

An Interview with the Author Jane Kirkpatrick talks about *An Absence So Great*

How did you become interested in writing stories based on the lives of actual people?

As a child I loved reading biography—Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* was set not far from where I grew up in southwestern Wisconsin. But there weren’t many biographies of women, and even fewer of ordinary women. I read Irving Stone’s novels and Anya Seton’s books about famous people and loved them. Then I learned about a historical couple who lived in Central Oregon in the 1860s. I wanted to tell the woman’s story but couldn’t find much information about her. Records existed about her husband, father, and brothers, but not much about her. When I found her obituary, which demonstrated such love for her, I knew she must have lived an extraordinary life. So, despite having never written fiction, I decided to tell her story in a way that allowed me to explore the truth of her life. I call it speculative historical fiction because I speculate about the why of things after researching the more factual what and when.

What novel was that?

A Sweetness to the Soul. It was followed by fifteen others, including this Portraits of the Heart series: *A Flickering Light* and *An Absence so Great*.

Where did you get the title An Absence So Great?

A friend and writer, Linda Lawrence Hunt (*Bold Spirit: Helga Estby’s Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America*), wrote of the death of their daughter Krista in a bus accident in Bolivia while on a mission trip some years back. As a comfort someone sent her a line from poet Mark Doty: “How could I ever prepare for an absence the size of you?” She felt it captured the great gulf of grief her daughter’s death created. She and her husband went on to establish The Krista Foundation (www.kristafoundation.org) to support young people around the world doing important social and environmental work. I adapted the lines for the title, as Jessie was managing the loss of integrity, the loss of a dream, and the loss of a great love while learning to trust in God’s guidance. The loss of the Bauers’ child I thought contributed to the absence of love that occurred within their marriage. Grief and loss take their toll on each of us, and the absence of spiritual support is perhaps the most devastating loss of all we humans face.

How was writing about your own family different from writing about other historical people?

What was similar was a great desire to memorialize and honor the lives of ordinary people, especially women. As with my other novels, I also found and listened to descendants’ recollections. Grandchildren and great-nephews might each have a different take on their ancestor, but each story lends credibility and helps shape the character. I could talk to aunts, cousins, and my brother and his wife, who all had experiences with Jessie, so that was different and helpful. I recalled stories my mother, Pearl, shared. My mom, by the way, was the third, or middle, child. I was also able to talk to others who knew this woman. She wasn’t just someone in a historical record. The subtext for me as a writer was also different, knowing that this woman’s story shaped my heritage, my mother, my life. I wondered about what kinds of values, thought processes, trials and tribulations, and strategies for enduring might have been handed down. There’s some evidence that DNA carries more than just physical characteristics, possibly emotional ones as well. I think I see patterns of my life in hers, but then I also saw universal patterns in her life, and those are the ones I most wanted to write about. I didn’t write the story to

be a voyeur into an ancestor's past but rather to explore the life of a woman I loved and wished to honor, while believing that her story could inform in positive ways the lives of those who never met her. I also had audiotapes of my aunts and uncles interviewing my grandmother when she was in her eighties and another when she was ninety-three. She played the piano on one, and on others her children asked some of the questions I would have asked. The family collection of glass photographic plates was another treasure I didn't have with my other novels. And of course, I had my own memories of her, which shaped the story as well: picking blackberries together, watching her shed her whalebone corset in hot July, laughing with her at my brother's wedding reception.

To help me dig deeper into what I thought were the truths of the story, I asked myself more often, *What aren't you writing about?* And of course I worried a bit about whether I'd be invited to the next family reunion after the relatives had read the books!

Did you uncover any interesting subtexts you'd care to share?

Like Jessie, I tend to deal with disappointment by first avoiding then acknowledging the truth. I struggle with unworthiness, distancing myself at times from spiritual support, and have to work at seeing what's past become water under the bridge. How I deal with absences of the heart gained dimension in the writing of this book. Another subtext is the number of ancestors—cousins of mine, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews—who have artistic passions with degrees in art, music, literature, and design, as well as the sciences, such as physics and engineering. In addition, there are a surprising number of relatives who count their faith life (me included) as an important part of who they are and who have served as pastors, nurses (my mother was one), writers, social workers, and missionaries. Many contribute their time, talents, and treasures to their respective churches and communities. I think my grandmother influenced those acts of artistry, science, generosity, and faith. I also explored my own issues related to marrying an older man (my husband is sixteen years older than I) and the complexities of divorce and its impact on children. My husband of thirty-three years and I were both married previously. He brought children into our family picture. That made for interesting conversations within my immediate family, and of course, blending a family made me admire my grandmother even more. The idea of how grief affects a marriage (my husband's son died the first year of our marriage), what ex-wives think about each other, and the way fathers stay attached or not to their children after a divorce also intrigued me as I explored this story. Considering talent as a currency and seeing ways that gifted people (young and old) sometimes harm themselves by their poor choices intrigued me as the story developed as well. As Pulitzer Prize-winner Willa Cather once noted, we writers most often find material in those experiences we had before we turned fifteen. Lots of grist for thought as I wrote this book.

