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Francine Rivers Interview

by C.J. Darlington

"I'm not writing for an audience. I'm really writing as a form of worship."
-- Francine Rivers

Francine Rivers has been writing for 30 years. From 1976 to 1985 she had a successful writing career in the general market, where she won numerous awards. Francine wrote *Redeeming Love* (Multnomah) as her statement of faith after becoming a Christian in 1986.

She is the author of the best-selling *Mark of the Lion Trilogy*, *And the Shofar Blew*, *The Sons of Encouragement* series, *The Lineage of Grace* series, *The Atonement Child*, and more.

We caught up with Francine as she was busy cleaning up her house for the weekly Bible study she and her husband host at their house. "Tuesday morning we're scurrying around and making sure everything is perfect," she says. "And then I fix cookies in the afternoon. I always make chocolate chip with a handful of ground up Heath bar."

C.J.: I know that most of your books stem from a question. In the case of *Her Mother's Hope* it sounds like it came from the question of why was there a rift between your mom and your grandmother. I know you talked a little bit on your blog recently about this, but could you share with our readers and how you discovered the theme for the book?

Francine: I really wondered what had happened between my mother and grandmother, because I knew that they were really close, and I loved both my grandmother and my mother. It was an exploration of what was the underlying reason. I figured out after a while that a lot of it had to do with my grandmother's past and how she was raised, some of the hardships she went through and hurt feelings. My mother had promised her mother that she would never lack for a place to live when she got to be in her elder years. She kept that promise, but I think my grandmother favored my mom and wanted to live with her, and because she had to live somewhere else for a time while they built their house in Oregon, she was angry. When my parents said, "We're ready to have you come up now" she said, "No. I'm not going."

They literally built their retirement home with their own hands, from the foundation up. They lived in a trailer that was maybe sixteen feet long. It was a really tough, long year, and there was no way they could take Grandma up there with them. I think that's what started it. And sometimes when people are older they become very child-like and very self centered. Because that wasn't like my grandmother. I have a picture of my mother and grandmother on my desk



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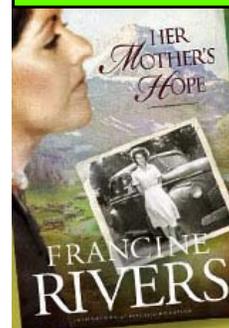
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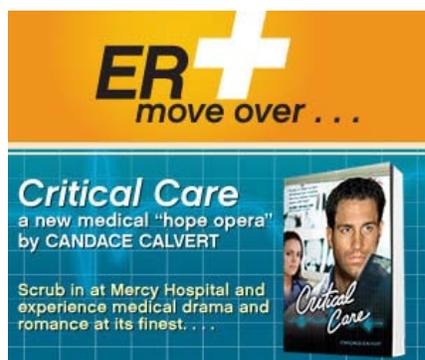
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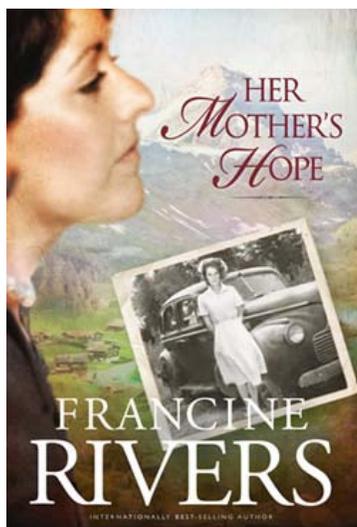
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that I have looked at everyday working on this, and they're both very relaxed and smiling, and they have their arms around each other. I always thought this picture was taken before all that happened, but it was taken after they built the house and after Grandma had moved. So I know that in some ways they worked out their problems, but there were still hurt feelings. When my grandmother died my mom told me that she believed Grandma willed herself to die so that they'd never have to work through things and talk things out. Sometimes when people are grieving they remember the hurtful things for awhile and later on they remember the good.

