

crossing *Oceans*



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READING GROUP GUIDE

## A Conversation with the Author

*Your blog, [www.noveljourney.blogspot.com](http://www.noveljourney.blogspot.com), grew out of your own journey to become a published author. How many books had you written before Crossing Oceans? How long has your “novel journey” taken?*

Thanks for mentioning Novel Journey. It has been a labor of love, not just for me but for the whole Novel Journey team. It's a great place for readers to discover new authors and for writers to connect and learn. And unlike most things in life, it's a completely free resource. It really is the Novel Journey team's desire to spread the word about the tremendous choices and talent available today in the realm of Christian fiction,

so forgive us if we unashamedly plug it. We'd love the whole world to discover the great Christian novelists there are to choose from—Francine Rivers, Charles Martin, Lisa Samson, Claudia Mair Burney, Frank Peretti, and on and on.

But to answer the question you *actually* asked, I've written four books that haven't been published before this one, *Crossing Oceans*, was contracted.

I've been writing toward the goal of publication for something like ten years. I've had lots of rejections and near misses along the way, but I'm so grateful for all of it. *Crossing Oceans* is my best piece of writing to date and a story I'm so very proud to debut with.

*How did the idea for Crossing Oceans come to you?*

I'm not exactly sure where the idea came from, but when I write, I'm usually working out something in my personal life, past or present. Often it's not until the story is done that I figure out exactly what. I think with *Crossing Oceans*, it probably was my relationship with my parents. They divorced when I was a baby. For the first years of my life, I was with my mother, and then when I was in second grade, I went to live with my father. I know what it's like to be torn, like Isabella, between two families who don't always like each other but who all love the child they share. Then again, maybe I wasn't working out anything! Maybe I just fell asleep watching something about a dying mother and woke up thinking I had a brilliant idea.

*How much of Jenny did you draw from yourself?*

Friends could probably be more objective in answering this question than I am. The honest answer would be maybe a little, maybe a lot. Each of the characters is drawn from parts of me, the good guys and the bad. I've got enough attributes and flaws to go around! Mostly the characters are their own creations, though. They borrow a little from me, a little from others, and take on their own personas as well. It's a combination.

Probably the one who's most based on myself is Bella. She's the glue that brings the two families together. I've always been a mediator type of person. I think most middle children probably are. However, I was more like Eeyore as a child than Isabella's sunshiny self.

*All of your as-yet-unpublished novels were written in a completely different genre—thriller/suspense. Crossing Oceans is quite a departure. Do you prefer or find your voice more easily in one or the other?*

I grew up reading suspense, so naturally that's what I thought I should write. I did okay with it and got some recognition in a contest and came close to getting contracted, but ultimately none of those suspense novels ever sold. Then I started reading some really amazing novels outside the suspense genre, and it was like another world opened up to me. It was no longer a thriller I longed to write, but a story that would change lives

the way the books I read had changed mine. When I started *Crossing Oceans*, I presented it along with a suspense novel I was working on to my agent, Chip MacGregor. I asked which one he thought suited me better. He told me both were good, but that *Crossing Oceans* seemed more like my true voice, or something to that effect. It turned out to be a turning point and absolutely the right advice. I'm now writing what comes naturally and absolutely loving it. Chip's a genius.

*As you reviewed novels and talked to a lot of novelists who have had varying degrees of commercial success, was there ever a "dark night of the soul" where you decided this wasn't what you thought it was going to be, wasn't worth pursuing?*

Not worth pursuing? No way! There are so many worthy stories to tell, and it's my burning desire to do that. Not to say that I didn't have fleeting moments of despair along the way, particularly when I came close to getting a contract only to see it fall through at the last minute. But those moments really were fleeting, and I knew God's timing would be perfect . . . and it was.

*King Solomon wrote, "My child, let me give you some further advice: Be careful, for writing books is endless, and much study wears you out" (Ecclesiastes 12:12). What's your perspective on the flood of new books you see each season?*

Honestly, I'd rather see two books released that are fantastic than a hundred that are just okay. There are great books that

often don't get the attention they deserve because they're buried in an avalanche of new releases. Of course, tastes in literature are as different as in clothing, food, and anything else. One of my dearest friends has raved about books I thought were just okay and vice versa. So who's to say which two books are the great ones?

*Do you ever find your Christian worldview a challenge to convey in your writing or as you communicate with other novelists in the industry?*

It's not difficult to convey in my writing, I don't think. At least not today. Hey, I'm a sinner. I wish I wasn't and I try not to be, but I always seem to fall short. It's the same for my characters. The thing with me and them is we get back up, dust ourselves off, and try to do better next time. My faith, in all its imperfection, isn't lip service. It's who I am. What I believe. That comes out in my conversations, my choice of clothing, music, friends, and in my writing. It's very natural for me.

