

An Interview with Marlo Schalesky, author of *Veil of Fire*

1. *How did you start writing? What was your first piece of writing like?*

When I was thirteen years old, I wrote a poem on the bus on the way to school. It was about an old tree, forlorn and desolate, standing alone in a field. I read that poem at every recess, tweaked it, polished it, and for the first time felt the thrill of how the written word can convey profound beauty. That day, I fell in love with writing.

Shortly after that, I told my mother (with all the angst of a newly turned teenager), “I will just *die* if I don’t write!” So naturally when I grew up I decided to get my degree in chemistry! And, oddly enough, I didn’t die. I enjoyed chemistry. But always that desire to write was with me in the back of my mind, saying “Someday, someday.”

Someday finally came. I started writing articles for various magazines and submitting proposals for book projects. I thought it would be easy to get my first book published, but it took years of writing and honing my craft. And more than that it took giving up my dream entirely. I had to come to a place where I didn’t have to write to be content. I had to let go of that strong desire and embrace God’s will for me, whether that included writing or not. Only then, only when my dream had given way to God’s plan, was I offered my first contract. Only when writing became worship could I do it the way God wanted it to be done. And I’ve been writing books ever since.

2. *Why do you write fiction?*

I love a powerfully told story. I love characters that present reality and truth through their lives and struggles. I love to see through other people’s eyes, to feel what they feel, to experience life in a new and different way—I think we all do. That’s why movies and television shows are so popular. Fiction is great entertainment.

But fiction is more than that. It has the power to change lives. By living vicariously through the characters, by encountering the true God even in a made-up plot, I am touched, challenged, changed. I see God in new ways. My vision is broadened, deepened. And I discover truth with new clarity. Fiction lays bare the imperfections of my soul, stirs my doubts and questions, and drives me into the throne room of God. And that’s why I love writing fiction.

While writing *Veil of Fire* in particular, I came to understand more fully that God's love can't be measured by my successes and failures. I've also learned that God is writing my life's story. And since the best stories have conflict, irony, and plenty of action, I shouldn't be surprised when my life takes an unexpected turn and my faith is challenged once again.

And so I hope that you too will be changed and challenged through the power of story. I hope you will be encouraged to persevere through difficulties, to press closer to God, to not settle for the easy answers but wrestle with the tough questions of life and faith, to dig deeper with God.

3. Why do people remember a story more easily than a sermon?

Because God Himself is primarily a storyteller. All history is the story he is telling—the story of his love, his care, his purpose for us. And our lives are stories, too, the stories he entwines with all the others to show us the depths of his love. We learn, we operate, we live in the realm of the story of our own lives and history. Story is the way we were created to learn and change. And so, in the stories we tell there is a power to reveal truth in ways that slip past our defenses to impact our souls. A story moves truth from an abstract concept to a concrete example. It makes truth real. It has the power to change us, especially in those areas in which we are most resistant to change.

4. What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

When we were children, we believed in miracles. The impossible was only a prayer away. Fairy tales were real, and dreams were free. Where did we lose the ability to trust? When did we stop daring to believe? What happened to us?

Life happened. Failure, discouragement, pain, loss. Somewhere, somehow, life burns us all. And we realize that this life we live is not the one we once dreamed. The realities of life scar us. Doubts rise. Fear whispers that hope is gone. And what was once a simple faith can fail in the face of that fear.

In the midst of life's disillusionment, choices appear. Do we retreat? Hide our hurts far from probing eyes? Do we embrace bitterness and cynicism? Do we use deceit to try to obtain our goals? Do we give up, give in, forget that we ever dared to dream?

Or is it possible to reach the high places of faith in the low valleys of life's reality? Can we still live a life of bold faith, of fierce hope, when fairy tales don't come true? How do we live this life that God has given us when it's not the life we dreamed?

These are the questions I wanted to explore in *Veil of Fire*. These are the questions that underlie each character's journey in the aftermath of the great fire of 1894. So, for those burned by life, for those who carry scars that cannot be seen, for those who have retreated for fear of more pain, this story is for you, this journey from the hidden places of pain to a new hope in the unhidden truth of Christ's love.

5. *Which character in the book is most like you?*

None of them, and all of them. I base no character on myself, but they all reflect a little of me—my questions, my struggles, the issues that have shaped and molded me. In *Veil of Fire*, this is particularly true for the hermit in the hills. Just as the hermit questions God's love, believes "I am Esau, unchosen, unloved," so I too have struggled with those same feelings, doubts, and questions. I have cried out to God, "Why don't you love me?" For the hermit, it was a question born out of fire, abuse, and disfigurement. For me, it was a question that came out of failure, infertility, and miscarriage. So, in many ways, the hermit's questions are my own, the answers mine, the external scars reflections of my internal ones, and in turn, I think, symbols of the scars of us all.

6. *What actor would you picture playing (your main character) in a movie?*

I suppose I would choose Jodie Foster to play the hermit in the hills because she is able to convey deep emotion without appearing overwrought. As for Josef, of course I would choose Russell Crowe because I love his ability to communicate a character's inner life without needing many words. He would be able to portray Josef's depth as well as his reticence.

7. *Which writers have influenced you most?*

Some of my favorites are C.S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien (I was a "Lord of the Rings" fan even before it became popular!), Francine Rivers, Cindy Martinusen, LaVyrle Spencer, and Philip Yancey. They've all influenced my writing, Lewis and Tolkien through their poetry of words; Rivers, Martinusen, and Spencer through their ability to bring characters to life and tell a great, moving story; and Yancey through his ability to wrestle with the difficult questions of faith and life.

But for this book, the greatest influence has probably been my love for the mood and mystery of *The Phantom of the Opera*. I've tried to capture a little of that mystery in my hidden hermit.

8. *Describe your writing process.*

For me, writing is primarily an act of worship. Even though it's fraught with disappointments, discouragement, and the temptation to just throw in the towel and take life easy for a change, I write because God has woven his stories into the fabric of who I am. This is the work He has given me to do, and he's crafted me in a special way to do it. So, my writing is an act of faithfulness to God, of sitting down with my computer regularly and seeking to follow God's lead, seeking to find the words, the story, the vision that he has for me on that day.

That makes my writing very much an adventure of discovery of the tale God wants to tell and also of the gems of truth and beauty that he has hidden within the journey between "chapter one" and "the end."

And on that journey, the characters of my books will typically take the plot in directions I never expected. This happened with *Veil of Fire*. When I started the story, I thought the hermit was one person and by the end, it turned out the hermit was someone else entirely. As I wrote, I had to unravel the mystery of who really was the hermit in the hills. It turned out to be a fun and intriguing process for me, and I hope for the reader as well.

9. *Can you share a particularly memorable encounter with a reader?*

Perhaps my favorite encounter came via email. A woman wrote to me who had grown up in a Christian home. Over the years, she had drifted away from her faith and come to think of Jesus as "old news," stuff that she'd heard a hundred times before. But someone had given her one of my books. And after reading it, she found herself considering Jesus in a new way. He was no longer "old news" but "good news." For her, a story of God's grace in Jesus reminded her of the faith that was missing in her life and encouraged her to start getting back in touch with what she had left behind.

10. *What is one fact about yourself that readers might find most surprising?*

In the middle of writing *Veil of Fire*, I gave birth to twin girls (and still managed to write!). Now, after eleven years of infertility, we have four beautiful daughters who keep their mommy very busy and who like to push buttons on my laptop while I'm trying desperately to meet deadlines.