

WHAT IF YOU WERE TOLD

An Interview
with author
Sigmund Brouwer
by Steve Parolini

It sounds like the perfect back story for a character in one of his novels: a young man who performs poorly in high school English follows his apparent destined career path to a degree in commerce, but then, in a surprising plot twist, he's encouraged by a college professor to pursue writing after all. He does, earns a degree in journalism, and—fast-forward a few years—becomes a best-selling author.

Sigmund Brouwer is a bit of an anomaly in the publishing world—an author who has found success in a variety of genres and with a variety of audiences. His early melding of a love for sports and science with a desire to encourage reluctant readers led to some of his first published work, including best-selling youth series, such as *Short Cuts Extreme Sports*, *The Accidental Detectives*, and *Mars Diaries*. His adult novels are equally diverse; he's written detective stories, cyber-thrillers, novels with a historical context, novels with a supernatural flavor, and even a western.

Although his stories are anchored in redemptive themes and clearly come from the heart of a man who knows Christ, Brouwer doesn't write his books to advance particular agendas. Neither does he shy away from potentially controversial subject matter. Recent fiction collaborations with Hank Hanegraaff sparked plenty of debate over interpretation of the book of Revelation.

If those books prompted lively discussion, Brouwer's newest novel, the apocalyptic thriller, *Broken Angel*, might just cause a major traffic jam at water coolers across the nation.

Broken Angel is the story of a young woman with a mysterious past and her thrilling attempt to escape an unfriendly nation so she might discover the secrets behind her existence.

Steve: Let's get the "easy" question out of the way first—how would you summarize *Broken Angel*?

Sigmund: *Broken Angel* is a story about

government agents chasing a fugitive on the run—the genetically-altered young woman named Caitlyn—and her two companions. It takes place around seventy years from now in Appalachia. The government of Appalachia is an offshoot of the conservative religious movement, and the story examines what happens if you take the shaping of a nation through religion and politics in one extreme direction. In short, the novel is a suspense thriller in a setting that prompts questions about the politicization of Christian faith.

Steve: So much for the "easy" question...

Sigmund: Well, the main theme behind the book really is "freedom to believe." That's the basis for Caitlyn's story. I argue indirectly through the novel about the critical importance of the separation between church and state. Once, during the writing of the novel, my wife, Cindy, challenged me on this. She asked what would be wrong with allowing a teacher to talk to kids about his Christian faith in a public school setting. I asked in return if

HOW TO BELIEVE?

she would resent a Muslim teacher doing the same with our seven-year-old sitting in the classroom. Without arguing for or against the merits of either religion, I hope my question highlighted a need for that separation. I read recently that a federal judge had blocked a Missouri public school from distributing Gideon Bibles to fifth-graders. My immediate reaction, as a Christian, was anger. But then I asked myself how I'd feel if the Koran had been distributed instead. I think America's founding fathers understood that when you don't separate church and state the end result may well lead to a country ruled like Iran. You can argue all you want for the truth behind our Christian faith, but when politicized and with misguided leadership, it's just too easy for a religion to disintegrate into a power structure. You don't have to look any farther than the Inquisition to understand this.

Steve: That's certainly a compelling setting for a novel, but it's not a particularly "pretty" setting. You're bound to ruffle a few feathers here. How do these themes play out in the story?

Sigmund: *Broken Angel* makes two main points regarding the intersection of Christianity and politics. The first is that we should be free to choose our beliefs, and the second is that when Christians band together as a political army, they are picking up the kingdom of the sword instead of accepting the kingdom of the cross. I would never argue it's wrong to become involved in politics as a Christian but that there is great danger in attaching the word "Christian" to political efforts as an adjective. As individuals, Christians should never hesitate to try to affect legislation in a way that has a positive impact in the earthly kingdom. I would argue, though, that by marching this coalition under a Christian banner, you begin to set up an either/or position: either you're Christian and you're on our side, or any opposition to our stand proves you are not a Christian. To me, that's oppressive and it's exclusionary—unlike the kingdom of the cross.

Steve: So Caitlyn's journey is more than an escape; it's also about discovering who she is apart from the state-imposed beliefs.

Sigmund: Exactly. What I am most concerned about is any group, conservative

or liberal, whose focus seems to be forcing morals on the culture. The foundation for the oppressive state of Appalachia that Caitlyn is attempting to escape is based on the question of, "What if a nation's rulers are distorting the Bible?". Such an approach to morality doesn't sit well with me. Most of what I read Jesus saying seems to apply to individuals. With hedonists such as the Greeks and Romans around him, Jesus didn't try to impose his standards on that secular society. Instead, he and his followers transformed individuals. In contrast, some fanatical conservatives seem more intent on transforming society into an image of what he or she believes, whether right or wrong, God's kingdom should be. So when I followed all of this into one possible future, I ended up with a fugitive story that explores what happens when power-wielding Pharisee-types use their power to impose morality on individuals.

