

An interview with Lori Benton, Author of *Many Sparrows*

Understanding why some things happen the way they do is impossible, but as Christians, we must remember God is in control and His timing is perfect. His purposes are deeper and broader than we can imagine. These are lessons Clare Inglesby must learn in award-winning author Lori Benton's latest historical novel, *Many Sparrows* (WaterBrook).

Set in 1774 and based on historical facts, *Many Sparrows* depicts the harrowing account of a young mother who will stop at nothing to find and reclaim her son after he is taken by a native tribe.



Q: Have you always enjoyed studying history? What drew you to writing specifically about 18th-century America?

I had no particular interest in history as a subject until around my sophomore year in high school, when I discovered the Sunfire Young Adult historical romance series (*Jessica* was my favorite) and *Christy* by Catherine Marshall. That's all it took to engage my interest, although it wouldn't be until I started writing historical fiction I began what I'd call *studying* history.

What drew me to write about 18th-century America in particular was nothing more profound than a liking for men's knee breeches. I'd seen the movie *The Patriot* (starring Mel Gibson and Heath Ledger) and for the first time, for some reason (Mel? Heath?), paid attention to what the guys were wearing. I'd been thinking of trying my hand at historical fiction and suddenly knew that if I did, I'd want my male characters wearing knee breeches. A quick Google search told me the fashion began disappearing around 1800, so I zeroed in on the late 1700s as I began hunting for a time and place to set a story. Little did I know I'd taken the first step on a journey that has lasted nearly two decades. I discovered a passion for 18th-century Colonial and early Federal American history I certainly didn't see coming when I sat down to watch that movie.

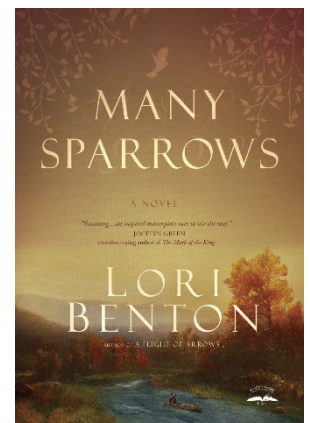
Q: Without giving away too much of the story, can you share where the title *Many Sparrows* comes from?

The title has several meanings. It's taken from the verses in Matthew 10 quoted in the front matter of the book. *Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father. . . . Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.* The title *Many Sparrows* speaks to the theme of God's vigilance in our lives and His constant care for us, as well as the fact we are linked to one another. There are many sparrows in His sight, not just one, and He's concerned for them all.

It's also the name given to an important character in the story.

Q: What inspired the storyline for *Many Sparrows*? How much of the book is based on historical fact?

Story ideas set on the 18th-century frontier are constantly spinning around in my head as I research whatever novel I'm presently writing — too many to write in one lifetime. The initial kernel/idea for *Many Sparrows* dates too far back to recall it specifically. For years I had a file going called "The Frontiersman" because I knew I wanted to write about one. From time to time other ideas began sticking to the bits in that file, and eventually I saw the beginnings of a story forming about a man who lived his life on both sides of that frontier. I wasn't really sure yet why. Still on the backburner, I began thinking about what sort of woman I might add to my frontiersman's story. Why would she be on the frontier? What might compel her to cross the line, and in what way might my frontiersman's path get tangled up with hers? As I asked such questions, Clare Inglesby eventually formed. At the same time I started looking at what was happening on the frontier at various points before and after the Revolutionary War, seeking the exact year for the story's setting.



I landed on two incidents that occurred in 1774, one to use as the inciting incident from which the rest of the story flows, and the other much deeper into the story. The Yellow Creek Massacre formed the book's opening scene. The murder of nearly the entire family of the Mingo warrior, Logan, on the banks of the Ohio happened April 30, 1774. It and his subsequent revenge is part of what escalated the brutal conflict between Native Americans and white settlers along the Ohio that year, culminating in Lord Dunmore's War and the Battle of Point Pleasant in October. Numerous other incidents portrayed in *Many Sparrows* are drawn from the historical record, but Logan's tragedy and Virginia Governor Dunmore's campaign against the Shawnees are the most prominent.

Q: Can you tell us about the research that went into writing this book?

Like most of my story research, there was a lot of book-reading. My primary source for the historical timeline of 1774 turned out to be a slender volume in the Osprey campaign series, *Point Pleasant 1774*, by John F. Winkler. Though I spent half my life on the east coast and have nearly 25 years of memories to draw from, I now live 3,000 miles away from the settings of my novels. However, while writing *Many Sparrows* I was able to take a road trip with a fellow historical fiction author. We covered a lot of ground in Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania, including spending a night in a hotel on the east bank of the Ohio across from Yellow Creek on the spot where Logan's family was murdered.

Q: What do you hope readers learn about God's timing and His plans for us while reading *Many Sparrows*?