Some of this I wove in *Her Mother's Hope*. The time line is very definitely my grandmother's and my mom's story. My grandmother was a Swiss immigrant. She did leave home at fifteen and moved to France to learn French and then to England to learn English and then on to Canada. She did have a boarding house and then bought another one later on after they had worked out in the wheat lands. My grandfather was a boarder in her boarding house, who she taught English. Those are all things I incorporated into the story. My mother did grow up during the Depression. They did have a farm in the central valley with all the trees and grapes. They dried raisins. My mother did become a nurse and met my dad in the hospital. All those things follow their time line and story. As far as what went on in their minds, my mom wrote journals, but she never shared her personal thoughts and feelings, because she felt that if you wrote something in a journal like you were upset with somebody, but then you never wrote about how it was resolved, people might think you were always mad at that person. So she wrote basically a chronology of events, but not her opinions and feelings. I had to come up with my own take on what was going on.



Did you find it challenging to decide how much to take from real life and how much to fictionalize?

Not really. I let the story unfold. Knowing my grandmother and my mother through my eyes, I wanted the reader to see that a lot of times we don't know the backstory of our parents or our grandparents, the things that happened to them that affected their thinking and how they raised their children. I wanted the reader to know Marta's backstory so they will understand why she is behaving the way she is, why she decides to raise Hilda the way she does. But Hilda doesn't understand. She is seeing things through her own eyes and is hurt by some of the tough love Marta is dishing out. But Marta's doing it because she believes it will make her daughter stronger. I want the reader to love all of them and to hurt with them and understand why it's going on.

In the second half of the story, *Her Daughter's Dream*, it'll all resolve. There'll be one member of the family who will really understand it all and bring it all together. Carolyn is my alter ego; she'll be the lead character in the beginning of the second book. And Mayflower Dawn is the last character, my daughter's generation.

Did you get to travel to Europe for research?

We got to go to Switzerland. We went to Steffisburg. We traveled around with a tour group, and we did go to Bern where my grandmother went through housekeeping school and we got to walk around the city. I mentioned to the tour guide that my grandmother had grown up in a small town called Steffisburg which is not too far from Interlaken. And she said, "Okay." She and the bus driver worked it out and actually took us past Thun Castle where my grandmother was offered a job, into Steffisburg and parked the bus and let us all get out and walk around town. I was able to go into the church she and her family attended, walked down the main street. We went by the schoolhouse, all the places I knew about. I didn't know where she had lived. I would love to have seen the home, because I think it's still there. My grandmother went back to Switzerland when she was 84, and her friend, who is in the letters in the story, got together and took a hike in the Alps in their 80's. She was a hardy lady.

In the interview you did for the writing how-to book *A Novel Idea* you say "sometimes the place I think I'm going is totally different from where I end up, from where God wants to take me." Was that the case with *Her Mother's Hope*?

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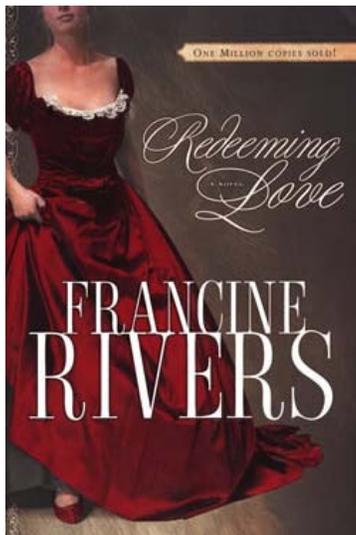
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I think so. I started out thinking that I wanted to show the difference in the ways generations think of God. With my grandmother's generation it was very much a "God helps those who help themselves" type of idea, which isn't necessarily Scriptural. My mother's generation was "serve the Lord", always earning your salvation, that kind of idea. My generation was "God is dead", and later "God help me". My daughter's generation is very polarized. They either don't believe or have no knowledge of God at all or they are absolutely zealous for the Lord. I was thinking about that to begin with, but the complexities of the mother daughter relationship came into it, and then it was more about how we pass down behavior through the generations. There are good reasons for things that happen, but you don't necessarily want the consequences of it. For example, Marta coming in and taking care of Carolyn when she's little. She helps Hildemara because Hildemara's ill with TB. Then in the later generation, the same kind of thing is happening, where the grandmother is helping to raise the grandchild and how that sometimes gets in the way of the child bonding with the mother. It can set up a jealousy/competition between the mother and the daughter. So there were lots of things I was learning and that helped me to reassess things in my own life. Also the mother's blessing; how important the mother's blessing can be. Marta's mother blesses her and sends her out. She says, "Take flight. Be free." And that blessing is really what sets her on her way. How important that encouragement and love, but also stepping back and letting her be her own person. And don't expect to lay your own dreams on top of that other person. They are unique in God's eyes, and God has a unique plan for us.



