

Redefining Women in Fiction

Rather than creating flat, predictable heroines, acclaimed author Cindy Woodsmall explains how she's more than happy to break the mold with characters that ultimately discover their purpose and fullness in Christ in a myriad of life-shaping ways.

BY CHRISTA A. BANISTER

Since all writers—fiction or otherwise—often opt to “write what they know,” it’s really no surprise that author Cindy Woodsmall doesn’t exactly stick with tradition when crafting her heroines, given her equally colorful life story.

Whether it’s the much-beloved Hannah Lapp from the *Sister of the Quilt* series or a feisty 26-year-old named Cara who grew up in foster care in her latest novel *The Hope of Refuge*, Cindy aptly showcases the strength of a woman.

And playing against type has certainly had its advantages, both for Cindy personally and for anyone who reads her work. In addition to offering page-turning plots fueled by engaging, multidimensional characters, Cindy also provides a vivid, well-researched glimpse into the Amish world. If that wasn’t enough to keep even the pickiest of readers intrigued, there are always plenty of food-for-thought moments. Whether it’s reexamining what true redemption really means or exploring the diverse roles of women within the fabric of society, Cindy demands a little more of her readers—rather than simply entertaining them.

Always the multitasker, Cindy now has two new books in the pipeline, the aforementioned *The Hope of Refuge*, the first installment in the Ada’s House series and the holiday-themed novella, *The Sound of Sleigh Bells*, which she now discusses in more detail, along with the mechanics of her writing craft and what inspires her.

First things first, what can readers expect from *The Hope of Refuge*?

Cindy Woodsmall: I’m really excited about *The Hope of Refuge*. It is a very different story with characters who aren’t as familiar with the Amish life as the first book. We have a 26-year-old heroine, Cara, who was not only raised in foster



care, but has struggled against everything from poverty and loss to a stalker, who connected with her while she was in foster care. She has these vague memories that reveal snippets of an Amish community, and she starts following them to discover what it was that she remembers and what it is that’s hiding in her childhood. When she finds the truth, the question is: is it enough to set her free?

That’s intriguing. So I have to know, was it difficult to leave Hannah Lapp and the Sisters of the Quilt series behind? How have you familiarized yourself with these new characters?

Cindy: Oh, those are good questions! It’s been a little hard to let go of Hannah. A little-known fact to readers is that she’s quite chatty, so she doesn’t just leave me alone real regularly. As an author you have to help develop a dialogue with your characters. They have to be allowed to speak so when you finish your scene and it’s written, they can speak up and say, “You know, I wouldn’t have said that,” or “I wouldn’t have done that.” These are the characters that I began writing with, so they’ve had a lot of years of speaking to me. I have to assure them, “It’s done. Be quiet now.” The fact that I can get into new characters and new

books helps them settle down.

To learn about the new characters—the Amish characters that come out of *The Hope of Refuge*—I got to spend time in the homes and in the lives of young people, which is not something I needed to do for the first series. And you know, in any culture, the young people see things differently and they are going to behave somewhat differently. I also spent a lot of hours watching movies and news clips and spending time with people I know from New York to get that inner-city New York feel and transfer that into the Pennsylvania Amish country. So right now, my inner voice has a New York accent!

That’s hilarious! Switching gears a little, one area explored in *The Hope of Refuge* is an Amish man’s struggle with an event that left him questioning whether to leave his community and join the military. Was this a difficult topic to explore?

Cindy: You know, it was a lot harder than I expected because I have older Amish friends, and I go to their community and stay with them year in and year out, so I thought I’d broach the subject and take notes like we normally do.

As I began asking the question, it became very obvious that there was a lot of hidden pain in the family members I was talking to. I soon realized this very scenario had happened to them, and it was a part of their family’s history. Now it wasn’t dealing with the same war, which would be the Iraq/Gulf war. It was a different war. They struggled with letting one of their own go and join the military. And how were they going to cope with that? How were they going to find a way to somehow make it okay in their understanding that this person wasn’t abandoning God. They were falling away from what they believed that God wanted them to do. So it’s been a little

more difficult than I expected, but we worked our way through it. I think that some of the people I've worked with have found more healing because of the openness of talking about it.

As if you weren't busy enough already, you've also written *The Sound of Sleigh Bells*. And one element of the novel features an Amish man who is an artist. Can you tell me of how some of the Amish feel about art and craft?

