordings, support groups, and the sources behind everything in these pages.

If your flight is tomorrow and you're reading this in a panic, skip straight to Chapter 12 and the checklists in Part Five, and come back to the rest when you're home safe, or airborne. If you have weeks or months before you travel, start at the beginning and give yourself time to practice the techniques in Chapter 8 and Chapter 13. Fear responds best to repetition, and the more often you rehearse feeling calm, the more automatic it becomes.



One last thing before we begin. Courage isn't the absence of fear, and the goal of this book isn't to make you love flying, although some readers end up surprised to find that they do. The goal is to make flying something you can do comfortably enough that fear no longer gets a vote on where you go and whom you see.

Let's get started.

From Chapter One

Look around the gate area the next time you're waiting to board. Count off every third person, and statistically you have just pointed to someone who is uneasy about the flight you're all about to take.

They don't look scared, because most nervous flyers become experts at hiding it, but the feeling is there behind the coffee cup and the scrolling phone. Fear of flying is one of the most common, yet treatable, fears, and the numbers make that clear. Researchers have tried to measure it for decades, and the honest answer is that the figure depends on how you ask the question. A 2016 research paper put the prevalence anywhere from 2.5 percent to as high as 40 percent, which tells you the line between "a bit nervous" and "phobic" is drawn in different places by different

studies.[1] A large Swedish study from Lund University, published in 1997 and based on 2,239 people, found that 36 percent felt at least some unease when flying and 8 percent had a pronounced fear reaction.[2] In Britain, a YouGov poll found that roughly one in six adults, about 16 percent, suffer from a fear of flying.[3] A 2023 survey of more than 3,100 Americans found that about a third admitted to being afraid of flying, and among people who had never flown at all the figure rose to nearly three in four.[4]

From Butterflies to Phobia

It helps to think of flying fear as a range rather than a switch. At one end are people who feel a flutter during takeoff and a jolt of adrenaline in turbulence, then forget about it once the drink cart arrives. In the middle are people who fly but dread it for days beforehand, sleep badly the night before, and spend the trip scanning the flight attendants' faces for signs of trouble. At the far end is true aviophobia, where the fear is strong enough that a person avoids flying altogether, and only about 5 percent of Americans fall into that group.[5] Wherever you are on that range, the tools in this book apply to you, and the further along you are, the more you'll gain from practicing them.

What Fear Costs

Fear of flying isn't only uncomfortable while you're in the air, because it quietly shapes your life on the ground. In the YouGov research, more than four in ten nervous flyers said they avoided planes completely, about one in six had missed visiting friends and relatives abroad, and many had skipped weddings and other important family events.[6]

In my practice, I've heard the same story many times in different words: the job interview in another city that never happened, the grandchild seen only on video calls, the honeymoon taken by car because flying wasn't an option. Those losses are the real reason this book exists.

Even the Professionals

If you think you're the only one who feels this way, consider that people who fly for a living aren't immune either. In a Norwegian study of more than a thousand airline staff, just under 10 percent of crew members said they felt anxious or fearful about flying at least once a month.[7] That doesn't mean flying is dangerous, since

these same people board aircraft day after day and return home safely. It means fear is a human reaction to an unusual environment, and it shows up even in people who know every inch of the aircraft.

The Good News

Here is the most encouraging fact in this chapter. Fear of flying is one of the most treatable fears there is. Barbara Rothbaum, a psychiatry professor at Emory University who has studied the problem, has said the best fear of flying programs report success rates of around 90 percent.[8] Those programs rely on the same building blocks you'll find in this book, which are understanding the fear, learning the facts, and practicing calm until it becomes a habit. You don't have to be brave to start; you only have to keep reading.

Overcome Your Fear of Dying While Flying
BY ERIC STILLWELL
BUY THIS BOOK

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DID YOU KNOW?

It's extremely common for nervous flyers to touch the body of the airplane when they walk in.

If this makes you feel comfortable, go for it.

POETRY

Everlasting

WILLIAM GENSBURGER

✦ ✦ ✦

The leaves are dying all around me
floundering in the breeze on damp ground,
undressed tree limbs not so stylish
as the cold stillness licks at me.

The birds sing quieter, many gone on warmer paths,
while those remaining scour for grub
before the ground's too hard to peck.

I used to envy winter's virgin snow,
the advent of holiday cheer,
the stark finale of one calendar
with the unknown fortunes of the next.

But now the cold bites harder
and layers can't keep away its reach,
mind and glasses fogged by erratic breath,
longing for the warmth of younger years,
endless spring dawns with hope of something
EVERLASTING.

William Gensburger is the award-winning author of multi-genre novels, stories, poetry, and nonfiction. His books and stories enthrall the reader and leave them wanting more. Learn more at www.MisterWriter.com.

