

Discussion Questions

1. Faith and Luke leave their families in different ways. Why do you think Faith felt she needed to pull away from her family? Why did Luke? Was it necessary for them to leave?
2. How do you feel about Luke's brother, Jake, and his outbursts against Faith throughout the novel? Do you think his initial assumptions about Faith were justified? By the end of the story, has Jake redeemed himself for his previous behavior? If so, what is his saving grace?
3. Faith, feeling betrayed by Luke, returns to the familiarity of her hometown. Have you ever felt

overwhelmed by your circumstances and wanted to run to something comfortable? Do you see this instinct as positive or negative?

4. After his arrest, Luke must fight to put together the broken pieces of his life. He finally turns to his family, particularly his brother, to help him through this rough patch. Did you agree with his decision to go to Jake? When faced with personal disarray, who do you turn to?
5. Faith, the symbol of the prodigal daughter, returns home to find her sister managing their father's life. How does Olivia's treatment of Cal differ from Faith's? If you were in Olivia's position, how would you feel about Faith's homecoming?
6. There are many different kinds of betrayal in this story. Between husband and wife. Between sisters. Between brothers. Could you relate to the characters' thoughts and emotions in these situations? How do you react when faced with the betrayal of a friend or loved one?
7. Calvin, Faith and Olivia's father, decides against treatment for his disease. How do you feel about this decision? Have you or your loved one ever faced a similar choice?
8. During the last moments of her life, Catherine vacillates between fear and peace, between fighting for her

life and trusting that God has a plan. Have you ever found yourself in a similar struggle, where you felt unsure of God's plan? What was the result?

9. Catherine regrets that she will be unable to get a final message to her family, and later Faith imagines what her mother's final words would have been. If you knew your last moments were near, whom would you want to speak to? What would you say?
10. In the end, Faith has to choose between the husband who lied to her and the young doctor who obviously cares for her. Which man did you want her to choose? Do you think she ultimately made the right decision? Why or why not?
11. Which sister, Faith or Olivia, do you identify with more? Which brother, Luke or Jake? Which family did you most relate to, and why?

Interview

It's COMMON PRACTICE for publishers to create interview questions for their authors so that you the reader can get a behind-the-scenes look at how the story came to be. But after working with these two creative minds, we thought it might be more interesting to see what they'd ask each other. We think you'll enjoy what transpired.

John Ward interviews Rene Gutteridge

JW: Your writing is so emotional. I haven't cried since the late seventies and you choke me up. Yet you're a mother and a wife with a totally normal life in Oklahoma. How do you process all these powerful emotions in your work and not be a basket case in your life?

RG: I think being a mother and a wife has created powerful emotions in me. It's one thing to love your own life and be sad or happy for yourself. It's quite another to love someone else fiercely, in a way that would cause you to give up your own happiness or contentment. There just isn't another kind of love that matches that. This is why God's love through Jesus was so powerful.

So why am I not a basket case in life? I can't claim that I'm not. Ask my husband. He'd probably argue I am very basket-case prone, but in a totally organized, administrative way. My basket-case moments are carefully worked around everybody's schedules.

JW: So you're given a screenplay from some dude in Hollywood (that would be me), and you're going to turn that into a novel. What ingredients were you looking for in that first read?

RG: I love a good story, no matter the genre. Years ago I'd written a family drama called *Troubled Waters*, so I was actually really eager to get back into that genre because I loved it

so much the first time. I wanted to know and love the characters and I wanted emotion to be drawn out of me. I saw all of that early on in the script, so I knew I was going to like it. And I was so excited to see that the characters and story line were strong all the way through. I didn't have to read it twice to know I wanted to dive in and be a part of your vision.

JW: In *Heart of the Country*, we've got the battle between the two sisters . . . Faith, the prodigal artist who ran away to New York, and Olivia, the Steady Eddie who stayed home. Which are you?

RG: I'm Eddie. It is so difficult for me to break rules. I can't steal a pen from a bank. I totally want to be a rule breaker, but then I become a nonscheduled basket case. It drives my husband crazy. But I like structure, and rules create structure, so for me that is safe. Playing outside the rules is risky.

At the same time, one of the truths for me in the Prodigal Son parable is that the one who threw away the most experienced God's love and forgiveness on a deeper level. God's love is radical, and sometimes just going along, following all the rules, keeps us steady—but maybe not as useful as we could be.

JW: One character I feel you brought so much insight, depth, and magic to is Catherine. I'll always be grateful to you for what you found in her. What made you start digging there?

RG: Well, digging inside your script was a lot of fun, like a treasure hunt. I started thinking about the long-term effects their mother's death had on Faith and Olivia. But something made me also wonder what it might've been like for a mother to know she was about to become just a memory to them for the rest of their lives. Catherine was already so well-drawn in the script through the eyes of the other characters that I wanted to get to know her personally. And because of the nature of literature, I could do that.