Steve: When you talk about Appalachia, you're referring to something new—a new state, based in the Appalachian region of the United States. Why did you choose Appalachia for the setting?

Sigmund: Yes, the Appalachia of *Broken Angel* is a new state in the northeast corner of Tennessee where it intersects with Kentucky—a fictional state that has seceded from the union. I wanted to choose an area that was remote and self-sustaining. And this whole idea of a new state is also based on an article I read about a group of like-minded people in that part of the country who have committed to buying up property so they can form their own religious community.

Steve: Hmm...that sounds just a little too creepy to me. You refer to this novel as being "post-apocalyptic." What do you mean by that? What sort of cataclysm precedes Caitlyn's story?

Sigmund: This story follows the Great Water Wars. When you consider the current drought crisis in the United States and rapid climate change, the importance of our water supply suddenly becomes patently obvious. Without water, we have nothing. It's not too much of a stretch to suggest water is one commodity countries might go to war over in the future.

Steve: Could you have written a contem-

porary novel that explores the same themes?

Sigmund: The post-apocalyptic setting allowed me to imagine where the efforts of religion-influenced politics might take society. Setting this in the future was also necessary because of the role genetic manipulation plays in the story.

Steve: This is key to Caitlyn's personal journey. She's just a young woman, but she's not like any young woman we might know today.

Sigmund: That's right. She's been genetically mutated, and she's an outcast in society.

Steve: I'm intrigued by the role genetic manipulation plays in the story. How did you come up with this idea?

Sigmund: Once again, this goes back to the potential impact I believe mixing politics and religion could have in a future society. This theme is actually based on something I think we're seeing today. I believe that because certain fundamentalist groups are so determined to make statements of condemnation about so many things done in areas of science, education, and finance, their condemnation is starting to lose its effectiveness. It's the 'cry wolf' syndrome. Eventually, these protests will come to be seen as little more than knee-jerk reactions, and serious thinkers will dismiss them as meaningless. Fictionally, I wondered if in twenty or thirty years, "Wolf!" will have been cried so often that the ability to effectively protest *any* genetic experiments on humans will be lost.

Steve: What did you uncover as you researched the science behind genetic experimentation?

Sigmund: Everything I've read and understand about the direction that genetic experiments are taking suggests this branch of science is growing faster every day. And it's apparent that science even today can go far beyond the moral boundaries imposed by the government.

Steve: Which sets the stage for Caitlyn's story...

Sigmund: The big question is this: How far will you go with genetics once you lift the moral impositions? And it's not just Caitlyn's story. One of the characters has to deal with the results of his experimentation. He discovers what science alone fails

to reveal—that genetic manipulation is more than an abstraction.

Steve: However, he's the exception, right? Because it continues to be an abstraction for other players in the story—or at least behind the scenes of the story.

Sigmund: Yes, particularly governmental decisions that are justified as military needs. When you think about it, a number of things that are done in science today are explained as needed for national safety or protection—or perhaps more accurately, a perceived military need for experimentation. And this element of the story is an offshoot of that. It's been explored in classic science fiction and techno-thrillers for years—the engineering of new forms of weapons.

Steve: *Broken Angel* is a chilling cautionary tale, but because of the complex political underpinnings it's not a typical "good versus evil" plot. That gives you a ton of opportunities to introduce conflict in the story.

Sigmund: In the novel, the "kingdom of cross" followers are fugitives who live in a network of mines in Appalachia, and this brings in one key aspect of the moral conflict. These are the people

who help others get to "the Outside." In this way, the government of Appalachia looks a lot like a communist regime. They have to impose intellectual views on people because if they let them challenge those views, the government will fall apart. To a lesser degree, I see the same thing is happening today, when Christian institutions and workplaces force employees or students to sign statements of specific beliefs. That's an intellectual imposition I am astounded has not been challenged. Where are the voices in the Christian community saying, "This is wrong! This is morally reprehensible!?" Christ never forced anyone to believe. If something is true, it will stand for itself.

Steve: That sounds like serious group-discussion fodder. Perhaps this book will spark some much-needed dialogue on this issue. There sure is a lot to digest here. But the novel, for all its dark edges, is not all doom and gloom. It's also a story of escape and pursuit. And there are other story elements that drive *Broken Angel* to its eye-opening conclusion.