POETRY

The Picturesque Dreameries

PAWEŁ MARKIEWICZ

Dedicated to all souls at the feast of All Saints' Day on the first of November 2026

✦ ✦ ✦

I was only a light dreamer.
I was lonely and alone, however gentle such
each poem of me, a piece of the eternity.
Tied to the weight of the earth, I feel careful like a charm.

My most beautiful dreams were brought by the rainbow into heaven,
thanks to the tender red sky in the morning,
that wrote down the longing into eternal book.
In the paradise happened the power of the ontology,
so that my day-dreameries were refined.

A dream was in the hereafter turned into the brightest star
and brought afterwards again over the homeland.
The star was in sight at midnight and it shines
for each dreamer of this world, in particular for me alone.
I look out at this star, where night-dreameries bloom.
A spell-like ghost warms the dream.
And so the small heaven on earth happens again.

I am dreaming of a rainbow of former times.
Other colors take me to same paradise.
The star from my dreams brings all to me however.
There are stairs from Elysian shooting stars.
Every shooting star has other colors such
an eternally tender rainbow.

I want to climb up the stairs, to
touch this star with the soul-wonder, as if
the marvelous angel enchanted the muse-like ambrosia,
like back then, in the beginning of each ontology,
formerly, in the dreamy times,
when the world has been created from hopeful partlets,
in a tender way.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

On the Second of November 2026

It was a day after the feast of All Saints' Day.
I visited a grave of Lukas.
Then a bewitched ghost
from the graveyard persuaded me to
go climbing up these stairs from
colorful shooting stars, to touch
the lightest star.

I went there and I gave my heart for the star.
I was given from the star an unwritten and empty
exercise book, to write down my news, ideas
and theories in the new Security of Countries, tender wisdom.

Oh. You spell-like muse!
For dear, thankful eternity!

✦ ✦ ✦

Paweł Markiewicz was born in 1983 in Siemiatycze, Poland. He is a poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku, and long poems. Read more of his work at https://www.pikerpress.com/author/551/pawe-markiewicz

NEWS FROM THE WEB

Stories of interest to writers and readers from around the web this month. Tap any headline to read the full story.



BOOKER PRIZE

At 81, M. John Harrison becomes the oldest Booker winner, and the first from the science fiction world, for *The End of Everything*.

READ AT NPR →



NOBEL PRIZE

Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson wins the 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature for work that "created new forms for contemporary literature."

READ AT NOBELPRIZE.ORG →



NATIONAL BOOK AWARDS

Hannah Lillith Assadi wins for Fiction with *Paradiso 17*, and Salman Rushdie receives the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

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BOOKS AND AI

AI companies are quietly buying printed books by the million, slicing them apart to scan, and discarding the originals.

READ AT DECRYPT →



FOR AUTHORS

Protect your manuscript: the Authors Guild's model contract clauses on AI training, uploads, and AI narration.

READ AT AUTHORS GUILD →



PAGE TO SCREEN

Suzanne Collins's *Sunrise on the Reaping* reaches theaters November 20 as the newest Hunger Games film.

READ AT TECHRADAR →



IN TRANSLATION

Yáng Shuāng-zǐ's *Taiwan Travelogue*, translated by Lin King, is the first book translated from Mandarin to win the International Booker Prize.