Cindy: Oooh, that's a touchy question, but I will aim to answer it. I'm going to compare it to how Christians feel about partaking of alcohol. We have some that feel in moderation, that it is Christ-like and allowable, and we have others that feel it must be avoided, and it's a sin to take part of it. In the Amish community, there will be bishops that feel any sort of carving, especially like we have in *The Sound of Sleigh Bells* is idolatry. We have two bishops in this book, and one does not have a problem with this type of artistry, and one feels that it is too close to being idolatry because the item is a two- to three-foot carving where you end up with a complete image of something

sitting. It's a struggle like a lot of things in our own culture. Once again it goes back to why I think people are interested in the Amish because there are things in our own culture, perhaps not as particular as having something carved, but *something* that is a struggle. Do we allow it? Is it against what God has said? Or is it fine and we're misinterpreting what He has said? This is a great way to get into and think about the different parts of how God might view something.

Really, *The Sound of Sleigh Bells* has it all: romance, mistaken identity and a seasonal setting. What type of reader might enjoy this shorter story?

Cindy: Definitely those who enjoy Amish fiction because it's centered with all of our characters being very Amish and having that from their roots for hundreds of years. I think this would be the perfect stocking stuffer. I could just see a woman Christmas morning, after the gifts have been opened and her family is content... I see her with a cup of coffee and a few hours to be renewed and reenergized by a story that has all the warmth and hope of Christmas. It stirs people's

fondest memories of Christmases past. I think *The Sound of Sleigh Bells* will reach a lot of women and encourage them and give them a little bit of a break to enjoy those memories of the past.

A mark of your work is that you create female characters with three-dimensional strokes. Why is this important to you?

Cindy: Women are remarkable beings. I think most godly women are vivid three-dimensional beings. If we see a woman who isn't, I think we're seeing a woman who has believed lies about herself or hasn't yet had the opportunity to believe in herself or explore who she can be. Although people may appear "stereotypical" to others, if we go beyond that "first impression" we usually find a person whose strength and spirit of determination far surpasses the conventional fulfilling of roles.

When you're developing your characters, what's important for you to keep in mind?

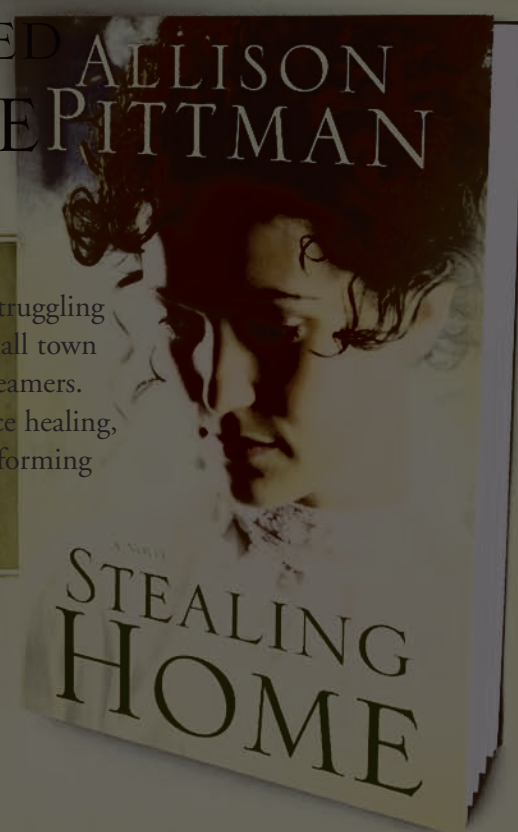
Cindy: I develop a character based on three main things: who her parents were, the character's genetic makeup

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and traits, and her personality based on learned behavior mixed with her innate responses to life. Those things have created who she is, including her moral beliefs. Then, when I place her in a circumstance, it's really not up to me to decide how she will respond. This character will react according to who she is.

Readers may not agree with what the character is doing, but once they understand who that person is, they can identify with why she did it that way.

What message do you hope readers will take away from the variety of women in *The Hope of Refuge*—the older widow, the single mother, the daughter caring for her ailing father?

Cindy: I sincerely hope each one is gently stirred in their faith to face what's in front of them. It's my prayer that their heart, mind, and soul are refreshed in the way they need for that day or time in their life.