What I love about how God uses a story like *Many Sparrows* is He's going to speak to readers in individual ways about things I could never plan or predict. Somehow He does that work in spite of the limitations of both me and my books. I'm so glad He does. He's a big God, so much bigger than my puny understanding can grasp. His plans, His timing, His purpose for us all are broader, deeper and higher than we can imagine. How easy it is to fail to see beyond the end of our noses, to be so wrapped up in our own circumstances that we lose sight of how connected we are. None of us lives or dies unto ourselves. All our choices have consequences in the lives of those we're linked to, and each of us is just as important to our Father in Heaven as the next. As we make choices we need to bear in mind how they will affect others. Will they build them up or stumble and tear them down? Can we trust God in those situations where the choice to do good for another's benefit requires a sacrifice we aren't sure we can make? Is He truly a good Father? Are we safe in His hands?

Those thoughts were stirring in my heart as I wrote *Many Sparrows*, so I hope such themes resonate with readers and provoke conversation between them and the Lord.

Q: Why is it difficult to surrender situations to God and rely on Him to resolve the circumstances?

We want to be the one in control. Surrender isn't a comfortable state. What if He brings us through pain? What if we suffer loss? Even knowing and believing God is good, He desires to give us good gifts and all He allows into our lives will ultimately work for our good, it's still not fun, comfortable or easy to face the possibility of pain or disappointment. Have you ever rushed ahead of God and tried to fix a situation and simply made matters worse? I have. Having done that a time or two (or three!), I prefer to let whatever loss, disappointment or pain He allows me to experience be what draws me nearer to Him. I am weak; He is strong. I am flawed; He is pure. I see through a glass darkly; He sees and knows everything about me that concerns me, my past, my present and my future. His word tells me He will complete the work He has begun in me (Philippians 1:6).

Q: There are many things we never learn in history class, and it seems as if students are taught less about history today than ever. What are some lessons from history during this time period that would be beneficial for us to know, especially from a cultural standpoint?

If I could change anything about the way history is taught in school (or was taught when I was coming up), it would be to add historical fiction to the curriculum. Facts, figures, dates — none of that translates to caring about what people in the past experienced or the choices they made that have shaped who we are as a nation. If you can see the past through their eyes — even fictional eyes — it comes alive in a way that actually makes an impact on our thinking (perhaps on our own choices).

What I've learned in my study of those who lived in the 18th century is, like us, they were flawed human beings, whatever side of the frontier they happened to be born. Men and women on both sides of the 18th-century

frontier made selfless choices, and they made cruel and grasping decisions. Brutality isn't limited to one skin color or another, and neither is grace and love, forgiveness and friendship, or the capacity to have a heart changed and a life transformed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the only One who can with any finality disrupt the cycle of enmity that has been in play across the face of this earth since Cain turned his hand against Abel.

Q: It is well known that traveling west was a dangerous endeavor, and many lost their lives not only to the elements and illnesses, but to native tribes. What added dangers did a pregnant woman face?

Childbirth was one of the riskiest things a woman in the 18th century could experience. Death in childbirth was common, even in the best of circumstances. Couple that hazard with heading into the wilderness perils you mentioned, and I'm amazed any woman, such as Clare Inglesby in *Many Sparrows*, survived at all.

In truth, I know of at least one woman in a similar situation to Clare's who did survive: Mary Draper Ingles. Mary was pregnant when she and her two young sons were taken captive by Shawnees from her frontier home during the 1750s. She went into labor during the long march to the Shawnees' Ohio villages. She survived childbirth, the march, months of captivity, an epic escape and retracing a journey of hundreds of miles back to her Virginia home. The courage, strength and fortitude women in far less desperate straits than Mary had to possess to venture westward to settle the frontier is astonishing to consider. I'm thankful they did it and I don't have to.

Q: One of the more spiritual aspects of the story is the idea of repaying evil for evil. How can we set our minds on overcoming evil with good?

My best answer to how we can set our minds to do anything God's way, rather than our own, is by daily washing those minds in the water of His word.

As for setting our minds on overcoming evil with good, let's remember God Himself did that for us. We have all sinned and fallen short of the mark a holy God set in His law, but instead of His wrath for our failure, we get grace. Instead of condemnation, we get forgiveness. Jesus took that wrath and condemnation for us. He overcame evil—our sin and failure—by paying for it on the cross. The ultimate good for evil repayment! Remembering the choice He made for us lends us the perspective and strength we need to show a similar grace to each other.

Q: What can we learn from the life-altering consequences of the characters in *Many Sparrows*?

Father God knows best. His ways lead to wholeness, healing and joy. If we leave Him free to work out His plan for us and cease the fretting that only leads to fruitless meddling, things will go easier for us. We won't walk through this life on a path of rose petals, but whatever situations He allows into our lives will work together for good, to deepen our faith, dependency on Him and intimacy of fellowship. We should keep our focus on what is eternal rather than on what will soon pass away. Oh, that I would keep such a focus!

Q: Can you give a little tease about your next work in progress?

Tentatively titled *The King's Mercy*, the story is set in an earlier time period than any I've written before: the first half of the 18th century. I'm returning to Colonial North Carolina as a setting, though the story begins in Scotland. I don't have a publication date yet, but I'm guessing sometime in late 2018.

Learn more about Benton and her books at <http://loribenton.blogspot.com>. She is also active on [Facebook \(@AuthorLoriBenton\)](#), [Twitter \(@LLB26\)](#) and [Instagram \(@lorilbenton\)](#).