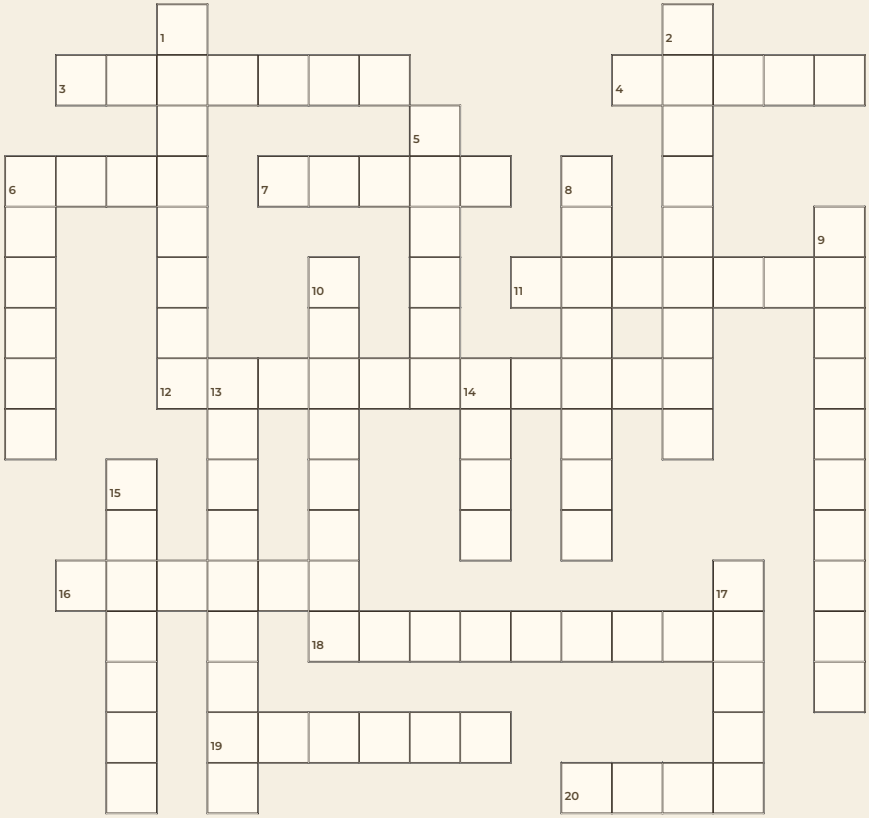
READ AT NPR / NHPR →

These stories are published by the outlets named and are shared for interest only.

BOOKS & PIECES PUZZLE

The Issue Crossword

Every answer is hiding somewhere in this issue. Answers on the next page.



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Crossword Solution

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FICTION

The Cat Lived

WILLIAM GENSBURGER

From the collection Distant Rumors: 10 Stories

The cat died on a Saturday morning amidst a blaze of activity designed to save its life. Hooked up to tubes, bandaged, and shaved in crucial areas, the cat awaited execution atop the sterile metal table in one of the examination rooms. Howling dogs could be heard in the background.

It was Jane who called it "execution." The veterinarian had softened such harsh realities to "putting the poor thing out of its misery" or "putting him to sleep." But then the vet had also joked about putting her own husband to sleep and had not intended that to come across as a peaceful transition.

"There could be some spasms after the injection. It may not look pretty. Are you sure you wouldn't rather wait in the outer office while we do this?" she asked.

Jane shook her head. Her husband, Jason, watched from behind. Despite the sadness of the moment, he found himself intrigued by the unfolding event, semi-detached as though he were watching a *National Geographic* television special or one of those made-for-television movies that were so popular a few years earlier.

He noticed the calmness of the vet, the way her face would contort into a grieved expression without the substance of grief, as though she wanted you to believe that she was killing her own pet rather than yours. He did not feel convinced.

The vet tech attached another tube, one into which fast-acting poison would later be injected. The first shot is only a sedative to calm the animal, he was told. The second one paralyzes the heart. Ka-boom!

Robert could envision a future world in which the elderly were dispatched with the same precision and the consoling pre-eulogy of the attending physician "putting the poor thing out of his/her misery."

"It's better this way," the vet said, her eyes offering another rendition of sadness and sympathy as she discharged the contents of the syringe through the tube leading into the cat.

The cat's head, which until this point had been free-moving, slowly dropped to the table, its eyes flickering then glazing over as the lids closed one last time. And that was it.

"Would you like us to take care of his remains?" the vet asked.

"Please," Jason said, clearing his throat and answering before Jane could argue a case for burying it in the backyard, where she would undoubtedly place a headstone and flowers and grieve periodically, in an almost human way.

Now, in front of him, she began to cry, and he considered that he should, perhaps, hold her, console her for the pain he knew she felt. He could not bring himself to do so and instead passively watched her.

"It's not always so peaceful," the vet said, checking for a heartbeat. There was none. "I'll let you say your goodbyes," she added, leaving the room.

Jane gently stroked the cat's fur, then suddenly pulled back as the body was already stiffening and now gave the appearance of a stuffed toy rather than something that, moments before, had lived.

"We did the right thing," he told her. "He'd only have lived another week and been in pain. His liver was gone. You spared him some pain."

"But not myself," she blurted, turning away from the cat and shielding her face in her hands. "He was my cat. I had him before we were married. I feel like part of my life has died as well."

"He had a damned good life. He ate better than we did. He slept on the bed between us, and he peed wherever he felt like. He was a fat cat who got damned lucky."

"You don't understand," she said, walking out and leaving him alone with the corpse.

"But I do," he said to the cat. "She killed you with all that fatty food she fed you. But what did she do to me?"

In the car on the way home, she was silent, staring at the fields slipping by. Ahead a stray cat sat curbside, watching the car as it approached. She looked but paid it no attention.

"Do you think he felt any pain?" she finally said.

"No pain. He was purring right up until his heart stopped. Not a bad way to go, really."

"I miss him already," she said. "It won't be the same without him."

"Nothing will be the same," he said, knowing it to be the truth; the cat's illness merely brought to the surface the years of resentment following the incident. And selfishly, he found himself glad of the cat's death for the pain he knew it caused her.

"You just don't understand what I'm feeling."

"I understand more than I'm given credit for."

"He was my child, my baby. We never had any children, so he was it."

"Your choice, not mine."

"We didn't need children," she said.

"You didn't need children."

He pulled the car into the driveway and got out. He was standing in front of the house he always considered hers—she had picked it.