As far as other novelists go, I guess it's not a challenge. I'm a Christian and not everyone's going to agree with what I do, what I write, or what I believe, and that doesn't matter. My mother said when I turned forty, I would stop caring so much what people thought and really start being who I am. I'm almost there, and as usual, she was right. I would say that in my personal life, everyone who truly knows me is well aware that I'm a Christian. I don't hide it in my professional life either.

*Finish this sentence: "I will know that I have totally arrived as a novelist when . . ."*

I don't think any of us ever "totally arrive" at anything. I'm a good mom, but have I arrived as a mother? No, I'm still learning and growing and trying to do better. It's the same with being a novelist. If I win a Pulitzer, that would be great—okay, really, really, *really* great!—but that still won't mean I've arrived. I'd still need to be learning and trying my best to improve with each book. I think once people start telling themselves they've "arrived," they start getting lazy and proud. Ultimately they become less than what they could have been had they remained hungry to improve. Only when I'm entering heaven's gates will I finally allow myself to say, "Now, I've arrived!"

## Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the book, everyone in Jenny's family is hurting. What are some of the things that have happened to bring them to this state? In what ways have they brought about their own suffering or made it worse than it had to be?
2. How does Jenny's return home change the family dynamics? She didn't really want to go home, but she felt she had no other options. Do you agree? What would you have done in her situation?
3. Was Jenny right to keep Isabella's existence a secret from David? How might things have been different if David had known about Isabella from the start?

4. After making a snide remark to her father, Jenny wonders, “Why was I waving a red cape before this bull instead of the white flag I’d intended?” Why is it so hard to break long-standing relational habits, even when we realize they are hurting us or someone we love? Have you faced a similar situation with a family member or a close friend? How did you handle it, or how do you wish you had handled it?
5. Jenny’s father has held Dr. Preston responsible for his wife’s death for years. Is his anger justified? Have you or someone in your family experienced something similar to this? How did you or they respond?
6. While standing in David’s yard preparing to tell him about Isabella, Jenny puts her hand out to catch flowers fluttering to the ground. Not one lands on her open palm. Instead they land on David. What do you think the author might have been trying to symbolize here?
7. After Jenny tells her father she is dying, she reflects, “For the first time in my life I knew—really knew—that my father loved me.” Why is Jenny unconvinced before this of her father’s love? Is there someone you love who, like Jenny, might not be aware of your love? What might you do to change that perception?
8. Despite her father’s desperation, Jenny makes the difficult decision not to seek treatment for her cancer. Do you think that was the right thing for her to do?

What factored into her decision? Have you ever known anyone who had to make a similar decision?

9. Do you think the loss of Jenny's mother made Jenny's diagnosis easier or more difficult for Jenny to handle? for her father to handle?
10. When David comes to pick up Isabella, he stops in the driveway and honks as he used to when he and Jenny were dating. Jenny tells us, "For the first time, I understood why the gesture used to infuriate my father." What are some things you see differently as a parent, or simply as an adult, than you did as a child?
11. Describe the way Jenny's feelings for David change. Do you think she was ever really in love with him?
12. If you were in Lindsey's position, how would you have reacted to Jenny's return? What would have been the most difficult thing for you to come to terms with?
13. Craig is a true friend to Jenny and wishes to be more. Do you think he was right to ask Jenny to marry him? Should she have said yes even sooner than she did, or was she right to put him off?
14. Jenny's mother's epitaph is a far cry from that of the woman who lost four children. How do you suppose these differing views manifested themselves in each woman's life? Have you ever considered what you'd want your epitaph to say?

15. Have you ever had to communicate something life-altering to a child Isabella's age? What did you find was the best way to do that?
16. Jenny ultimately decides to move in with David and Lindsey, against her own wishes, because she sees it as a chance to be a hero to her little girl. Was she right? Would you have made the same decision? What are some of the things to consider when weighing our own needs and desires against those of the people we love, especially those who are dependent on us?
17. Jenny is predisposed to dislike Lindsey because of her jealousy. When does Jenny's impression of Lindsey begin to change? What causes the change? What relationships do you have in which your initial impression of someone gradually changed for the better? Why did it change? Do you have any relationships in which you are letting jealousy or other negative feelings prevent you from seeing the person's true worth?
18. Jenny seems to have a peace about dying. Would you have the same peace? Why or why not?
19. Jenny has an advantage over most in that she has time to spiritually prepare for her impending death. How would you minister to someone in the same situation?
20. If you knew you had only a few months to live, what would you most want to accomplish?