

About Tori Whitaker



Tori Whitaker grew up in the Midwest. She now resides outside of Atlanta, Georgia, where she and her husband of more than forty years live near their two sons. Tori belongs to the Historical Novel Society, and her feature article, “Multi-Period Novels: The Keys to Weaving Together Two Stories from Different Time Periods,” appeared in the *Historical Novels Review*. Tori graduated from Indiana University and is chief marketing officer for a national law firm. She is also an alum of the Yale Writers’ Workshop. *Millicent Glenn’s Last Wish* is her first novel.

You can connect with her at www.ToriWhitaker.com; on Instagram at [tori.whitaker.37](https://www.instagram.com/tori.whitaker.37); on Facebook at Tori Whitaker, Author; and Twitter @ToriLWhitaker.

In Conversation with the Author

How did you get the idea for writing this book?

I was four or five years old when I overheard some distant cousins talking at a family reunion held in a park. I was headed to a large stone drinking fountain a bit away from the shelter house, when an older boy described to others what had happened to a relative many years before. Only once again in my life did I hear mention of the woman’s tragedy—but some months before she died, I had occasion to speak to her about it briefly and to express my sympathy. Years after she passed, I asked three people close to her if she’d ever discussed it with them. Each said they’d had but one conversation about the loss in all their years together, and each shared what they knew . . . a single detail, each one’s different from the other’s. These snippets of a family’s memories and the unfairness of all that happened troubled me for many years. In time, I felt compelled to bring a story to the page: to have fiction relate how a tragedy can occur in seemingly the safest of places, within the most trusted of hands, and especially when there is a large difference of power between two people. What happened in that maternity ward is reflective of our culture in a specific era in time. But could it happen again? As a woman—and as a mother—I am still haunted by what happened to her.

Are any characters based on real people?

No, but Millie is a fictional composite character, combining features of several people I’ve known. She has German ancestry, like my paternal grandfather, and she grew up poor in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati, like my paternal grandmother. She has a head for numbers, like my grandmother had, too. Millie does exercises into her twilight years, the way my mother-in-law and my maternal grandma did. I recall that grandma lying on the floor at age 88 and showing me how she did daily stretches. That grandma also inspired Millie’s red lipstick and the knotty pine cabinets in the kitchen. As for Millie’s traits of punctuality and protectiveness, I’m sure there are strains of myself and my own mother.

Your family moved away from Cincinnati when you were 10 years old. What inspired you to set your novel there?

One of my writing instructors, author Joshilyn Jackson, once said that she never wrote about the South until she moved away from it for a time. She said writing is more meaningful if you have “a visceral connection to the place.” That’s partly why I set my novel in Cincinnati. Indeed, I loved how little memories floated up as I wrote—my dad taking us to do the whispering fountains at Union Terminal, my grandfather driving us past the house near the river where he’d lived during the Flood of ’37, his showing me the view out over the city from high in Eden Park, my grandmother taking me to eat ice cream at Graeter’s. Those are just a few memories that wiggled their ways into my story details.

Did any information surprise you during your research?

Although my paternal side came to this country from Germany in the mid-1800s, I was somehow unaware of the extent of anti-German hysteria that occurred in Cincinnati surrounding the World Wars. I also didn't realize that C-sections have become—in some experts' opinions—an epidemic in this country today. And, of course, I was disheartened at stories I read of women's mistreatment in maternity wards during the first half of the last century.

As a writer, are you a *plotter* or *pantser*? Did you always know how this book would end?

I'm a planner by nature, so I'm definitely a plotter. I do a lot of historical research and pull together backstories of the main characters and a rough outline of the plot. Then I start to write. But what happens during the drafting phase can lead me down detours, as the characters take on lives of their own and as more inspiration strikes. Once I go through round after round of revisions—often with input from a few beta readers—anything can happen. That said, about half way through the first draft of this novel, I skipped to the end and wrote the Epilogue with my vision for it fully formed, right down to the last sentence.



Are there unique challenges when weaving two storylines within one novel?