It was a small brick house surrounded by pine trees. She had decorated it, selected the shrubbery and the flowers and the cobblestones and, on the inside, the furniture and the color of the paint on the walls, in the same way that she had selected the pattern of their dishes and the design of the bed sheets, all of which, at this moment, he hated more than he knew he could ever express.

And he had allowed her those pleasures because it made her happy, and, at the time, he just wanted her to be happy, just as the fat cat sleeping between them made her happy.

It was not his house. It held none of his persona. And standing by the front door, he knew he would become the stranger he already felt he was.

Inside, she wandered through the rooms noticing the emptiness before settling on the couch. She told him so, and he shrugged and replied, "Only now?" and, with a nod, apologized for the cruelty of the statement.

"Why even apologize when you don't mean it?"

"Let's not start," he said, pouring himself a scotch and her a large glass of sherry, knowing she would be starting on something more volatile, such as the half-empty Southern Comfort she kept hidden in the garage behind the laundry supplies.

He handed her the glass and raised his in a toast. "To the cat," he said, "who was lucky enough to have an easy life and a quick way out." He took a large sip.

She sat silent for a moment and sipped at her drink before speaking. "I had hoped that things had changed with us," she said.

"Things never change."

"More's the pity. You can't just forgive me, can you?"

"Forgive? That's easy. Forgetting is the part I can't seem to do. Knowing that it was so incredibly stupid . . . ." He took another sip, and shook his head. "Rehashing again, I suppose . . . ."

"To hell with you," she hissed and finished her drink with a gulp.

"Do you remember the plant you got when we were first together?"

She nodded. "I bought it right after we made love the first time."

"And the antique, Oriental, glass paintings I used to own that you hated?"

"They broke. The frame wasn't strong enough to hold it."

"Not after you threw the salt shaker at it. And even though you said that the plant would grow with our love, it knew something you didn't. It died."

"And you're glad the cat died, even though you'd never admit it."

"I don't begrudge the cat. But you, you could have told him 'no,' that your marriage meant something more than getting drunk and giving in."

"Damn you," she shouted, charging from the room and slamming the door behind her.

"No, damn you," he found himself screaming after her. He poured himself another drink. The cat got lucky, he thought.

In the next room, he could hear her crying. He wanted to pack his bags, walk out, and relish the revenge he wished so desperately he could obtain.

How could I ever trust you again, he thought? How could I leave you alone and not wonder? All his life, he had expected that he would have a marriage of trust and love, and in his mind, he knew that he could never have betrayed her in the way she had betrayed him.

It had felt as though his life had ended, like someone had sliced a section from him, a lump of flesh seething with all the lost hope and idealism.

Their wedding picture in a tarnished silver frame stared back at him. There were two happy people he could not remember. They looked happy, almost certain of the choice they had just made, moments before the flash went off. Like thoughts of the cat, those moments seemed muted now.

He went back outside and stared in through the window. It was quiet outside; the cool air pressed comfortably against him. Safety in silence, he considered.

He watched as she came from the bedroom, a wrinkled tissue in her hand, and sat down on the couch.

The motions felt right, he thought. He looked away, then back again.

✦

He watched as she came from the bedroom and sat down on the couch next to the fat cat.

He would go inside in a moment and tell her he was leaving. He looked at the cat. The cat's liver was infected, and swollen, and he was on medication to flush out the toxins. The cat had a fifty-fifty chance. They would know tomorrow, although he felt the cat was already a goner.

✦

The motions felt right. They felt comfortable, and well, they should, for he had practiced this scenario for a week.

What if the cat had to be put to sleep? He considered how cruel it would be to leave her on a Friday night and have to have the cat put to sleep on Saturday morning. And yet he knew he could not stay. Each day he remained was like living life as an endless pattern, forever renewing and becoming ever harder to change.

He watched her on the couch, petting the cat. This is not my house, he told himself, expecting the cameras to pull back and the final credits of this God-awful movie to roll up the screen. This is not my life.

He would walk in, and she would look at him. And she would see the expression of detachment in his eyes and know that what was to follow would hurt her, for she knew nothing other than the fact that she needed him in her life, even if she had hurt him repeatedly.

"I can't stay here," he would say, and she would frown and not make it easy for him.

"What do you mean you can't stay here? Don't be ridiculous. What are you talking about?"

"Us," he would mutter. "I can't live like this anymore."

And her eyes would glaze over, and the beginnings of a tear would form. "What are you telling me? Do you want a divorce?"

And his heart would skip a beat because hearing that word come forth from her mouth meant both pain and freedom, the former from the destruction of union, if even only in formality, and the latter from the relief of the burdens he had been carrying with him. "Divorce" was a word of power to be served up like a good cocktail.

"Yes," he would say. He had trained himself to say that word, not allowing the guilt or the thoughts of intense pain that he would be causing her to stop him this time; she had caused the same pain upon him to such a degree that he could no longer live with it. "I want a divorce," he would say slowly, clearly, savoring the fact that, finally, he would get the last word.