In noticed that you take the time to describe the flora and fauna in the settings of this book. Did that come from your love of nature?

I think so. When I became a Christian my eyes were open to different things I saw in nature and how I felt that God was revealing Himself through nature. There are lessons all around us all the time. I tend to look for that and try and incorporate that into my stories.



Are you the type of write who will go someplace and write notes about what you see, or do you just soak it all in and hope it comes out the way you saw it?

I tend to write notes. I don't remember things. (laughs) I go downstairs and then can't remember what I came down there to find! (laughs) I tend to carry a notebook with me all the time, and if I see something that strikes me I will write it down; otherwise, I know I'll forget it. I also carry a notepad in the car. If I see something, I'll pull over and write a note down. I think it's a good thing to have. I think it was Ray Bradbury who said he had the idea for the great American novel one night when he was lying there before going to sleep. He said, "I'm still trying to remember what it was." (laughs) Because he didn't write it down. When you're relaxed at night, all those wonderful ideas just flow through your mind, and if you don't jot them down, they're gone the next morning. Good to have a little flashlight and notepad by the bed.

You've written both historical and contemporary novels, and you've even mixed them. Do you prefer one over the other, and how do you decide which genre to use for each of the story questions you have?

The story usually decides. It's been wonderful for me to work with Tyndale, because they've just let me write what I need to write. They haven't set me into one particular genre. Some publishers do that; if you do well in one genre, they just want you to keep writing that book over and over again to build that market. But Tyndale just says, "Wherever God is leading you, write that story." I've been able to try different things. The setting, the time and place, is decided by the story. I love to write historical, but they are so time intensive with research, making sure I have the facts right. Contemporaries are often a little easier.

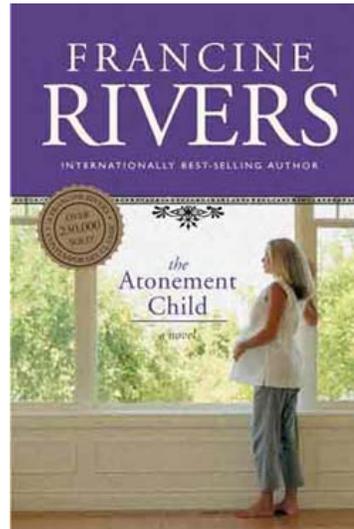
In an interview we had several years ago you said, "When you write to please someone it doesn't work. You have to write to please God." How do you write to please God? What does that look like for you?

Starting with a question keeps me focused on the Lord, because I'm looking for God's perspective. I'm not writing

for an audience. I'm really writing as a form of worship. I'm going before the Lord saying, "I don't get this. I don't understand what's going on here. This is the situation." And then very often I'll have one really strong Christian story and all the others play into that question, living it out with different viewpoints. I think that helps a lot. I used to belong to a writers group. I found that when I would go and read and then do the critiquing, then I'd go home and write and I'd have the idea of, "Well, this person wants this, and that person wants that, and this person had another idea." And I'd try to incorporate all that into my writing. It just didn't work. Now I just have the question, and I use Scripture and prayer and telling a story to speak with God and carry on a conversation with Him for however long it takes. This project took three years to get to the end of the road and figure out what it is He's trying to teach me.

