

An interview with Cindy Woodsmall, Author of *Gathering the Threads*



How different would your belief system be if you grew up in a different culture? Would your faith in God be the same if you were raised in a different family? *New York Times* best-selling author Cindy Woodsmall poses these questions in the powerful conclusion to the CBA and ECPA bestselling Amish of Summer Grove series in *Gathering the Threads* (WaterBrook/August 15, 2017).

Woodsmall's latest series introduces readers to two young women, one Englisch and one Amish, who were switched at birth and follows them as they discover what their lives would have been like had the switch never taken place. In *Gathering the Threads*, Woodsmall deftly weaves complex issues of identity into the story. What makes us who we are? Are we simply a result of our genetic ancestry? Does our family determine our future . . . or is there something more to identity?

Q: The Amish of Summer Grove series introduces readers to a pair of girls, one Englisch and one Amish, who were switched at birth. What are some of the challenges each faced when pushed to experience the life she would have lived had the switch never taken place?

Ariana, who was raised Amish, battles to keep her sanity and survive in a lifestyle she'd never considered living. Her biological dad has devised what he calls a "bucket list" because he believes if she returns to the Amish ways, her life will be over. Her thinking and faith are undermined at every turn, and the changes demanded of her break her in ways her Englisch dad can't understand. She finds it appalling he wants her to remove her prayer Kapp and wear modern clothes. She struggles when he insists she have some length cut from her hair. She's never had scissors used on her hair. She must learn to drive. She also must study various religions and learn the original meaning of words in the Bible. Her biological dad's goal is to undo her religious beliefs.

Skylar, who was raised Englisch, agreed to live with her Amish family to avoid rehab. She's used to living a very comfortable lifestyle. The Englisch parents who raised her were never married and never lived together, so she's learned throughout the years how to play them against each other to get what she wants. Suddenly she's in a poor home, stripped of her cell phone, electronics and spending money. Her immediate challenge upon arrival in the Amish community is how to score prescription drugs. A tight-knit family and community is foreign to her. Manipulating her authorities isn't easy, and in this home everyone works to put food on the table and to keep a roof over their heads.

Q: What are some of the questions about identity the girls must work through as they adjust to life with their new families?

Ariana's journey is about coming to a place of *not* submitting to the authority over her when she thinks and sees things differently than that authority does.

In book two, *Fraying at the Edge*, Ariana adjusted to life with her English family. Three months later she comes home, and that's where *Gathering the Threads* opens. She left as a sweet, obedient Amish woman, and now she's being accused of bringing the world into her insular Amish community. Yet she can't compromise the gains she has made in her own personality and in her relationships. Is she still the "rule follower," or is she now an "activist," pushing others to open their eyes to see a broader life and a bigger God?

Skylar feels rejected by both families, passed over in favor of the "good" and "giving" Ariana. Skylar needs to work through her jealousy and her desire to put herself above others, but can she? Being self-centered comes naturally for her.

Q: Today's news stories, even our social media feeds, are full of people arguing and treating each other poorly due to a difference of opinions. As Christians, how can we be respectful of others' beliefs while standing for the truth?

Ariana wrestles with this very thing in *Fraying at the Edge* when she is living with her birth parents. In *Gathering*

the Threads, she's returned to her Amish community a changed woman who must stand up to some of the backward thinking and biases her older bishop holds.

It's important to remember we have the ability, even when we are overwhelmed with emotions, not to dump our feelings on others. It's helpful to remind ourselves we are all wrong at times. We've all had situations take place where we were lied to or were misinformed. If we're as right as we think, why lose our temper over it?

I remember telling my mom about something really negative someone had said about me, and my mom asked, "Is it true?"

I shook my head, "No."

"I don't think so either, but always ask yourself if what was said is true. If it is, look at yourself and choose to change. If it's not true, ignore it and move on."

When we don't like something, anger is our go-to response. It begins quite young for all people. Toddlers, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic background, are known for throwing tantrums.

As adults, we don't have to let anger take control of us. We can take control and be in control. We can deal with our overwrought emotions in a way that makes us stronger and tomorrow better.

Q: Ariana was deeply conflicted between respecting the parents who raised her and the pull of the world outside the Amish community. How was she able to balance the two sides and still hold on to her faith?

Her emotions were a wreck much of the time, but she didn't let them have the last say or rule her actions. She could see the extremes in each lifestyle — the Amish and Englisch — and she saw each way of life had strengths and weaknesses. When too confused to know what to believe, she talked to Quill, a good friend she rarely agreed with but who'd been through many of the same things as Ariana. He took her to a planetarium, her first time to go to one, to view images from the Hubble telescope of the universe and galaxies. While there she saw the power and awesomeness of God and realized He was bigger than anyone could understand. Suddenly faith wasn't about rules and lifestyles. It was about the God of energy and light and creation beyond what she could comprehend. She saw God had a way for her tiny life in the huge universe to be what He designed it to be.

Q: Explain the meaning behind the title of the book. In what ways was Ariana a "gatherer of threads"?