"Oh God!" he imagined that she would mutter, believing that a more accurate response would be a belligerent acceptance of the proposal.

In his pocket, he fingered the house keys, feeling the jagged edges, biding his time. He could feel the pressure of the outside coolness guiding him.

Perhaps the cat would live, he thought, sliding the key into the lock and turning the handle.

As the door opened, he could see the cat on the couch next to her. It looked up at him for the briefest of moments before closing its eyes, its head falling gracefully. Peacefully. ✦

Read all ten stories in Distant Rumors.

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BEHIND THE BOOK

KALEE BOISVERT

Permission to Just Be

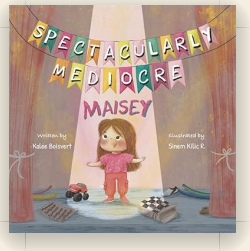


From money books for women to picture books for kids, with the same heart behind both.

THE INTERVIEW

Kalee Boisvert spent more than fifteen years writing about money and financial empowerment for women. Now she has added children's books to her shelf: Spectacularly Mediocre Maisey, Evie Who Feels Everything, and Slow Down, Little Junie. She talks about the expansion, the reminders she hopes children (and their parents) take away, and how to raise kids who love to read.

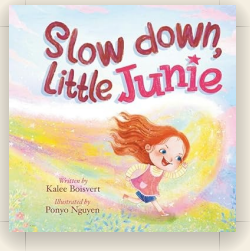
Q. *Welcome back, Kalee! I know it's been some time since our last two interviews. Would you please give brief descriptions of your books, beginning with Spectacularly Mediocre Maisey?*



Spectacularly Mediocre Maisey is probably my most playful reminder that you do not have to be the best at something for it to be worth doing. Maisey tries all sorts of things and discovers that she is spectacularly... mediocre at them. And that's completely okay. Somewhere along the way, I think we started teaching kids that everything they do needs to lead to achievement, improvement, a trophy, or maybe even a future career. Maisey is my little rebellion against that. Sometimes you can paint because you like painting. You can dance badly because dancing is fun. You can try something, be completely average at it, and still have the best time.



Evie Who Feels Everything is especially close to my heart because I have always been a sensitive person, and I see that same sensitivity in my children. For so long, sensitivity has been treated as something we need to toughen up, hide, or grow out of, and I really wanted to frame it differently. Evie feels everything deeply, and through her story she begins to understand that this isn't something she needs to push away. It's a gift. The same sensitivity that can sometimes make the world feel overwhelming is also what allows her to notice the little things and care deeply about others. I wanted sensitive kids to see themselves in Evie and know that this part of them is something worth holding onto.



Slow Down, Little Junie is about a little girl who is always racing toward whatever comes next. She wants to hurry through everything until she notices all the tiny, wonderful things she has been rushing past. It's a story about presence, but written in a way that I hope feels natural to children rather than like an adult telling them to slow down.

I think all three books have a similar heartbeat underneath them. They give children permission to just be. You don't always have to achieve. You don't have to stop feeling deeply. And you don't have to rush through childhood trying to get somewhere else. There is so much value in who you already are and in the life that is happening right now.

They give children permission to just be.

KALEE BOISVERT

Q. *What made you transition from writing financial books for women to writing children's books? Was it an easy transition?*

I don't really think of it as a transition as much as an expansion. I haven't stopped writing about money or financial empowerment, and that work is still a huge part of what I do. Children's books simply gave me another space to write about things that matter to me.

Having my own children has also made me think a lot about the messages we give kids early in life. I see so many wonderful qualities in them that I hope they never feel they need to lose as they grow up: sensitivity, curiosity, playfulness, the ability to be completely present, and doing things simply because they bring them joy.

So in some ways, the subjects are very different, but the heart behind the writing really isn't. My financial writing has always been about helping people feel more confident and empowered in their own lives. My children's books are doing that in a different way, hopefully helping kids recognize that the parts of themselves that make them who they are are worth holding onto.

And the transition into writing for children felt surprisingly natural. It gave me permission to be a little more playful and imaginative, which has been really fun.

Q. *What lessons and reminders do you hope children learn once they read your books?*

I think they are probably more reminders than lessons. Kids already seem to know so many of these things naturally, and then somewhere along the way the world can get a little loud and tell them otherwise.

I hope my books remind children that they don't have to be the best at something for it to be worth doing, that feeling deeply can be a gift rather than something they need to change, and that they don't always have to be rushing toward the next thing. There is value in playing, noticing, trying, feeling, being curious, and simply enjoying where you are.

But I also hope there is something in these stories for the parents and adults reading alongside them. Sometimes the things we are trying to preserve in our children are the very things we have lost touch with in ourselves. Maybe while we're reminding our kids that they don't have to be productive all the time, or that it's okay to feel deeply, or to slow down and enjoy something simply because it's fun, we can give ourselves that same permission too.