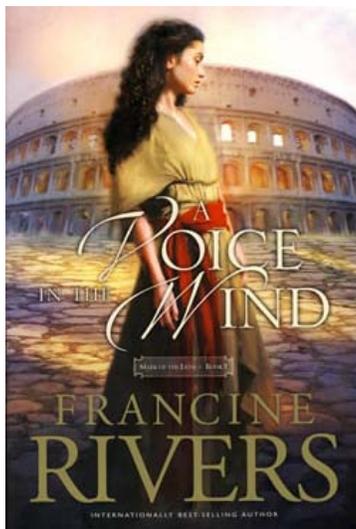
The second book, did it just divide itself because of the generations? Did you have to decide where to stop it and where to go further?

I had some help with my editors on that one, because originally it was intended to be one very long book. But it would have been prohibitively expensive to publish and for readers to buy. It was 1200 pages in the manuscript. So we cut out almost 40,000 words in the first one and in the second one. They gave me some ideas of how I could make the transition. I do not like sequels where you're repeating half the story in the second half. I wanted it to just go from the first story right into the second one, but I needed the transition to make that smooth. I needed to end the first one with, "Okay, now we're going to start to move toward resolution and working out these problems between the mothers and daughters." The letters helped a lot. We added more letters to Rosie, because Marta isn't playing a main role in the second half of the book. So those stories keep her voice strong throughout the book, so that she is still an integral part of it. I have wonderful editors! I have a wonderful editor who really understands what I'm trying to go for, and she makes suggestions and then lets me do the work. She does the cutting, because I never know where to cut. She does an awesome job of just taking this out and that out, and she'll have me go through and see if there's anything that I believe needs to be put back in there, but usually I think she's right on. I told her characters that she could take out, scenes that could be removed, and she did all that, but then she could nip and tuck here and there to get that word count down. Since becoming a Christian, the only book that's been published with anybody else was Redeeming Love, and it was because it wasn't right for their list at the time, it was just a little bit too edgy. But Tyndale has just been great. It's like working with a family. It's a team effort to get the story out there.



How important is your own journal writing to you, and do you think it impacts your fiction writing in any way?

I'm not a daily journal writer. Because my mother wrote her journals the way she did, I have a different way of doing it. I only write feelings, thoughts, and opinions on basic things. I have a subject or an event, like the Kennedy assassination - where was I? What were the thoughts going through my mind? What was happening around me at that time? I think sometimes journals down the line can be historical documents for a family. I would love to have known what was going on in my mom's mind. I wish she had talked more about her own personal struggles. When did she become a Christian? What brought her to Christ? Those kinds of things. I collect subjects and put them in a file, and when I'm ready I jot them down. I probably will keep copies of my blogs because those have really touched me from my heart. I'll put those in the journal. If the kids just end up tossing them in the end, that's up to them.



So where were you during the Kennedy assassination?

I was in high school. I rode a bus home. They let school out, and I remember everything was quiet. I remember the principal crying as he made the announcement. I remember I was in civics class at the time, and the male teacher was sobbing. We all just filed out silently. The flag was already at half mast. We got on the buses and went home. Both of my parents worked, so I came home to an empty house out in the country, and I went out on my swing and sat there on that swing. That was my "What happened, and what does this mean for us?" moment. And the same with the Cuban missile crisis. We were all waiting for the end of the world, literally. We were sitting in class at school, waiting for the end of the world, World War III to hit and the a-bombs to go off. There was a sense of "there is nothing in the future."

Could you share with us some memorable moments from your travels?