Sigmund: I've focused on the book's backdrop in this interview because it is the

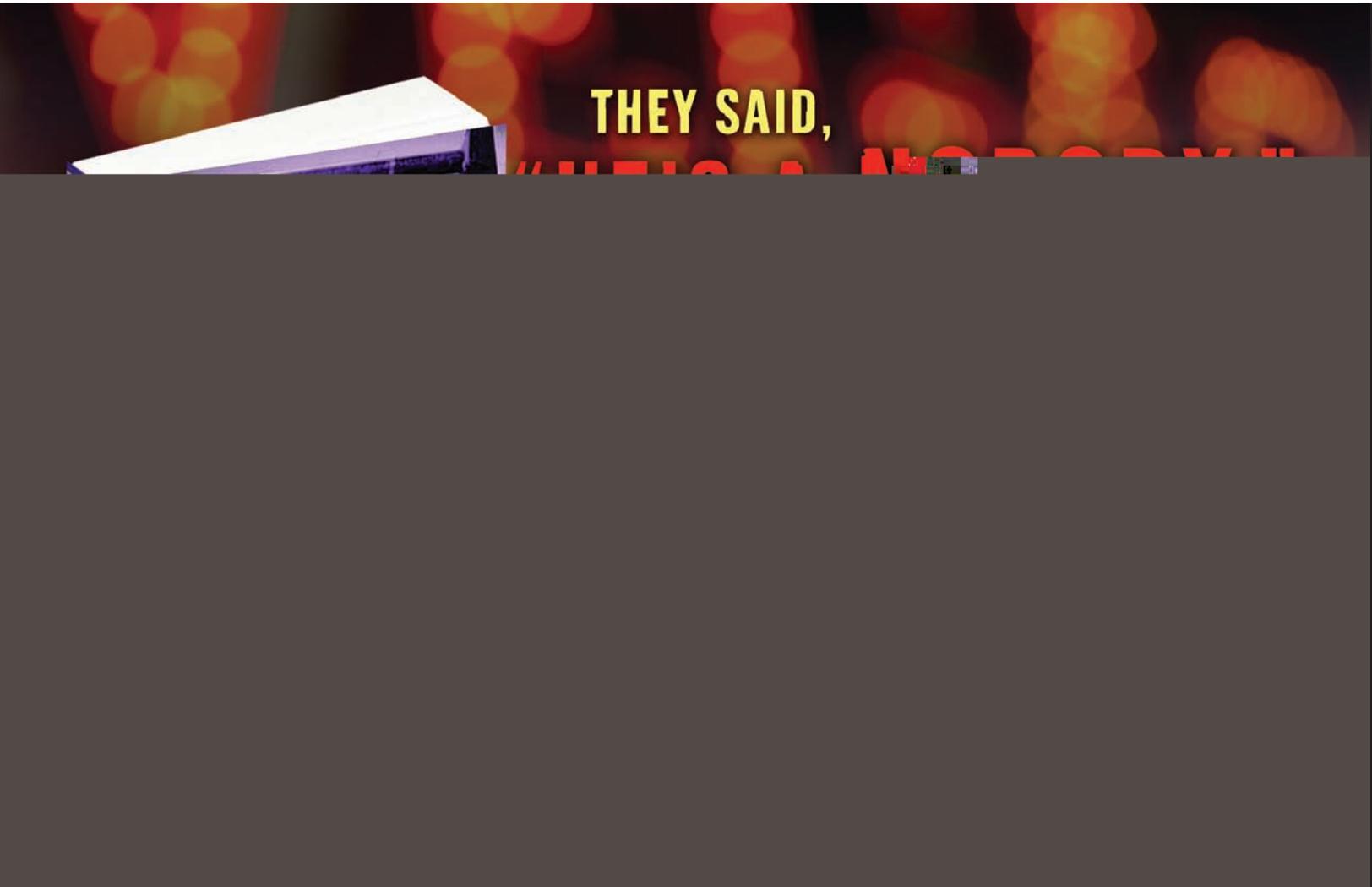
stage for the fugitive-on-the-run story—and because I don't want to reveal too much of the story itself. But beyond the oppressive society and the bleak picture of religion gone terribly wrong, it is also a story of discovery, a story of a father's love for his daughter, and ultimately, a story of redemption.

Steve: You could have said many of the same things in a non-fiction book. Why did this become a novel?

Sigmund: I think story has a lot of power, which is why Jesus spent so much time telling stories. Stories reach the emotions...and as humans we are really driven by our emotions. That's why stories can go beyond non-fiction.

Steve: In the final analysis, when the last page is turned, what do you hope readers take away from *Broken Angel*?

Sigmund: I'd like them to like the characters so much that they're sad the story is over. Regardless of the theme or setting of the book, a good story needs to have a solid foundation. And while good stories have good plots, great stories have great characters, and that was one of my goals with *Broken Angel*—to create memorable characters. ■



THEY SAID,

IN THE ROUGH, SHADOWY HILLS OF APPALACHIA...

“...addictively readable...”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY 

Her birth
was shrouded
in mystery
and tragedy.

Her destiny
is beyond
comprehension.

Her pursuers
long to see
her broken...

SHE FIGHTS TO SOAR.

In Sigmund Brouwer's shocking new thriller, a strangely deformed girl must run for her life and unlock the secrets of her past to understand her father's betrayal.



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