I love the idea that a children's book can be a reminder for both the little person listening and the grown-up turning the pages.

A children's book can be a reminder for both the little person listening and the grown-up turning the pages.

KALEE BOISVERT

Q. *Are you currently writing your next children's book, and can you reveal the plot?*

I actually have a few children's books that I'm hoping to release next. One is a really fun story built around the idea that fun deserves more space in our lives. We're so good at making time for all the things we have to do, and I wanted to play with the idea of what might happen if fun got a little more time on the schedule too.

I'm also working on another children's project that brings a little more of my soulful side into my writing. Let's just say the woo-woo parents out there might especially enjoy that one!

That's probably one of my favorite things about writing children's books. I get to explore so many different ideas and follow them wherever they want to go.

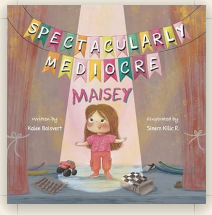
Q. *What is your advice for parents on how to get their children to read more? There is a literacy crisis in this country, and it makes me sad that now both adults and children don't read as much as they should.*

I think one of the biggest things is making reading feel like something enjoyable rather than another thing kids have to accomplish. Let them read what they actually like, even if it isn't what we imagined they would choose. Graphic novels, funny books, books about completely random things they're obsessed with: it all counts.

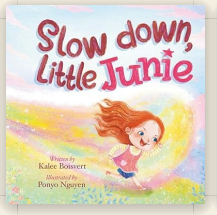
I also think reading together matters, even as kids get older. There is something really special about sharing a story, laughing about it, talking about the characters, and making it part of your time together. And of course, letting kids see us reading too. It's hard to convince them that books are wonderful if they never see the adults around them enjoying one.

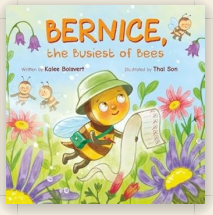
Mostly, I think we need to protect the joy of reading. Kids already have so many things they are measured on. I would hate for books to become one more place where they feel like they are being graded. Find the stories that make them want to turn the next page, and start there. ✦

THE PICTURE BOOKS









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ABOUT KALEE BOISVERT



Kalee Boisvert has spent over fifteen years in the financial industry, driven by a desire to rewrite the money story she grew up with. Raised in a single-parent household, she became passionate early on about financial empowerment and helping others create freedom and confidence through money. But her path didn't stop there.

Over time, Kalee's work expanded into something deeper: a soul-level invitation for women to remember who they are. Today, she writes financial and spiritual books, offering practical tools, tender truth, and gentle reminders that you are already enough. Her picture books for children include *Spectacularly Mediocre Maisey*, *Evie Who Feels Everything*, *Slow Down, Little Junie*, and *Bernice, the Busiest of Bees*.

Mostly, I think we need to protect the joy of reading.

KALEE BOISVERT

Interview by Bianca Rose, courtesy of Book Notions.

INTERVIEW

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

Thrillers From the Edge of the Ice



The BBC correspondent turned novelist on the Arctic border where two nuclear powers stand within sight of each other.

Humphrey Hawksley is an author, podcast host, commentator, and journalist whose reporting with the BBC has taken him to crises around the world. His future history series, *Dragonstrike*, *Dragonfire*, and *The Third World War*, imagines catastrophic scenarios that begin with a Chinese strike in the South China Sea. His Rake Ozenna espionage thrillers are set in the Arctic and High North, beginning with *Man on Ice*, a Russian invasion of the Alaskan island of Little Diomede. Rake is an island native and a special forces veteran with the Alaska National Guard, and the late Nelson DeMille praised him as smart and tough. Hawksley's nonfiction includes *Democracy Kills: What's So Good About Having the Vote*, published during the Iraq civil war, and *Asian Waters*.

Q. *It's been a few years since we last spoke. Does it feel like the world has changed much?*

In some ways, yes; in some ways, no. When the Berlin Wall came down, it felt like democracy had won and history had turned a corner. But now we're seeing tensions that resemble the 1930s or the period before the First World War. It feels less like progress and more like history coming full circle.

Q. *Your thriller series is set in the Arctic. What inspired that?*

After Russia first threatened Ukraine, I became interested in the US–Russian border in the Arctic. That's where the two nuclear powers face each other directly. I visited Little Diomede Island, where Americans can literally see a Russian military base just a few miles away. That setting became the foundation for the Rake Ozenna series.



The Rake Ozenna thrillers, beginning with Man on Ice.

Q. *That border hasn't historically been a flashpoint, has it?*

Not really. It's remote, harsh, and strategically difficult. During the Cold War, there were incidents (Russian forces shot down American aircraft), but both sides avoided escalation. There was almost an unspoken agreement to keep that border quiet.

Americans can literally see a Russian military base just a few miles away.