How did you do your research?

Pretty much the way I always do: I start with an interesting character, for example, a woman who had done photographic work, which was considered to be a man's profession at the turn of the century. I was an adult when I learned that my grandfather had been married before, because the children from his first marriage were always known to me as my mother's "older brothers and sister," without the distinction that they were half siblings. Considering the time period, I thought that remarkable and wondered about it. I also knew of something strange—the two marriages to the same man. My grandmother never answered that question on the audiotapes. Along with these unanswered questions, I create a time line of actual known events in the person's life and then talk with descendants. I look at census information, social histories of the time period, then contact historical societies—in this instance the Winona County Historical Society was of huge help to me, and so was a friend, Lori Orser, in North Dakota. I read histories of the areas I'm writing about and read first-person accounts of growing up during the time period I'm

researching. Magazine articles written by hunters and fishermen are rich with landscape detail, and the storytellers of antique shops bring fascinating details to the manuscript. I also had dozens of original glass plate negatives to study and work into the tale.

Finally, I ask myself three questions from a book called *Structuring Your Novel* by Meredith and Fitzgerald: *What's my intention in writing this story? What's my attitude? What's my purpose?* I work those answers into three sentences, which I post on my computer to help me when I get lost. Then I identify what I think are the significant life events, the turning points in the character's life. I ask myself what each of the characters wants, then begin to write, trying to find out what motivated the characters to be where they were in the historical record and to do what they did. How did that affect them? I weave landscapes, relationships, spirituality, and work into the story and keep researching, talking to photographers (for this book) and other specialists as I go. I'm still asking questions, making corrections, until just before the book goes to press!

How did you research Mrs. Bauer's part of the story? Was her first name really Jessie too?

Both women had the same first name! That's why I used Mrs. Bauer as the character name, to distinguish her from my grandmother, Jessie. To learn about Mrs. Bauer, I had the wonderful help of cousins Molly Bauer Livingston Hanson, Bruce Bauer, and Patricia Bauer Butenhoff, who answered questions, read drafts, and were generous with their time and memories, including details such as that Mrs. Bauer loved to fish. Several descendants spoke of her emotional difficulties, which her sister, Eva, also had. I also had several photographs of Mrs. Bauer as a young woman and with her children. I find photographs to be quite revealing. My aunt Fern Bauer Griffin, who did the genealogical work a number of years ago, also transcribed interviews with all sides of the family, including Mrs. Bauer's. While I didn't have access to those transcriptions, I did have access to the book she wrote for our family in 1985, *Frederick John Bauer and His American Wives*, as well as several stories she sent me that my grandmother told her. Some included references to Mrs. Bauer. The consensus is that Mrs. Bauer was a troubled woman, and I attribute much of that to her great grief over the death of Donald. She may have suffered from clinical depression, but she also was known to hold the retouching brushes in her mouth to keep them moist, and the chemicals in the fluids and paints were not safe. Some of her descendants speculate that metal or chemical toxicity might explain her erratic behaviors. She died two months after the death of her mother in 1941, two years after the death of Fred Bauer. I wanted to portray all three main characters as three-dimensional people with flaws and strengths so they could inform our own lives more fully.

Did your grandmother own her own studio as you portray in this book?

She did. It was called the Polonia Studio. Oddly, she never mentioned it in the audiotapes or when my aunt Fern, her oldest child, interviewed her years before and wrote that family history. On the audiotape she asserted, "I took photographs too," and spoke of the character study she photographed in Eau Claire but not of the studio ownership. I discovered it through the *Republican-Herald* archives. Earlier, while going through family records, I'd come across a single page with the logo for Polonia Studio on it. It was not part of the ledger accounts, and when I asked, none of the relatives knew what it was doing there. So when I found the news announcement that Jessie A. Gaebele was the new proprietor of Polonia Studio, I did the happy-dog dance. Then the speculation began about how she might have come to purchase a studio from George Haas at the ripe young age of twenty, a woman in 1912. The news account of the sale of some of FJ's property about the same time gave me direction to speculate. Also in the family collection is a hard-bound program for a Photographers Association of America conference. Rides on a lake, the theater and lecture titles, and presenters described in the book were taken from that program, so it's likely Jessie did attend at least one of these gatherings, where she could have found female mentors.

