

An interview with Mike H. Mizrahi, Author of *The Great Chattanooga Bicycle Race*



We live in a world where a device on our wrist can detect our every step and vital sign while our phones pop up with notifications telling us where we are, in case we did not already know. Too easily we take for granted the great inventions of the past that drastically changed the world at the time they were introduced. Take the bicycle, for example. In his debut novel, *The Great Chattanooga Bicycle Race* (Redemption Press/May 1, 2017), author Mike H. Mizrahi tells the story of a woman who creates waves by not only riding a bicycle, but doing so in bloomers. A woman riding a bicycle in pants seems trivial to us now, but at the turn of the 20th century, it was a very big deal and played a part in the advancement of women's rights.

Q: You didn't write your first novel until after you retired. Have you always had the bug to write? If so, why did you wait so long to get started?

Yes, the bug burrowed deep inside me long ago. I've been writing since high school, in one form or another. Take songwriting, one of my favorite pastimes. It's a puzzle, crafting words that tuck neatly into the melody of the song. At the same time, the lyrics must tell a story or express an idea that moves the listener. Anyway, having pursued a career in journalism and corporate public relations, I thought writing a book would be the next frontier. I guess the busyness of life got in the way; then I noticed one morning the kids are grown and gone, and I'm about to retire. However, it wasn't until Karen and I returned from a mission trip to Africa in 2013 that I got the idea for my first manuscript. Looking back, I wish I had taken the plunge long before, but God willing there's much more ahead.

Q: *The Great Chattanooga Bicycle Race* is the first book you have published but was not the first book you ever wrote. Tell us about the experience that inspired you to write your first novel.

We went with a handful of members from our church to the Democratic Republic of Congo to teach business and education principles. One day while taking a break outside the church where we taught, a woman asked about the large gathering inside. She wore western clothing and appeared to be in her late 20s. As it turned out, she was born in Bunia, the city we were in, but she left to attend college in San Francisco, became a social worker and never came back. I asked if she ever would. She said she was thinking about it, and I told her Bunia needed her. Just then a man on a motorbike pulled up, and she got on and waved goodbye. Three months later I had a 90,000-word manuscript about an African-American social worker who returns to her city of birth to see her dying father and is caught up in a rebel attack. The story involves a great chase through Virunga Nation Park, the gorilla mountains.

Q: In a few sentences, tell us about *The Great Chattanooga Bicycle Race*.

It's 1895, and the new "safety" bicycle is taking the nation by storm. Young Anna Gaines has fallen in love with the sport and is intrigued by what the women in the North are wearing to ride: bloomers. But Chattanooga, the gateway to the South, and Anna's own mama are not about to sit idly by while she unleashes such scandalous behavior upon their city. Socialite Bertha Millwood, haunted by the tragic death of her own daughter, leads a community revolt. Anna rides in spite of her own self-doubt and lack of confidence, born of a tragic childhood injury, and she battles against the roadblocks that Bertha and others put up to derail her. In the end, Anna must race the president of the Cycle Club while the citizens watch to decide if women should share the same right as men to ride a bicycle in Chattanooga. However Peter Sawyer, the club president, is beside himself; he's in love with Anna!

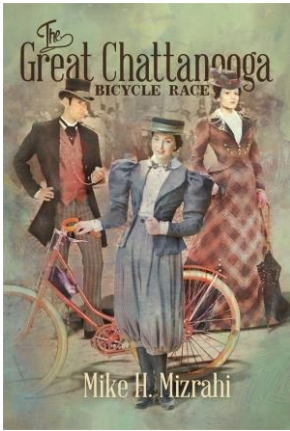
Q: Your leading lady, Anna, is described as an introvert, but she did something seemingly out of her nature. What exactly did she do, and what inspired her to break out of her shell and try something new?

Anna declares war on the childhood insecurities she is carrying into young adulthood. At 13, a fall from her horse resulted in a broken leg, a permanent limp and a shattered self-image. Now 19, Anna starts her emotional rehabilitation by moving from the family farm into a women's boardinghouse in the city. An expert seamstress from years of self-imposed social confinement, she lands a job at Loveman's Department Store and

gets her first taste of freedom. It's really the accomplishment of Annie Londonderry, a mother of three in her mid-20s, that breaks the chains binding Anna. On a visit with her aunt in Brooklyn, Anna learns that this adventurer is finishing a bicycle ride around the world . . . clad in bloomers. Anna's aunt, a college professor, takes Anna to a riding school, where she takes to "the wheel." A second taste of freedom on the bicycle leads her to stand against an entire community determined to keep such inappropriate behavior from their streets.

