

# POTPOURRI

*April/May, 2016*

## LIFE CYCLE OF A BIRTHDAY BOUQUET



### **ARKANSAS BIRDS:** *The Mystery of the Disappearing Orange*

The third week of April I received a local Audubon alert: Baltimore Orioles were passing through the village on their way north for the summer. Since I'd had good luck attracting orioles last year, I made a quick trip to the grocery store for a bag of oranges. Within 24 hours I had two orange halves secured to the railing of my deck. I waited expectantly, checking every couple of hours. No sign of orioles.

By mid-afternoon one of the orange halves had been picked clean of any meat, still without the benefit of birds. At suppertime, the empty rind was sitting at the end of the deck railing. I left the rind where it was, curious to see what would happen next. It disappeared. My first thought was a raccoon, but things had been far too quiet for that.

I decided to leave the intact orange half alone and hope for orioles the next day. Instead, the same thing happened—orange picked clean, rind carried to the end of the railing. This time, however, I caught the culprit in the act of whisking away the last of the orange. As I looked out the window, I saw the squirrel that patrols my deck for spilled sunflower seeds grab the rind in its mouth, leap to the branch of a nearby tree, and scamper up the trunk.

The next morning I cut another orange in half to put out for the orioles, but I saw my squirrel sitting expectantly on the tree branch. I sat down at the kitchen table and ate the orange. It was sweet and juicy. The best part? I have six more oranges all for myself.

## STORIES BEHIND HYMNS: *The Doxology* (Thomas Ken, 1674)

For Christmas a friend gave me an intriguing book by Robert J. Morgan: *Then Sings My Soul, 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories* (Thomas Nelson, 2011). Every time I pick it up, I get pulled in by surprising bits of information about songs I've sung all my life. This month I want to share the story behind *Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow*, a song I knew as "The Doxology."

When I was writing my blog on the ending added to the Lord's Prayer (*For Thine is the kingdom...*), I learned the word *doxology* encompasses far more than this single hymn. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a *doxology* is "a usually liturgical expression of praise to God." The word began in Greek, passed into Latin, and appeared in English around 1645.

About thirty years later Thomas Ken, the chaplain at Winchester College, wrote three hymns for the students (all boys, of course) to use in their private devotions: one to sing when they woke up, one to sing at bedtime, and one to sing at midnight if they couldn't sleep. All three of the hymns ended with the words I knew as *The Doxology*.

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him, all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

In Fifteenth Century England, only Psalms were sung in public worship, so most scholars agree that Ken's three hymns were the first written in English. Thomas Ken went on to become chaplain to King Charles II and later a bishop. When he died in 1711, *The Doxology* was sung at his funeral.

It's an interesting idea to think about singing a doxology on first waking and before going to sleep—and an interesting way to deal with insomnia. I plan to give it a try.



## MEET SHIMMER

About a month after Miss Gabs died, I took a tour of the HSV Animal Shelter—just to look. Lots of dogs but only a few cats. When I asked about cats, my tour guide said, "Call Nancy. She's the cat lady."

I took Nancy's number, planning to call her in a couple of weeks. Instead, I picked up the phone the next morning. When she asked what I was looking for in a cat, I said, "An adult female that *wants* to stay indoors and take naps with me in my recliner." I explained that while Gabby was a lot of fun, I was tired of battling for my birds and scooping up dead critters from my front porch.

Nancy didn't hesitate. "I've got just the cat for you. Her name is Shimmer. A couple of months ago a young woman called the Animal Shelter to tell us her grandparents had moved and turned thirteen cats loose in the woods behind their house. My friend and I (the other cat lady) took my pickup and a bunch of cat carriers out to the house. When we arrived, I let down the tailgate and opened the carriers. Just to see what would happen, I called out, 'Kitty, kitty, kitty!' One cat shot out of the woods, leapt into the bed of the truck, jumped into a carrier, and curled

up. We had to trap the rest of them. When we got the cats home, Shimmer went right into the house. She hasn't even gone close to the door since."

"How about naps?"

"She's reluctant to sit in my lap, but she likes to sit close.

We're working on it."

I hesitated.

Nancy hurried on. "I think you'll like her. Why don't you foster her for a couple of weeks? Then you can decide if the two of you suit each other."

It turns out we do.



## WHAT I'M READING

This month I've been reading entries in the Carol Awards—ACFW's (American Christian Fiction Writers) recognition for the best Christian fiction published by traditional publishing houses in the previous calendar year (2015). I volunteered to be a first-round judge for six books spanning three categories: best debut novel, best short novel, and best romantic suspense. Of the six, only two were a disappointment.

Sorry: you have to wait for the titles of the ones I liked until after the awards are announced at the ACFW Conference in August.



## MY WRITING LIFE: *Why Christian Fiction?*

When someone asks me what I write and I say "Romantic Suspense for the Christian market," the next question is often "Why Christian fiction?" It's a good question. When I first got serious about writing long fiction, I wrote for the mainstream market—or so I thought. But I kept running into roadblocks: I couldn't get published without an agent, and I couldn't interest an agent in my work. Finally, however, I got close enough that an agent was willing to talk to me about my writing and what was going wrong. She told me my plot and characters were strong but that my story wouldn't sell as it stood.

"If you add more sex and violence, I could probably find a publisher," she said.

"I can't do that. I don't like to read stories like that, and I don't want to write them."

"You should consider writing for the Christian market."

"The Christian market? Isn't that all romance?"

“Not any more,” said the agent. “Read romantic suspense writers like Colleen Coble, Brandilyn Collins, and Dee Henderson.”

I hadn’t heard of any of those writers, so I started reading. I found fast-paced stories with plenty of excitement without the profanity and bed-hopping I always did my best to tune out. A writer friend suggested we go to the American Christian Fiction Writers conference. Though Christian fiction began with romance—for obvious reasons—in the last few years it’s expanded to include Romantic Suspense, Historical Fiction, Women’s Fiction, Young Adult, and even Science Fiction.

The conference was a turning point for me. Not only was I energized by the break-out sessions, I felt at home in a way I’d never felt at other conferences. Each day began with worship, and a prayer room was kept open down the hall. The atmosphere, rather than being competitive like I was used to, was open and supportive. I heard people talk about praying for each other and for their writing process. I took a lot of notes at that conference and went home armed with a long reading list.

For a couple of years, I just read. Like any fiction, I found great books, okay books, and some I couldn’t imagine ever being published. When I began to write for this new market, I found myself relaxing. I’m a Christian, so I see the world through the lens of my faith. As I experimented with characters who viewed the world the same way I do, I began to get a new vision of themes I could work with: themes like forgiveness, courage that comes from God, and redemption of a painful past.

So my answer to the question “Why Christian fiction?” is simply “It fits me better. My characters can face challenges in their stories the way I face challenges in my life—with God’s help.”

**A BUMPER STICKER:** *for the 2016 Presidential Race*

*That love thy neighbor stuff? I meant that. -God*

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