Most authors I know who craft dual time period novels agree: it makes us pull out our hair. For example, it gets tricky when I change something in one plot or chronology, because that can mean major restructuring in the other storyline to get chapters to line up and flow. One good thing about Millie's story is that she's the main character in both narratives. I believe it's all the harder to write a past-and-present novel when it has two completely different protagonists whom an author wants readers to embrace.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

Understand that many writers don't sell their first books. (Many people don't keep the first job they get forever either.) As one instructor said, "You have to write a novel to learn how to write a novel." Besides all the writers' conferences and reading a lot of fiction, sit in the chair and write. Be disciplined. Write about what you're obsessed with. Join a critique group to get and share feedback with others who are going through this same crazy, creative passion. That's a step I wish I'd done much sooner in my journey.

Enhance Your Book Group Experience

- Bring photos to share of a grandparent at various ages
- Serve refreshments in Tupperware or Fiestaware dishes
- Have 1940s–50s music playing softly while you gather
- Bring props (such as vintage magazines, a WWII ration book, or a small antique or piece of jewelry from the period)
- Invite the author to participate in your book group's meeting

Optional Questions for Live Chats Only with Book Groups

(via phone, FaceTime, or in person)

- The story and characters are fictional, but exactly what parts about the doctor's actions are drawn from true events?
- Which character was hardest to write?
- What scene in the book is the author's personal favorite?
- During revisions, did the author make any major changes to the plot or key chapters? (Hint: yes!)

Vintage Recipes for Your Next Book Club Night

Housewives in the 1950s often spent a lot of time cooking for their families and entertaining. The author provides a few recipes that her character Millie would likely have prepared. Consider serving one or more dishes for your book club.



When the novel opens and Jane arrives unexpectedly, Millie happens to have her daughter's favorite brownies baked and cooling in the kitchen. Millie might've used the following recipe that day, as well as when Jane was a child.

BROWNIES

Preparation: Have shortening at room temperature. Assemble all ingredients and utensils needed. Sift flour once before measuring. Chop nut meats. Grease an 8 inch x 8 inch square baking pan. Preheat oven to baking temperature.

Sift together into large bowl of Mixmaster:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sifted flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt
- 1 cup sugar

Add:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup shortening (soft)
- 2 eggs, unbeaten
- 1 tsp vanilla

Beat on No. 4 speed for 1 minute, scraping bowl while beating. Stop mixer. Scrape beaters.

Add:

- 4 tablespoons cocoa
- 2 cups chopped nuts

Beat $\frac{1}{2}$ minute longer. Pour into greased pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 30-35 minutes. Cut while still warm. Serves 9.

Source: Recipe Booklet from a Sunbeam Electric Mixmaster (ca. 1952)

Cheez Whiz processed cheese sauce was first advertised in 1952. Millie later saw it served at a Tupperware party. The product is still around!

EASY CHEEZ WHIZ APPETIZER

Advertisements suggest that homemakers spread the creamy yellow-orange colored cheese on crackers, topped them with sliced black olives or pieces of red pimento, and served them on a tray. Try a small spoonful of chilled Cheez Whiz on Ritz Crackers (which came to market in 1934) or Triscuits (which began being produced some 30 years earlier).

Millie planned to wow her husband Dennis with a dinner meant to convince of him something important she wanted (a persuasion technique suggested by her best friend, Pauline). Millie cooked his favorite Swiss Steak with mashed potatoes and served an impressive Baked Alaska for dessert. But things with Dennis didn't turn out as she'd hoped. I remember both of my own grandmothers, as well as my mother, making Swiss Steak, though, and I loved it!

SWISS STEAK

Buy a 2 ½-3-pound piece from the round of beef, about 1-1 ½ inch thick. Mix 1 ½ tablespoons dry mustard, 1 ½ teaspoons salt and ¼ teaspoon pepper with ¾ cup flour. Pound the seasoned flour into the beef with a meat pounder or the edge of a saucer. Don't spare the rod and spoil the beef. Work as much flour in as you can. And with patience and elbow grease, you'll get most of it in. It takes both. Melt 3 tablespoons shortening in a skillet or Dutch oven. Brown the meat well on all sides in the hot shortening. Sprinkle 1 ½ cups sliced onions and 2 carrots, diced, over the beef. Add 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce and 2 tablespoons brown sugar to 3 cups canned tomatoes and pour over the meat. Cover and bake for 1 ½ - 1 ¾ hours in a moderately slow oven, 325 degrees. When the beef is tender, lift it on a hot platter and garnish with sautéed mushroom caps, if you wish a dressier dish. Skim the fat from the sauce, if need be, and thicken it to a smooth consistency. Serve the sauce on the meat and you have Swiss Steak.