Q: Some of us may laugh about the standards of modesty during that time period and think a woman wearing bloomers isn't very scandalous, but it was a big deal to Anna. Today some Christian women still struggle with defending their standards of modesty. How can all of us respect the personal standards and values of others better?

Dress standards shift, even within churches, and have throughout time. The lines of modesty and indecency are often blurred in the eyes of the beholder. For example, Anna opts eventually to wear bloomers when riding because of practicality and safety reasons, not to be provocative. Skirts often became entangled in the bicycle chain and caused women to tumble. Today even a modest American woman might look askance at a Muslim woman who wears a burka or a man who wears a turban. Clothing in ancient times was vastly different than modern-day fashions. I believe the biblical admonition calls us to dress modestly and in good taste, in accordance with the standards of the day and in the society in which we live. In the 21st century, withholding judgment of others should be the guiding principle for us all.



Q: As a writer, you plan to write in the historical genre, at least for now. What drew you to write about life at the turn of the 20th century?

I had an idea for a different book, which I still intend to write, about the era of Yellow Journalism (circa 1900-03). So much change was in the air, much like today. Industrialization created a massive shift in America from an agrarian to a more urban society; this brought about increased opportunities for men and women to attend school and take jobs outside the home. The nation experienced a massive wave of immigration, people from every nation seeking the ideals of liberty and opportunity. Sensational news coverage, particularly from New York, distorted the information Americans were reading, much like today. However we were still a country of strong faith, and family was the backbone of our culture, all of which attracts me as a writer of historical fiction.

Q: Was the book based on a true story? Was there a reason why you set the book in the south, specifically Chattanooga, Tennessee?

As I researched the amazing impact the bicycle had on the American social fabric, I noticed one region was slow in accepting female cyclists: the South. Women wearing bloomers was a non-starter. In September 1895, the *L.A. Herald* proclaimed, ". . . in almost every southern newspaper the appearance of a pair of bloomers is treated almost as would be the coming ashore of the sea serpent." After the War Between the States, Chattanooga was the "gateway to the South." Shipping via the Tennessee River and several different rail lines through the city connected the industrialized North to the struggling South and created a magnificent business hub within the city. A shift in Southern social norms involving the bicycle might well have started there and spread to other cities. So I chose Chattanooga — a different kind of southern city after the war.

Q: How did the invention of the bicycle pave the way for women's rights in this country?

Putting social mores aside, the construction of early bicycles made it difficult for ladies to ride. The first real bicycle, the Draisienne, hit America's shores around 1818. Made almost entirely of wood, the rider propelled himself forward by alternately pushing his feet against the ground. Fast-forward to the "Bone Shaker," or the Velocipede, with a pedal on an enlarged front wheel. In 1870, the "Penny Farthing" was introduced, the bike with the huge front wheel and pedal and a much smaller rear wheel. While women experimented with these contraptions, it was the invention of the "Safety Bicycle" in the '80s that launched a revolution. This forerunner to the bicycle of today was chain-driven, with same-sized wheels, pneumatic tires and brakes. Manufacturers produced bikes with drop-down frames to accommodate the women better, and soon off they rode by the millions. Women were no longer confined to the farm, city and church. They were unshackled.

Q: In what ways did the popularity of the bicycle change the social and economic fabric of society in 1890s America?

The bicycle created a new mobility for women, which led to increased independence. To accommodate women riders, clothing manufacturers created new streamlined dresses and skirts that fell to the ankles — a more stylish alternative to the traditional hooped dress. Female riders increasingly abandoned the tight corset and took to wearing more comfortable apparel, such as bloomers. The “Gibson Girl” emerged in newspaper and magazine advertisements — the artistic creation of a thousand women featured tall and slender lines, ample hips and buttocks, youthful features and ephemeral beauty. The “New Woman,” the feminist ideal, rode into the 20th century on a bicycle — all the way to the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution.

Q: What piece of inspirational wisdom do you hope readers ride away with after reading *The Great Chattanooga Bicycle Race*?

True and lasting joy comes not from things or experiences, but from what we hold in our hearts as excellent, praiseworthy, just and pure. To grow into the person we long to become requires patience and courage in the shadows of adversity. Having the courage to conquer our inner doubts and pursue our dreams can transform us and those around us — even change history.

To keep up with Mike H. Mizrahi, visit www.mikehmizrahi.com. You can also follow him on [Facebook \(AuthorMikeMizrahi\)](#) and [Twitter \(@MikeHMiz\)](#).