What I was noticing when I was traveling is how many churches are focusing on a building. When I wrote *And the Shofar Blew*, that came out of traveling around and seeing how the focus was

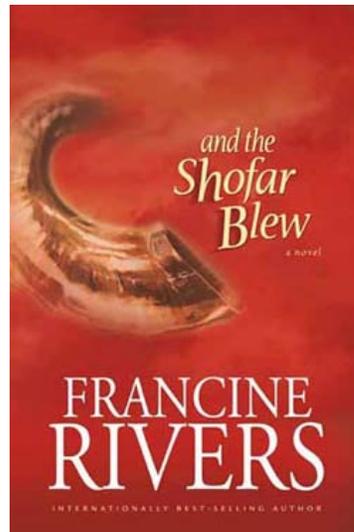
shifting, becoming very worldly. Success was the size of the building and the number of programs; how many people were in the pews rather than are we focusing on a relationship with Christ? Are we interacting with one another as brothers and sisters? That really struck me. About the only speaking I do now is for pregnancy

counseling centers, so I repeatedly am telling my story, which can be very painful. Looking back on the decisions that I made and the things I did is a constant reminder of how gracious God is.

How do you create characters based on the questions you have in a story?

In *And the Shofar Blew* everybody in that story is named after a Biblical character. Readers who are familiar with Scripture are going to recognize the role they play. With *The Atonement Child* everybody was impacted by abortion in a different way. And Hannah's story was really my story. I wanted to deal with the heavy duty, the rape victim who becomes pregnant. There were a lot of Christians who were saying abortion would probably be all right in that case. But what about Ruth? She was a Moabitess and Dinah? Dinah was a rape victim in the Bible.

The character Doug was like my husband. And Edie was my mother's story, because she had an abortion when she had tuberculosis. The doctors felt she wouldn't survive, and my dad and the doctors convinced my mom to have a therapeutic abortion in the hospital. She told me when we were in Oregon, and I was telling her that someday I'm going to have to write a story about abortion and deal with this issue. My dad had passed away, and she told me, "Remember when Dad had told you that I had a miscarriage? It wasn't a miscarriage; it was an abortion." She said, "You would have had a forty-four year old brother." And the tears were rolling down her cheeks. I thought at that time how many women who've had abortions feel like she does, and they've never gotten over it or spoken about it. They're trapped in that shame and guilt. She told me this when I was just thinking about dealing with the subject of abortion. I had told her about mine long after the fact when my father had passed away. She told me that a week before my dad died of cancer he was really quiet, almost as if someone was in the room talking to him. And he said, "I wonder if we made the right decision." And she knew exactly what he was talking about, but they had never discussed it. He'd never forgotten it.



Who are some of your favorite authors of books these days?

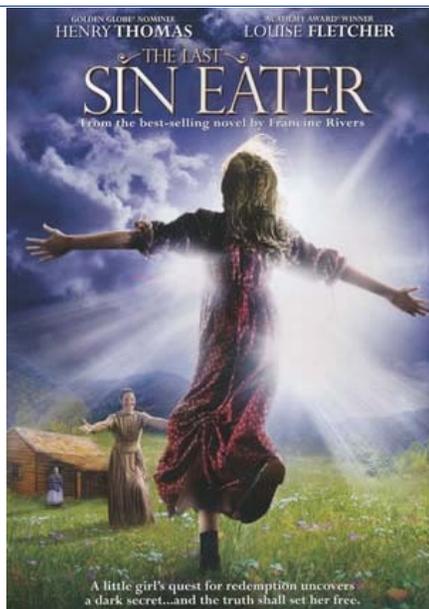
It's often whoever I happened to be reading. I love Liz Curtis Higgs. She has a book coming out on the 16th also, *Here Burns My Candle*. I love her Scottish stories. I love Sandra Dallas' work. She wrote *Prayers for Sale*. She has a new one called *Whiter Than Snow* coming out in April. It is wonderful. She writes in the general market. I read all kinds of books, fiction and nonfiction. I keep a list of what I've read, with a little notation at the side as to whether they're fiction or nonfiction. At the end of the year, I like to look at that list to see if I'm overreading in one particular genre or market. I think writers need to read a lot of different things and see the way people think. I also love the book *Three Cups of Tea*. I read it recently. It's a Greg Mortenson story about the schools in Afghanistan. It's an amazing book. I haven't read suspense in a while, but my husband reads a lot of it. The last suspense I read was *Daniel Silva*. I can't remember what the book was, but I know it was great. I read it cover to cover when we were traveling.