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

Q. *You mentioned research at the Naval War College. Was that helpful?*

Very. The United States Naval War College gave me access to experts for both the thriller series and my nonfiction book *Asian Waters*. It's a fascinating institution. Historically, even foreign officers have studied there.

Q. *Did you have a specific theme in mind when you began the series?*

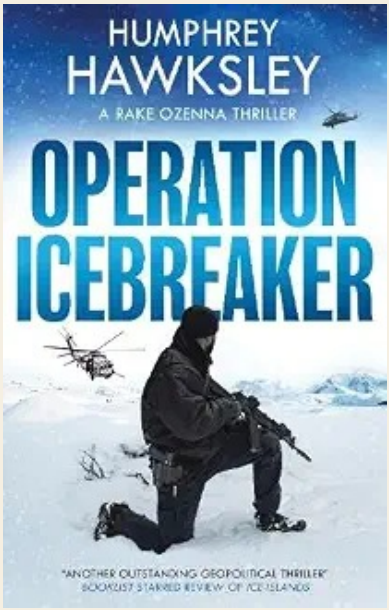
The first book, *Man on Ice*, grew out of a simple "what if" scenario: what if Russian forces seized Little Diomede under some pretext? There's no major military presence there. It would take minutes. When I asked policymakers what would happen in that case, half said the US would retaliate immediately; the other half said they might let it go. That uncertainty became the heart of the story.

Q. *How did you create your main character?*

Initially, I considered the typical military-thriller hero, an elite intelligence officer swooping in to save the day. But I realized the toughest people in that region are the locals themselves. So I created Rake Ozenna as someone native to the island, an Iraq veteran who understands the terrain, the weather, and survival in extreme conditions.

Q. *How much do current events influence your plots?*

A great deal. I have a journalism background, so I'm drawn to real-world tensions. One book explored the Norway–Russia border. Another looked at Japan and Russia, which technically never signed a formal peace treaty after World War II. My upcoming novel, *Operation Icebreaker*, deals with tensions around Greenland and NATO. Real events often catch up with the fiction faster than I expect.



Coming next: Operation Icebreaker.

Q. *Is it harder now to write geopolitical thrillers, given today's political complexity?*

It is. In the past, it was easier to define a clear antagonist: Russia, China, Iran. Now, especially with something like Greenland, the tension can feel like the West versus itself. Instead of portraying entire nations as villains, I focus more on individuals within institutions who drive conflict. And I keep the heavy politics in the background, emphasizing action and character instead.

Real events often catch up with the fiction faster than I expect.

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

Q. *How long do you plan to continue the series?*

I'd like to write at least two or three more books. The Arctic remains strategically important, especially as ice melts and trade routes open. There's still a lot of story potential there.

Q. Did you originally plan for this to become a long-running series?

No. The first book started as a standalone idea while I was on assignment. But readers and publishers responded well, so it evolved naturally. With each installment, I've been able to explore the characters more deeply.

Q. Can you tell us more about Rake personally?

He's an Iraq veteran with deep roots in his Alaskan homeland. He falls in love with a trauma surgeon he meets overseas. She's half Russian, half Estonian, but their different worlds make a traditional life together difficult. That emotional tension runs alongside the geopolitical drama and gives the series a more personal core. ✦

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This interview was conducted by Alan R. Warren and Michael Hawley of House of Mystery Radio and is reprinted with permission. House of Mystery is a weekly radio program hosted by Canadian author and broadcaster Alan R. Warren on the NBC News Talk Radio network, syndicated across the US and Canada, with interviews spanning fiction and nonfiction.

Alan R. Warren is an award-winning Canadian true crime author with more than three dozen books published. Michael Hawley studies the Whitechapel murders, has written over thirty research articles and several books, and has lectured across the US and the UK.

LISTEN TO THE FULL INTERVIEW



ESSAY

Reckoning With the Rending

S. E. TSCHRITTER

No one talks about how in grief, a person present-tense loves a past-tense person—a parent, a child, a sibling. When your spouse dies, a widow or widower is in present-tense love with a past-tense person. "We used to go to [this place] all the time, except, we don't go anymore. He doesn't go, but I still do. We went, he went, I go."

It's no wonder grief is so maddeningly difficult to navigate. In my language, there is no longer a way for me to share the subject of the sentence with my late husband. Tell me what language I must use to speak of us simultaneously in present tense. There is no language to keep us together because by death did we part.

The one-flesh concept is real. Two souls, two individuals, intertwined like a vine to become one flesh. Each year the vine grows thicker and more sturdy. Then suddenly half of the roots, now tangled and intermingled, die, leaving the rest of the vine vulnerable, weak, and exposed.

Or imagine those souls as two construction paper hearts—one black and one white—glued together. When the glue dries completely, and you pull the hearts apart, the result is a messy, jagged tear. Part of the black is stuck on the white and part of the white remains on the black.