Source: *Ladies' Home Journal Magazine*, October 1951



What '50s retro menu would be complete without a gelatin mold?

MARSHMALLOW PINEAPPLE-LIME MOLD

Dissolve 1 package lime gelatin dessert in 1 cup hot water. Drain the juice from 1 cup canned crushed pineapple and add water to make 1 cup of liquid. Add this liquid and 1 tablespoon lemon juice to the gelatin mixture. Chill until almost firm. Fold in the crushed pineapple and 2 cups of Kraft Miniature Marshmallows. Pour into a 1-quart mold. Chill until firm. Unmold onto a serving plate covered with lettuce. Serve with Kraft Mayonnaise or Miracle Whip Salad Dressing.

Source: *McCall's Magazine*, January 1957

Below is an authentic Baked Alaska recipe from the period, but in lieu of the sponge cake, today's cooks could easily bake and cool an 8-inch single layer yellow cake using a mix, top with desired amount of strawberry ice cream, and lather on meringue and brown it in the hot oven.

BAKED ALASKA

Bake half recipe *Egg Yolk Sponge Cake* in 10" spring form pan, which makes a cake with high sides and a cavity in the top. Shortly before serving, make the following.

Special Meringue:

Beat 6 large egg whites with ½ tsp. cream of tartar until stiff. Beat in gradually 1 cup sugar. Continue beating hard until meringue is stiff and glossy.

Place cooled Sponge Cake on several thicknesses of wrapping paper on a wet board. Pile 2 qts. ice cream (preferably pink) into hollow in cake. Completely cover ice cream (and sides of cake) with a thick coating of the meringue. Place in very hot oven (500 F) for 3 to 5 min. (just until meringue is delicately browned). Slip the dessert from board onto serving platter. Serve at once.

Amount: 12 to 16 servings.

Source: *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book*, 1950

My maternal grandmother cooked a different version of the following recipe for me when I was home from the hospital with my first newborn son. I recall her using Campbell's Cream of Chicken Soup, thinly sliced onions, and button mushrooms. In my novel, Millie tries to decide what celebratory menu she's going to make to announce her first pregnancy to Dennis. She considered Chicken Fricassee but decided on an elaborate picnic in Eden Park instead. Too bad Millie's sister-in-law Abbie had other ideas.

CHICKEN FRICASSEE

Get as large a fowl as possible and have it cut into pieces for serving. Cover with 7 cups boiling water, add 1 tablespoon salt and cook until tender. If you use a pressure cooker, give it 20 minutes at 15 pounds. If you use a stewing kettle, bring to a boil, lower heat, cover and cook gently until tender, about 1 ½ hours. Let chicken stand in broth overnight in a cold place—either the refrigerator or out of doors. The fat will congeal on the top. Remove it, but don't throw it away, because it's excellent for frying. Potato pancakes fried in chicken fat are really something. Take out the pieces of chicken, scrape off the jellied broth which will cling to them, and arrange them in a shallow casserole.

To make the sauce for the chicken, melt 3 tablespoons butter or margarine and 1 tablespoon chicken fat, stir in 4 tablespoons flour and cook 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Add 1 cup chicken broth and 1 cup top milk and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture has boiled briskly for 1 minute. Add salt if needed, and ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper. A few pinches of saffron will give the sauce a lovely yellow color as well as a delicate flavor all its own. If used, the saffron should be added to the flour and fat with the liquids. Spoon the sauce over the pieces of chicken in the casserole. About half an hour before serving time, put casserole in a moderate—350 degrees—oven. Before serving garnish with parsley and paprika. Serve with hot cooked noodles.

Source: *Ladies' Home Journal Magazine*, October 1951

In the novel, Kelsey and Millie make Monkey Bread to greet Jane with when she returns from the doctor. My mother-in-law made Monkey Bread in a Bundt pan when my boys were young, and they loved it. While some recipes include nuts and raisins, hers never did.

CINNAMON MONKEY BREAD

- 4 tubes (7-1/2 ounces each) refrigerated buttermilk biscuits
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- ½ cup butter, melted
- ½ cup packed brown sugar

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cut each biscuit into 4 pieces; shape into balls. In a small bowl, combine sugar and cinnamon. Roll each ball in cinnamon sugar. Arrange evenly in a generously greased 9- or 10-in. fluted tube pan. Sprinkle with remaining cinnamon sugar.