A while back it was mentioned that *Redeeming Love* was optioned for a movie. Is there any news on that?

It's optioned by Abba Productions, Christy Lee Taylor. She's been working on it for a number of years. It's partnering with Ralph Winter in Hollywood. They're trying to find financing. They have somebody who's very interested in doing a script, a very well know script writer, but they have to have the money to pay for it. Money is not free and easy right now.

When the movie *The Last Sin Eater* was done you said they gave you the option of backing out if you didn't want your name involved.

I got an entertainment attorney who has worked with a lot of high powered people, including Arnold Schwarzenegger when he was in movies. I wanted to have creative control; in other words, I would have final say on the script. And then once they made the movie with all their editing, I needed to see the final cut. The movie can be changed a lot right at the end. And if the Gospel wasn't at the center of the story I could have my name and the name of my book removed from the movie and have no connection with it. I have the same type of thing written in for *Redeeming Love*. *Redeeming Love* was actually contracted before *The Last Sin Eater*. But Christy Lee has very big vision. She wants it to be in the main theaters. She wants it to be a very expensively made movie. She's a very strong Christian and wants the message absolutely central. It's an allegory, and it needs to be very strong. I love what Michael Landon Jr. and Brian Bird did with *The Last Sin Eater*. They really stuck with the story. I think they



did an awesome job, and they made that movie for less than two million dollars, which amazes me.

If you could have a movie made from any of your books, would those be on the top of your list, or is there one you'd still love to see?

Those two would be on the top of my list. I've had people come to me about *The Mark of the Lion* and *The Voice of the Wind*, and I think there's no way. It has so many characters in it, and it would be so expensive to make. It would either be a really cheesy job or they'd have to do a mini series, and it would be so expensive, how would they ever do it? I remember when *Gladiator* came out, I had so many people contacting me and asking, "Is that your story?" No, it's not my story, but there are certain original historical documents that you read for your research. They probably used the same ones I did about the gladiators and Rome. That's the kind of scope it would have to be. I would love to see *The Atonement Child* made into a movie. It's optioned too, but there's been no movement on that one. There are a lot more Christian movies coming out, and that's what excites me. It doesn't have to be my book. Let's just get the story out there. Like *Fireproof* and *Bella*, the *Blind Side*. It's wonderful that movie's going to get another boost. *Gifted Hands* was another one.

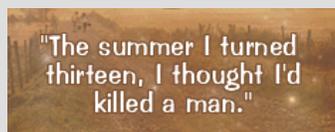
What book are you currently working on?

I'm not working on anything right now. I'm basically just waiting to see where I'm supposed to go next. I have a couple ideas. One keeps coming up over and over again, so we'll see if that's where God is leading me. But I probably will not work on anything for 8-10 months. I have an idea, and I was going to go that way. But then God was tapping me on the shoulder, like, "Yeah? Well, that's not where I want you to go." I thought, "Oh, this would be fun to do. It would be an interesting adventure story that would put me back in ancient Rome again." But this other one keeps coming up, and it would be a lot harder to write, because it would involve really intensive study of Scripture. It would be another allegory like *Redeeming Love*, but more complex.



C.J. Darlington's first novel, *Thicker Than Blood*, was the winner of the 2008 [Christian Writers Guild's Operation First Novel](#) contest. It's just released from Tyndale House, and you can [watch the trailer](#) today! When she's not writing, she's reading. Her hobbies include book and art collecting, fly fishing, painting and drawing. Visit her online at [her author website](#) and at [her blog](#) where she talks about books, writing, and publishing. You can also look her up at [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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