Are the photographs used in the book of the people you claim them to be?

Some of them. The photographs of Jessie and of Roy with his chickens are. The portrait of Minnie Raymond and the sample photographed in Eau Claire are part of the labeled family collection, as well as the wedding photo. But the others were part of the collection received at her death labeled “don’t know, don’t care.” But I did. So the stories Jessie tells about them—Misha, the Marquette girls, the Giroud sisters, the canoeists, for example—are purely fictional. I had dozens of other glass plates from other family members to choose from. It was difficult to decide, and I’ve put many of them into a PowerPoint presentation I sometimes present at book signings and events and on my Web site. They are really quite remarkable.

Did your grandmother really travel to different states to help run studios?

Absolutely. In addition to her work in Winona, she assisted in Milwaukee, Eau Claire, and Bismarck. She had plans for Seattle too, but apparently those changed. The studio in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and the Butler Studio in North Dakota were both identified in the family record; the Milwaukee studio was not named, but she was there and she did live with the Harms family, relatives of Fred Bauer. Incidentally, the studio in Eau Claire was the Johnson Studio, not the Everson Studio. I had to change it because in my aunt’s book, she said the Milwaukee studio was run by “Mrs. Johnson,” and I used that in *A Flickering Light*. But during research for *An Absence So Great*, I found no studio by that name in Milwaukee but one in Eau Claire instead. It was too late to use the correct studio, so the name was changed to Everson. I don’t think Jessie knew the reporter Robert Taylor, but the story of his motorcycle and the type of photography he inspired for newspapers is accurate.

Did your great-uncle really stutter? Was Lilly actually a seamstress? What about Selma; did she sing well? What happened to them?

It’s all true! Roy was also a musician and later became a clock repairman who came home to look after scads of plants and who loved to watch travel programs on television. I remember visiting him and my aunt Lilly and loving his roomful of African violets and orchids and all sorts of tropical plants he kept alive through the Minnesota winters. It felt like a hothouse. Lilly worked at the glove factory, and when the entire family moved to Minneapolis in 1920, she worked for the drapery section of Boutell’s department store until her retirement. When I was young, she and Roy and Art—who survived Selma— would come to our Wisconsin farm and collect black walnuts they later cracked and dried. Selma and Art married in 1918 but had no children. Roy never married. Lilly never married either. The story is told that her long-term beau finally convinced her to marry him after years of asking. She’d resisted because he had a tendency to drink. The night she agreed to marry him, he celebrated with pals and drank the first beer he’d had in years. She found out and called off the marriage. I do have a postcard written to her by a Joseph and signed “Joseph 4 Ever.” After my uncle Stan married, he helped build two houses side by side in the Minneapolis area: he and his family lived in one, and Roy and Lilly lived in the other. Many of the smaller details are true as well: Lilly was the secretary of the Stott Company Young Women’s Industrial Association; the North-Western School for Stammerers was in Milwaukee (a piece of history I discovered on a penny postcard, and later I found the winter program for the school on eBay); my grandmother worked for “a healer in Winona,” and Ralph Carleton was such a minister, whose activities were reported in the paper. Russell married a woman who had gotten his name when, like many soldiers, he wrote his name on a piece of paper to toss from the train window. Young women then wrote to the soldier whose paper they picked up. He lived in Winona all his life and was an electrician who loved photography. One of his children, Patricia Butenhoff, worked for the *Republican-Herald* as a copyeditor. Winnie

married and had children and also lived along the Mississippi River near Winona. Robert, too, worked as an electrician and raised his children in Winona. One of his daughters, upon her marriage, lived in the house near the railroad tracks, and both Molly and Bruce, two of his children, were wonderful resources for this novel. My grandmother Jessie died in 1990, at the age of ninety-eight, leaving numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even great-great-grandchildren to mourn her passing.

What do you hope a reader will take away from this book?

I hope they hear a story about listening to one's heart, learning from missteps, and redeeming grievances—though not without cost. I hope people consider the talents they have and how they've invested them. I hope this story affirms that accepting the gift of forgiveness is the hardest yet most meaningful work of the human spirit. And I hope that readers might use the story to consider the absences in their own lives and hearts and to examine what actions they can take to fill them and thus cherish more deeply the relationships in their lives.

What's next?

More stories about remarkable men and women, ordinary souls perhaps, but people who lived lives worthy of remembering. I feel so fortunate to have both the passion and the support necessary to research and write these stories. I hope readers keep reading them!

[Click here](#) to watch the video trailer and to read the first chapter of *An Absence So Great*.