What do you hope that readers will take away from reading *The Hope of Refuge*? And where did you get the inspiration for your latest leading lady?

Cindy: *The Hope of Refuge* is a book that's very dear to me because of the insight I received from Old Order Amish friends. Several Amish friends shared difficult stories of struggles and events that took place a generation after loved ones had left the Amish community. It's a journey that shares one woman's destruction and victory as she survived and then overcame what a previous generation had done. I hope the takeaway is that we're not separated from God's outstretched hand by our parents' sins and mistakes or by our own sins and mistakes.

Are the characters you've created women who you can personally relate to? Why or why not?

Cindy: I do relate to these characters. They are women who often feel backed into a corner with no acceptable way out. They feel confused, overwhelmed, and frightened. They also feel faith, hope, and determination. So their first goal is to survive the situation, but an almost simultaneous reaction is an unwavering passion to bring the most victory possible out of the situation, and inside of that, they find peace.

As a woman, you've sort of done it all...You're a wife, a mother, a success-

ful author. Did your characters draw inspiration from your own life?

Cindy: Well, if you live long enough you'll be surprised at what all you can get done. Seriously, we don't have to do it all right now in order to do it all. We can pace ourselves, keeping sight of our priorities at all times and refusing to allow what others want from us to rule our lives. My characters share a lot of different perspectives throughout their journeys and although, as the mothering type, I do share my wisdom with them, they don't always listen!

What was your "ah-ha" moment when you knew you had to write and create?

Cindy: Because I was unsure about pursuing writing, it took numerous ah-ha moments to convince me to get started, but one moment happened while reading a fiction book. I was powerfully touched when I realized I had a specific area in my heart that needed work. My attitude was off center and after my understanding was opened because of that book, I was never the same. It shocked me how much I was affected by fiction.

For me the road to giving writing a place in my life—a good-sized place—was a very long one.

If I began writing as a career, it would have been a huge adjustment for my family. I wouldn't be right there waiting to help them with whatever project they wanted. They would have to pitch in and help me with dinners, laundry, errands, household chores, and the gazillion other things it takes to make life work. My husband was a great supporter, feeling that it would be a mistake for me to live my life making him and the children everything. He never doubted that I should write if for no other reason than to express parts of myself I couldn't as a wife and mother. But I soon realized writing wouldn't remain a hobby. I had one certain story—the Sisters of the Quilt series—that seemed to beg me to buckle down and do my best to learn the craft of writing.

Your stories speak of a fullness of life that we can have through Christ. What does having a full life in Christ mean to you?

Cindy: It means that I'm not buried under the weight of who I am not—He is my shield (Psalms 3:3). It means that by faith He takes my pitiful best efforts

and makes them bear fruit beyond my wildest hopes—He exceeds above all that we ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). It means facing life with a heart-pounding joy because success over the circumstances isn't life's main purpose—faith is. (Hebrews 11:6)

Your most recent book, *When the Soul Mends*, appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Are you surprised at the breadth of readers attracted to fiction about the Amish? Why do you think they love this genre?

Cindy: I think it's an engaging lifestyle, and in many ways, it illustrates the kind of conflicts that people of faith face. We all have our moral guidance that we go by or specific boundaries that we have to live inside of, and then we have our daily lives that challenge and tempt us constantly. And we can really see a beautiful picture of that through Amish fiction by the boundaries they have set within their culture, and then the things that clash against them and tempt them to come outside of that. So it's a great picture of the work that Christ has done for us and the struggles we have on this earth.

You have a unique story about how you came to write Amish fiction. Tell me a little about that.

Cindy: I had an Amish/Mennonite best friend as I was growing up, and we had a lot of years of interaction with each other—going to each other's homes to spend the night. Neither set of parents were comfortable with that relationship, so we had to sort of learn to navigate around their disapproval. Each had their own set of concerns: her parents, of course, wanted her to keep to her strict rules of no TV. No radio. All sorts of things that were very important to them. My parents wanted me to enjoy the life I'd been born into, which meant that we watched TV and we went to movies, and they didn't want that questioned. So she and I—that's where the seeds began of connecting with the Amish. And then as an adult, I've had such a wonderful experience with reconnecting with the Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania. I have families that I go and stay with each summer and get to live like they do. It's a wonderful experience that gets to shine through in my books. ■