

## A Conversation with Susan Kraus about All God's Children (Cont'd)

### **What did you do to prepare? Or did you just start writing?**

I began researching this book years ago, clipping articles, jotting down notes. I heard about a graduate student at the University of Kansas, Rebecca Barrett-Fox, a very fine teacher and scrupulous researcher, who was writing a Ph.D. dissertation on the Westboro Baptist Church. She teaches now at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. And, then, as they say, "the plot thickened." I read everything I could find, and a series of articles published by the Topeka Capital Journal back in the 1990's was a gold mine. I researched Primitive Baptist theology. I went to Sunday services at the church. I met with Nate Phelps, one of Fred's sons who left the family over thirty years ago, about his experience. I met with Jonathan Phelps, Fred's son, who is smack in the middle of every picket line, about their beliefs. I'm pretty sure that every Biblical quote in the book that is spoken by a WBC character was provided by Jonathan Phelps.

### **But despite all the research, this is a novel, correct? It's fiction?**

All God's Children is definitely fiction, with a plot and characters that come completely from my imagination. But it also contains verifiable biographical info and background about one 'real' character, the most notoriously public of public figures, Fred Phelps. He is the only Phelps whose name is used (except for his wife, but she is a kind and gentle grandma, as invisible as she has been in the public eye.) Everyone else, every character, I created. I deliberately did not use the names of other family members because many of them have not sought out and provoked media attention like Fred has for decades. I moved the church from Topeka to my fictional town of Kaw Valley, although that might not have been necessary. I figured Topeka (where I lived for 8 years while working at Washburn University which is where most of the Phelps go to college and law school) would be only too happy to have them relocate, if only in fiction. I took the liberty of compressing the time line, giving Fred a youngest daughter who is much younger than his actual kids. I used that creative license.

I also found that the omniscient narrator (who I guess is me but who seems to have a mind of her own) could get inside the heads of most characters but not inside the heads of the Phelps. They say things, of course, but part of the mystery is never truly knowing their motivation, their thought process. Except for the children. I think one of the strongest characters in the book is David, the 11-year old boy who is the emotional heart of the story. The narrator does get inside David's mind.

When I was describing the plot to a friend, he commented, "But that would never happen. A Phelps would never have a secret romantic relationship, get pregnant and have a baby out of wedlock." Except that part is also true. The Phelps, despite public personas to the contrary, are human and vulnerable. They fall in love. But then they often repent their fornication and return to the fold.

### **You have a combat vet character, Mike, who is the dad. Was he researched?**

From 2007 to 2014, I've done part-time contract work as a counselor for the Department of Defense. I had rotations from between six weeks to six months each on Army and Air Force bases in Germany, Alaska, Hawaii, the Azores, Missouri and --- the longest stints --- Fort Riley, Kansas. The work was with military members, spouses and families, often pre-and-post deployment. So, the character of Mike was

not "researched" as much as lived. Mike reflects the ethics, character and experience of many of the men and women that I had the honor of working with. It was often intense but gratifying work and I hope I get the opportunity to serve again. There will definitely be other characters in future books who are in the military or are combat veterans.

**There are more sub-plots and tangents than most genre mysteries. Do you think it's distracting to have these tangents?**

I don't think so but I'm sure there are readers who may disagree. I want to write books that are, in some ways at least, more like real life, which is messy. When was the last time a real woman got to focus on one thing? Real women have jobs, groceries to get on the way home from work, laundry and kids (and, in Grace's case, a grand-kid). So, while this one case is front-and-center for a while, she has other clients and other problems. Like she sometimes drinks too much. And she can get pretty self-focused.

Maybe it would help to have a little context. Grace McDonald has just returned to Kaw Valley after running away ten years earlier --- but you'll have to read *Fall From Grace* for why. Grace's daughter, a single mom with a son with Asperger's Syndrome, needed help. So, we have their dance of emotional re-connection, the mother-daughter relationship, and the unique aspects of raising a kid with special needs. And Mike, the dad-who-didn't-know-he-had-a-son, is adjusting to civilian life after being deployed three times as well as to his new role as father. And then there is Grace's best friend, Katrina, and some other characters from the first novel. And a few other cases of Grace's, mainly a parental abduction with a twist on parental alienation. And just a touch of a love interest for Grace. This book is more platonic, but the next one heats up.

**You mention a prior novel. Is "All God's Children" part of a series? Like a mystery or woman sleuth series?**

It is, at least in my head, a series, but different from a classic women sleuth or mystery. It is not strictly genre. Grace is not a private investigator or cop or forensic pathologist. She's not a physical risk-taker. She doesn't even like to exercise. She makes herself do it, but she isn't one of these "Oh, gee, I start every day with a 5-mile run to clear my head" kind of woman. And there are much bigger differences. While there are exceptions, most woman protagonists in mystery fiction are unattached (or have an on-again/off again 'thing' going with a conveniently absent hunk of a man). If they are in a relationship, they have limited family responsibilities. No kids, let alone grandkids, they actually have to cook and care for. No worries about getting old and fat. Those protagonists tend to do things, make choices, especially towards the end of their books, that Grace would see as really stupid and reckless, like going into deserted warehouses alone without police back-up and almost getting themselves killed. And they do it book after book.

Grace is a problem solver. She likes to fix things, to figure things out. She gets fixated and obsessed. But she uses her brain and intuitive skills. I'm a big believer in women's intuition, or human intuition. I think we often know things in our gut way before the synapses connect in the head.