JW: Which setting was easier for you to take on—rural North Carolina or New York? Why?

RG: Definitely North Carolina, though I had to adjust the region in my mind and get the Midwestern landscape out of my head, with your help. But I grew up in the country, so that is where I am most comfortable. New York City seems so loud and overbearing to me. For the New York scenes, I had to work to establish two characters who draw their comfort from a place that makes me feel uptight.

JW: Now be honest . . . you'll only hurt my feelings a little bit. Was writing from a screenplay a help or was it confining?

RG: It was terrific! I have studied screenwriting extensively and I love the craft very much. It was not in the least bit confining. In fact, it was like a playground to me. Part of the reason for that, though, was that you gave me a lot of freedom to create the magic in a novel. You understood the differences between the two and knew that whatever changes I needed to make were so the novel read well. Probably the most challenging part of the writing was the flashbacks in the script. My editors and I had to take a few stabs at exactly what to do with those, but that's the fun part, the experimentation.

JW: I still remember you calling me with the idea of writing the novel from the multiple first-person points of view. First, that was so heady it took me five minutes (and a Google search) to even follow what you were talking about. Once I got caught up to speed, I was blown away by its sheer brilliance. What is it about this story that made you think it should be told in that manner?

RG: I am not one for picking something unusual just for the sake of being unusual. But this story really lent itself to this style because of the strong characters. I couldn't pick whose story I wanted to be in. The thought that I could tell

each story in first person struck me early on, and it just made total sense. It was more of a gut feeling than a logically thought-out idea, but I tend to write more from my gut.

JW: When you're writing, do you feel the desire to get it written as fast as possible—does it consume you? Or do you write for set amounts of time over a longer period? In other words, do you flip the switch between writing/imagination and the real world of carpools, making dinner, etc., all day?

RG: I definitely have set times I write. And I feel very strongly that I want to be present wherever I am. So if I'm with the children, I want to be there fully. Same with my husband and all the other things in my life. I do have a good on/off switch. But I steal pockets of time to think . . . driving, in bed at night. I let my mind wander a lot during those times and think about the characters. So much thinking is required to write realistic characters. If you don't know them well, your readers or viewers won't either, as you know. So we are more intimately acquainted with our characters than most people know or than we would likely admit.

JW: We both live in the space where art meets faith. What do you think makes a book or movie “Christian”?

RG: Everything I write will always be from a Christian point of view because I am the creator and that is my point of view. Calling books or movies “Christian” now has some meaning steeped in “brand,” so it's sometimes hard to identify what that exactly means on a larger scale. But for me, I'm a Christian who creates art. However that looks to a marketer or on a bookshelf is for someone else to decide. I have to be true to who I am as an artist and as a Christian. That combination makes what I do unique to me, and it's true for all artists. Sometimes the results are hard for others to swallow and that makes them uncomfortable. That's okay too. I think art should rattle our cages and make us think about what we truly believe.

I think in our Christian artistic community, we can be awfully hard on our fellow artists when they're creating differently from ourselves. We all have the same basic vision and message, so I think we can settle back and realize that God is working in a variety of ways. What I think we do need to be held accountable for is our "production value," to borrow a term from the film world. We should always strive to be better—and to deliver the truth accurately but creatively—in everything we do.

JW: Tell the truth—weren't you secretly pulling for Lee to end up with Faith?

RG: Definitely! I had to be pulling for Lee because he had to be a viable threat to Luke. If he was just thrown in there as a stumbling block, he wouldn't have read as well. But to me, Faith could've ended up with Lee and a happily ever after. What won out was her deep commitment to her marriage vows, and that's the tie that binds.

JW: I know when I'm writing a screenplay, I won't allow myself to write a word until the story and characters "ferment" in my mind for a bit. What are the things you do before you write the first word of a novel?

RG: A lot of thinking. A lot of thinking. I'll take some notes here and there. I have an idea journal, where I keep track of things I want to put in the book. I discover a lot as I write, especially about my characters. But sometimes I'll be thinking on an idea for years before I actually begin writing it.

JW: Do you have people you talk with about what you're writing, or are you a Selfish Sally, hoarding it all in that brain of yours?

RG: Ha! That's funny. I'm now Eddie and Sally. I don't talk a lot about what I'm writing to anybody. For one, by the end of the day my brain is fried and I don't really want to spend any more time on it. Also, what I'd want to talk about—"I'm thinking

about murdering character A”—comes across odd in a conversation with PTA parents. And I like that I have different aspects of my life. I have entire sets of friends who’ve never read one of my books, and that is totally fine with me. We have other connections that are just as strong, like parenting or our faith. Lastly, I think that it’s hard to talk about the way we pour out our souls. Writing is a very intimate process for me, and I work through it almost entirely internally. So if I did talk about it, it would be with a fellow artist, an editor, or my husband—who also happens to be an artist, which works well.