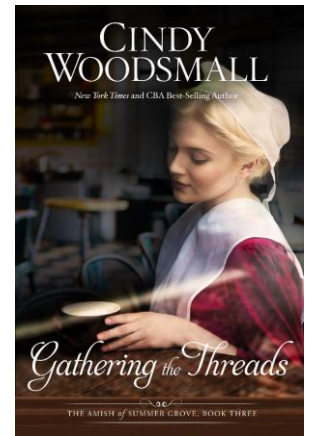
Quill's Mamm, Berta, gave Ariana the name "Thread Gatherer." She said life was like an heirloom quilt; life ripped at the seams. Gathers are rare. Ariana took the frayed pieces and worked with them until the quilt could fulfill its purpose once again.

Throughout the tumultuous events of this series, a lesser person would have left the whole situation — Ariana is an adult after all. The Amish community feels she returned to them bringing the world with her. However, she stuck with her families, both Amish and Englisch, and worked all the frayed and broken pieces together until their bond was stronger than ever.

Q: Skylar experienced a culture shock when she arrived in Summer Grove. What lessons did she learn from her new Amish family that helped her overcome her battle with drug addiction?

Oh, my, where to begin when it comes to Skylar! I've had readers contact me, sharing they felt she was unredeemable and wished I wouldn't waste any more time on her and just toss her to the side to focus on Ariana and her Amish family. That surprised me, and it hurt because I have someone in my life who once had many of Skylar's traits. We can't give up the fight. Everyone wants the sweet, stalwart child. However, like winning the lottery, reality doesn't give us everything we want.

Skylar lives a selfish life unchecked. Her desires for admiration and drugs are a bottomless pit of hunger, but despite those things, when Ariana was forced to live with her biological parents, Skylar was the only person who had the ability to save Ariana's café from going under. Skylar is smart and talented, but her addiction threatens



to ruin her life before it can really get started.

It was quite a battle for Skylar to get clean, and she fought with her Amish family to leave her alone and let her be an addict. One Amish sibling fought back, saying, "Don't let something that cares nothing about you control your life. It will make you as apathetic as it is. Fight, Skylar. Decide that you, your family and your future are worth more than these stupid pills!"

Other things came into play concerning Skylar and her addiction, but Skylar finally understood the value of life. She began the battle to get clean and stay clean.

Q: What lessons in hope and faith do you hope readers takeaway from reading *Gathering the Threads*?

Metaphorically, we often have an idea or vision or number in our heads of what life and people are supposed to add up to be. In reality life is messy and confusing, and it's rarely what we thought it would be. Even God doesn't always add up to our ideas or dreams or that elusive number, and we can't make ourselves, others or God add up. We must accept and believe despite all the messiness and confusion. In the series, Ariana realized there were many translations of God's Word, and it seemed to her there needed to be more grace and less legalism about exactly how to live. That's the theme. Hebrews 13:9 says, "It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace."

Q: Is there a subtler, maybe even hidden lesson you hope readers consider as well?

I think there are many. A fictional story has the power to slip into a reader's skin and enable her to see nuances of understanding that make life as broad and beautiful as God intended. I didn't intentionally write hidden lessons, but when readers slip into a character's world, they often discover things the author didn't see. As readers, personal insight is our superpower.

Q: Some people who have never read Amish fiction usually have a certain perception of the genre without giving it a chance. What would you say to encourage new readers to branch out and try the Amish of Summer Grove series?

I would say they may be missing out on some of the best reads of their lives. In any genre, there are different types of books. I'd like to think this series goes deeper than most and leaves readers breathless, thinking they were going on one journey and discovering they went on an entirely different one. I enter the Amish world and lift the veil of presupposition, not showing readers what they expected to see, but showing them a very different reality — one I hope builds faith inside their own lives.

The Amish way of life challenges us to consider more than the mantra of self-discovery and self-rule. When we get a peek into their way of life, we can begin to understand how and why they put sacrificial action behind their beliefs. At the same time, we take a journey into a world that struggles to uphold all the previous generation upheld. The heart cry of the faithful in every generation, whether Amish or Englisch (non-Amish/non-Plain), is to do what is best for the family, the faith community and those we influence. We learn how the Amish pass their faithfulness from one generation to the next while we see the weaknesses of trying to have too tight of a grip on the next generation. The determination and struggles of the Amish are a clear depiction of our struggle with the world around us.

Q: *Gathering the Threads* is the third and final book in your Amish of Summer Grove series. Is it difficult for you to end a series and leave the characters behind?

Yes and no. After three books there are many pieces to put together and many facets of the story to juggle and remember. It's a bit of a relief to get to start a fresh story, but at the same time, it feels like I'm saying good-bye to close friends. How can I not write any more about Ari, Quill and Skylar? Possible spin-offs about their future lives fill my mind when I close my eyes at night, even though it's not feasible to bring those to the page right now. The good thing about book-friends is they are always there on the page and in my heart whenever I want to visit them.

Q: Can you share a little bit about the book you are you writing next?

I just finished writing my first non-Amish novella with my daughter-in-law, Erin. It comes out in October and is titled *The Gift of Christmas Past*. I'm currently writing a full-length non-Amish book that will release in the fall of 2018. Its working title is *Soft Dusks and Noonday Fire*, and the setting will be the beautiful St. Simons Island, Georgia. I have an amusing, spunky cast of characters I think my readers will enjoy getting to know.

Learn more about Woodsmall and her books at www.cindywoodsmall.com. She is also active on [Facebook \(@authorcindywoodsmall\)](#).