I'd say that the most striking difference, at least as far as genre, is that Grace is not the strongest character in the book. She is the glue, the core, the connection among all the other characters. But in the first novel it is one of her therapy clients, plus a young Native American cop, who actually solve the

case. In that book, Grace is an ordinary wife and mom with middle-class illusions and a false sense of security. She has a happy marriage, healthy kids, nice home and is well respected in her community. And then things happen that rip it all apart. The image I like is Pleasantville meets Presumed Innocent.

Over the next several books, Grace will become stronger and take more risks, both in her relationships and plot-lines. But the growth and change will be an integral part of her personal evolution and development. She'll have to sweat every transition, every change, which is what real people do.

**This book is a balance of real-life and fiction. Why do you use the Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church names and not a pseudonym?**

I could just make up a fictional name and say "Inspired by Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church." But then what is the point of doing all the research, of striving for factual accuracy? I accord them the respect of not demonizing them, which might have made for better sales. But the other reason is that there is no way to write about this unique entity, this most public of all religious groups that poses all sorts of interesting moral conundrums, and not have everyone know exactly who or what is being described. WBC has no "likeness" in the United States.

I believe that they can't do what they've done for years, invading the privacy and grief of other families, and expect a right to the privacy they deny others. Of course, I'm not a lawyer and I'm probably mixing apples and tangerines. But I believe that I treat them with more empathy and dignity than they've ever accorded the families their picketing and preaching has wounded. In fact, I'm more worried that readers, people in general, will be pissed off because I'm too balanced in the book when the general public craves revenge. But I'm a therapist, and curious to a fault, so I've tried to understand their motivation, what specific theological beliefs compel them to carry signs proclaiming "God Hates Fags," "Thank God for IEDs," "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" and "No Tears for Queers." Whether I've succeeded or not is up to the individual reader to decide. If readers finish the book with an iota more understanding --- which is different from forgiveness --- then I think it works.

**Do you think they will sue you? Is that a concern?**

I'd be an idiot not to be concerned. I have a letter from Margie Phelps and the family law firm telling me they intend to pursue "all legal remedies" if I use the "name or likeness" of Fred Phelps, the church, or any of its members. But, at that very same time, I met with Jonathan Phelps after a church service and told him I was writing a novel that included the family. I even asked him directly, "Will you sue me?" And he said no, that there would be no basis for a libel suit because they were all public figures. He even went on to explain the statute and why it could not apply. He then followed up with e-mails providing extensive Biblical quotes that explain their theological positions, sent me handouts, offered his assistance. When I asked him for a list of family/church member's names, saying I did not want to use any, he wrote me that the family had used almost every Biblical name and not to worry about it, that duplication would be impossible to avoid.

So, Fred's son helped while Fred's daughter sent me a letter threatening "all legal remedies." One partner in the Phelps family law firm provided both material and support for the "work product" that the other law partner is threatening. Either the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing or it's a routine form of intimidation.

More than any family or church in the United States, the Phelps have pushed to be public figures. They taunt and provoke media attention. They've gone clear to the Supreme Court fighting for their right to inflict their 'free speech' on others. They are absolute in their belief in and defense of the 1st Amendment right to free speech. So, while this may be stupidest thing I've ever said in my life (and I've said some stupid stuff), I do not think they will compromise that absolute conviction in the 1st Amendment by coming after me. Because I have that right as well. And as much as Fred Phelps finds my beliefs offensive and believes they condemn me to eternal damnation, so I find his beliefs and behaviors unconscionable. I choose, however, to explain my beliefs in a much softer, gentler manner, to provoke questions and discussion. The Phelps picket and preach. I believe in the power of fiction to influence people's thinking.

Now, I did form an LLC, for the first time in my life, to protect our limited family assets, like my house, and I consulted with attorneys and received very different advice. The concern is not so much that they could win a libel case, but that they could bankrupt me by forcing me to defend myself.

I applied for author liability insurance and was (big surprise) denied. As the nice broker explained, it's like applying for arson insurance while the arsonist stands outside waving a torch... or for medical after the cancer diagnosis.

What so many of us do not realize is that, in the United States, anyone can sue anyone for anything. They may not prevail, but they can make life hell for their target, forcing them to defend against false allegations at huge emotional and financial costs. Which, now that I think about it, would make a great plot line for a future book.

Oh, one last thing: if I'm wrong, I'll be turning to Kickstarter to help build a legal defense fund.

### **What are some of your goals for these future books?**

When I was young, I dreamed of writing literature, the kind of books I read when I was in graduate school studying for a PH.D. in English (never did finish), or lectured on when I was teaching undergraduate classes at the University of Texas at Austin or California State University, Chico. That was all before I made an abrupt turn into social work and training to be a therapist, part of which is listening to people's stories and helping them construct new narratives for their lives.

Now I want to write decent enough novels (kind of like being a "good enough" parent) with characters that readers engage with and think about. Every plot will involve a polarizing social or political issue. I want to take back-and-white and turn it into gray. I want to make the political personal, and show, in some small way, how every personal act has political implications.

**Addendum:** Fred Phelps died after this book was completed and already into the publication process. What is fascinating to me is that he died in hospice and not being cared for at home, with home hospice, surrounded by his very large extended family. It is rumored that he was "excommunicated" from his own congregation, the church he built. I want to understand how and why that happened. I cannot believe that his daughters agreed, and I see it as a power struggle/power move by Steve Drain, a church member who is not a family member, to become the new leader and prophet. It appears that there was a move to undercut the power of the Phelps daughters, shifting a theological focus to Biblical injunctions on female submission and creation of a panel of male church elders to make decisions.