JW: What do you think Jesus was trying to say when He told the Prodigal story? Did writing a novel based on it change or improve your understanding of both the parable and Jesus? If so, what did you learn?

RG: The thing that amazes me about Jesus’ parables is all the layers that are present in what at first glance seems like a simply told story. And I love how the Holy Spirit can take a parable that you think is about one thing and apply it to your life in a totally different way. I’ve related to this parable in so many ways . . . as the prodigal, as the sibling, as the parent, as a person observing it all from the outside looking in. For this particular story, what I took away was how complex and simple God’s love for us is, at the same time. He understands all of our layers more than anyone and saturates us with His love accordingly. But there is no bolder statement than the sacrifice He made to save us, which can be universally understood—under any circumstance, in any culture, through any language. So He is both intimate and far-reaching. Kind of mind-blowing.

Rene Gutteridge interviews John Ward

RG: *Most writers like to be in their caves and crave solitude. But you're also a director and an actor—you work with a lot of people and have to bare your soul on-screen. So basically what I'm saying is that you're really odd . . . speaking strictly and mostly in the writing sense. What is quirky about your personality that makes you able to float from one personality type to the other?*

JW: My funky LA friends say it's because I'm a Gemini, but I think I'm just bipolar. Seriously, it's funny you mention that because there was a time when I was just a screenwriter (no acting and no directing). I thought I was going to die! The walls of my little office started to move in on me. That was when I knew I had to return to the set. There's something about making a movie . . . once it gets in your blood, you're hooked. Being a director or an actor is like being a sailor. Eventually, you've got to get back to sea. If someone really twisted my arm—like you, Rene—then I'd probably say I'm a director and an actor who writes and not the other way around.

RG: *I have to give you props. You really captured the heart and voice of women in your script. Since you're not a woman, how'd you manage that?*

JW: That's a compliment I'm going to treasure for a long time! There's Atlantis, the Fountain of Youth, El Dorado, and man's search to understand the female mind. Honestly, I'm not sure how. . . . When my daughter, who just turned six, was first born, I remember rocking her to sleep and thinking about the life she had ahead of her. The more I thought about life from her future point of view, the more I realized how hard it is to be a woman! I think that was the point when I had a real, true, vested stake in what it is to be female.

RG: *Among many things, the theme of family reconciliation drew me to your story. Is this something you're passionate*

about, and have you had your own personal experiences with family reconciliation?

JW: I was blessed with amazing parents, and my wife and I try hard to do the same for our kids. Still, when I was a kid actor, I worked with so many teen stars (some of whom died way too soon) who had utterly sad and destroyed family lives. I saw the pain that caused for everyone involved. It was a black hole at the center of their souls that seemed to suck away all joy no matter how much success they had. That seared into me the prayer that all families can find peace.

RG: In novels, we get to play inside characters' heads. But with a film script, you've only got visuals. So what are some of the tricks screenwriters use to help the audience feel the emotional angst and triumphs of their characters?

JW: You novelists make me so jealous because of that! In a movie, we really can't express the inner monologue very well. That's why we have to rely so heavily on the visual metaphor. In *Heart*, for example, there is the single horse in the field as a visual expression of Calvin's loneliness. There's also the use of music as a symbol of love. As Calvin helps Faith grow to the point that she better understands how to love, music returns and becomes more full. Things like that.

RG: I bet you know a lot of famous people, huh? Well, my good friend's sister's husband's brother used to work for Brad Pitt's brother. So that's only five degrees of separation. Beat that.

JW: Well, I'm zero degrees separated from Rene Gutteridge and one degree from Karen Kingsbury. So there!

Yeah, it's true that in Hollywood, famous people come with the territory. I think since I grew up constantly around really famous people, it kind of became normal for me. The only thing that bugs me is going through the checkout at the grocery store and seeing tabloid articles about someone I know. I turn into a crazy person as I point and pronounce, "That is *not true!*"

RG: Is it hard as the writer and director to step aside if an actor interprets a character differently than you anticipated? Or do you just clapper-board them until they do what you want? The latter sounds more fun, but that's why I'm just a cave-dwelling writer.

JW: First of all, no one let Rene near the clapboard.

Because I've been an actor since I was twelve, I have a keen appreciation for the freedom someone needs when they put their skin around a character. I think every director should look at their actors as collaborators in the character. I truly feel that I am in every scene with every actor—right there with them on camera playing the part—in every take. Their success is my success and vice versa. You can't make that relationship work if you're not willing to let the actors bring their ideas to the screen. Otherwise, they are just robots.

RG: What is the funniest thing that's ever happened on the set of one of your movies?