So it is with spouses. For widows, when your spouse dies, part of you goes with him and part of him remains with you. For widowers, part of you goes with her and part of her remains with you. The tear obliterates the identity of the remaining spouse and alters life's shape.

Grief is a Rending, a tearing.

S. E. TSCHRITTER

That space between what was and what will be, the terror of the unknown in the dark and unfamiliar place—that is grief. Grief is a Rending, a tearing. Grief is an abstract place that we step into when we lose a portion of our heart.

There are no rules for grief, no timelines. And the only people who think these rules exist are the ones who have never experienced the Rending.

Let me tell you about three of my Rendings and the three friends I turned my back on.



In my late twenties, I miscarried after having been on a birth control pill. A "friend" who practiced natural family planning said, "Your baby probably died because you were on birth control." I turned my back to her so quickly, I don't even know if she noticed that I left. A couple of years later, she miscarried. I didn't call her. That was the reach of my grace, because the only words I could find were, "I told you so."

A friend once told me that she thought I was selfish because I hadn't driven to see her newborn son. (It was a three-hour drive.) At the time, my late husband had stage IV cancer and was in the throes of chemo treatments. I gave that friend a second chance. I'd moved to a new town after my husband's death and not many people knew him. When she came to visit, I tried talking with her about my husband. "Actually," she said, "I never really got to know him that well. Whenever you came to visit with the girls, he was always too good to visit me." Whew. Or maybe he was working, and I'd been a stay-at-home mom with more flexibility in my schedule. That was six years ago, and I have not dialed her number since. When one of her children landed in the hospital with a life-threatening diagnosis, she reached out to me for pity and sympathy. "That's hard. I'm sorry." That's all I said. The measure you use is the measure you will be given.

As a new widow and a homeowner, I needed help replacing my deck. A male friend came to help me. His wife came too. His wife remained in the house with my kids and hers while her husband and I worked together outside. We had a similar sense of humor and found ourselves laughing at dumb—and purely innocent—perspectives on life. The laughter healed my soul. The laughter felt so good—until I realized that each time we laughed, his wife came outside to "check on the progress of the deck." My friend later made an indirect, offhanded comment that confirmed my suspicion—his wife feared that, because I was now single, I would make a play for her husband. I was not to be trusted. I don't do passive-aggressive well. I skip the passive part. And in the midst of my grief, my filter was paltry, at best. When my friend and I were alone, I looked at him and said, "You can tell her she has nothing to worry about." And this was the first time I ever articulated this next part. "You can tell her that I am not going to hit on you. I am in present-tense love with a past-tense person."

When I was a newly widowed mother of three young children, it amazed me how many people knew exactly what I should do with my money, my time, my children's education. People knew where I should live, how I should act, when I should start dating, and exactly what I needed to fix my problem.

I am in present-tense love with a past-tense person.

S. E. TSCHRITTER

The people with all the "shoulds" had never experienced the Rending. They were ignorant and clueless as to the cards I held in my hand.

Grief changes a person. How could it not? And if a grieving person once spoke to you, but no longer does, it's not because that person changed. It's likely because you didn't have room for the changed version of that person.

If I could say anything to friends of grievers who've not experienced a Rending, it would be this: You're incorrect. Speak very little. "I'm sorry. I love you." End scene. Until the day you figure out how to allow a living person to share the subject of a present-tense sentence with a dead person, before you speak, understand that you don't know. You can't fathom. You have no shared point of reference. Showing up is love in itself.

If I could give any advice to a griever, it would be this: guard your heart. Don't apologize for what you look like on the anvil when you're bent and broken. Grief monopolizes energy, and you don't need to spend yours explaining your feelings to someone who will not understand. I'm so sorry. You are loved. You are not alone. ✦

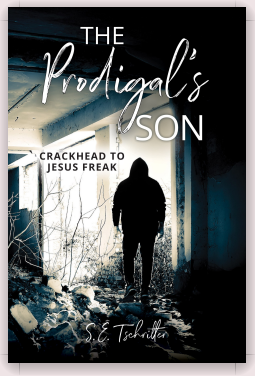
ABOUT S. E. TSCHRITTER



Multi-award-winning author S. E. "Sam" Tschritter (pronounced *Shridder*) specializes in articulating grief and loss, leading grievers toward hope and healing. Whether poetry, fiction, or nonfiction, Tschritter writes content that will stick with readers long after they close the cover. Her twenty-plus years of leadership experience and contributions to over forty books enable her to serve others, speaking truth with transparency, humor, and love.

Tschritter grew up in Chicagoland and has also lived in Minnesota and Oregon, giving her a wide view of people all over the country. She lives in Simpsonville, South Carolina, with her husband, their three teen and preteen daughters, cats named Pitter and Patter, and a Siberian husky she lost the vote to name Onomatopoeia. Nothing refreshes her soul like gardening, where she works through plot holes, writer's block, character development, and book ideas.

Read more at loveunedited.com or linktr.ee/LoveSamEvans.







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