JW: A movie set makes summer camp look like chemistry class. It is a never-ending series of practical jokes and general tomfoolery. One of the all-time greats was when we were making *I AM*, and we had this really dramatic flashback scene where the actor was supposed to shave his head. His character's wife had been murdered, and it was part of a ritual to turn himself into a cold-blooded killer bent on revenge. Stefan Hajek, the actor who played the part (and one of my best friends), is notorious for his intensity—especially in scenes of high drama like this. *I AM* is a modern retelling of the Ten Commandments, so it was pretty intense, and we needed a lift . . . so I decided to put some almost-dead batteries in his electric clippers. As I said, "Action!" Stefan glared at the mirror, summoned up his most intense anger, and turned on the clippers into his thick, full head of hair—right at the forehead. The clippers made it about half an inch before the batteries began to fizzle, but he kept on digging it into his hair.

He never stopped trying to shave his head until we all burst out laughing. I think he still has a scar from that, and I know he hasn't forgiven me. Still, it was pretty funny.

RG: What is one misconception you think people have about directors?

JW: That we know what we're doing.

In all seriousness, the cartoon version of the director is the self-absorbed moron with that bullhorn, screaming, "Action!" The reality is that we're coaches. It's our job to help everyone else be the best they can be at what they do, from the actors to the cinematographers to the art department to makeup and wardrobe and so on.

RG: So be honest. When you learned your script was going to be turned into a novel, were you the least bit nervous about the process?

JW: I was intimidated! Novels are things that smart people write; screenplays are for people like me.

RG: What was the most rewarding thing about seeing your script as a novel?

JW: By far, it's the depth a novel can bring to the characters and the story as a whole. In Hollywood, we are trained to be lean and efficient. Every page is hundreds of thousands of dollars—at a minimum. This is the first story where *everything* in my mind and heart can be for public consumption. I love it, and I hope enough people read it so that we can do this for all of my movies!

RG: What draws you to the Prodigal story told in the Bible?

JW: As a storyteller myself, I am in awe of Jesus and His parables. Each of them is a masterpiece. Of all of them, I think the Prodigal is my favorite. It captures the essence of the heart of God and is the perfect portrait of His ability to heal

all wounds. It completely refutes the pop-culture perception of God as judgmental. Here is the Father forgiving all and restoring His son with pure unconditional love. That's God.

RG: Why did you choose two prodigals for one story?

JW: I loved the idea of two prodigals being in a marriage together. Faith and Luke ran away from their families and wound up with each other. How could that ever work out? The answer is that it couldn't until they each went back and found healing with their families.

RG: Why do you think the Prodigal story has resonated for so long and with so many?

JW: We are all prodigals in one way or another. We all fall short and desperately seek the redeeming love of Jesus. When I became a parent, I really saw this story from the other side as well. Now I was a father, and as I felt the unconditional love I have for my own children, I had such a greater appreciation for the love God has for me.

RG: Were there other themes you wanted to explore through the subplots of characters like Olivia and Calvin?

JW: I wanted to create other portraits of God's redeeming love, particularly in marriage—although one of my favorites is Calvin's relationship with Luke. Here's a guy Calvin didn't even get to meet before his baby girl married him. There's no doubt he would probably feel more comfortable with Faith ending up with Lee—a good guy from his native North Carolina who he could relate to. Still, Calvin goes out of his way to help this wayward, rich Yankee-boy son-in-law repair the broken marriage to his daughter.

RG: Why did you choose to produce and direct faith-based films? Couldn't you be more successful by making films for a broader audience?

JW: Good question. I ask myself that every day! I was blessed with a great career in secular Hollywood, but God kept tugging at me with one question: “Why do you take Me everywhere you go except to work?” I rationalized that for a long time, but in the end, He was right, of course. Now I believe that it’s His calling for me to apply the artistry and grandeur that decades in Hollywood have taught me to telling His stories. It’s not just about putting Christian thought on-screen; it’s about creating emotion and being highly artistic and relevant in doing so. Artistry and subtlety are often overlooked in “Christian film.”

RG: Can you talk a bit about how you work with pastors, bloggers, social media, and the church to get audiences to the theater opening weekend?

JW: It’s such an honor when a church or any group adopts your work and makes it their own. With *I AM*, we reached out to churches on 10/10/10 and offered them the chance to show this modern Ten Commandments movie for free on this “Day of Tens.” We hoped maybe a couple hundred would do it, but we were shocked when twenty-five hundred said yes.

That’s really how you can create change in the world. When your movie or book can create a moment and that moment can be picked up by people and transformed into a movement.

Social media is the coolest thing ever. Those who follow me on Twitter (@caliheel) are subject to hearing about my kids’ every move, my alma mater UNC, and the daily comings and goings of my life in Hollywood, but what they give me is a relationship with them, making me and my work a small part of their lives. Nothing is cooler than that!