Combine butter and brown sugar; pour over the top. Place tube pan on baking sheet; bake until dough is golden brown and cooked through, 35-45 minutes. Cool for 5 minutes before inverting bread onto a serving platter.

Source: www.TasteofHome.com

*Readers may recall that Millie serves gimlets one night to her guests but declines to drink one herself. David A. Embury in his *The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks* (1948) variously refers to gimlets and gin sours—cocktails with gin, lime juice, and dry sugar or syrup. Below is a modern recipe that's true to the spirit of an old classic.*

GIMLET

- 2 oz. gin
- ¾ oz. lime juice
- ¾ oz. simple syrup

Add all ingredients to a cocktail shaker. Add ice and shake until chilled. Strain into a chilled coupe or cocktail glass or over ice into a rocks glass, if you prefer. Garnish with a lime wheel.

Source: *The Essential Cocktail Book: A Complete Guild to Modern Drinks with 150 Recipes*, Edited by Megan Krigbaum, 2017



Popular Music in Millie's Day

Billboard magazine's top popular songs of 1946—the year Millie and Dennis launched their homebuilding business.

POSITION	SONG	ARTIST
1	"Prisoner of Love"	Perry Como
2	"To Each His Own"	Eddy Howard
3	"The Gypsy"	Ink Spots
4	"Five Minutes More"	Frank Sinatra
5	"Rumors Are Flying"	Frankie Carle
6	"Oh! What It Seemed to Be"	Frankie Carle
7	"Personality"	Johnny Mercer and The Pied Pipers
8	"South America, Take It Away"	Bing Crosby and The Andrews Sisters
9	"The Gypsy"	Dinah Shore
10	"Oh! What It Seemed to Be"	Frank Sinatra
11	"Surrender"	Perry Como
12	"Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief"	Betty Hutton
13	"Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!"	Vaughn Monroe
14	"To Each His Own"	Freddy Martin
15	"Ole Buttermilk Sky"	Kay Kyser
16	"To Each His Own"	Ink Spots
17	"Symphony"	Freddy Martin
18	"The Old Lamp-Lighter"	Sammy Kaye
19	"I Can't Begin to Tell You"	Bing Crosby and Carmen Cavallaro
19	"I'm a Big Girl Now"	Sammy Kaye
20	"Symphony"	Bing Crosby

Source: Wikipedia

Billboard Top 20 singles of 1953, the year Millie attends the Tupperware party and begins to have a renewed vision for what she might accomplish even after her tragedy.

POSITION	SONG	ARTIST
1	"The Song from Moulin Rouge"	Percy Faith
2	"Vaya con Dios"	Les Paul & Mary Ford
3	"(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?"	Patti Page
4	"I'm Walking Behind You"	Eddie Fisher
5	"You, You, You"	Ames Brothers
6	"Till I Waltz Again with You".....	Teresa Brewer
7	"April in Portugal"	Les Baxter
8	"No Other Love"	Perry Como
9	"Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes"	Perry Como
10	"I Believe"	Frankie Laine
11	"Oh"	Pee Wee Hunt
12	"Ebb Tide"	Frank Chacksfield
13	"Pretend"	Nat King Cole
14	"Ruby".....	Richard Hayman
15	"St. George and the Dragonet"	Stan Freberg
16	"P.S. I Love You".....	The Hilltoppers
17	"Tell Me You're Mine"	The Gaylords
18	"Eh, Cumpari!"	Julius La Rosa
19	"Rags to Riches"	Tony Bennett
20	"Anna".....	Silvana Manga

Source: Wikipedia

Discussion Questions –

Spoiler Alert: Do Not Read if You Haven't Read the Novel

1. Millie is ninety years old when the book opens, and readers soon learn that she carries a long-held secret. Do you believe that most people who've lived that long have a buried secret or regret? Has anyone in your family (or other families you know of) harbored secrets that eventually came out?
2. Which character did you relate to the most?
3. In what ways was Millie's life shaped by her mother? By her mother-in-law, Mother Glenn?
4. How do you assess America in the 1950s—that slice of time between the victory of WWII in the 1940s and the era of protest and the civil rights movement of the 1960s? Was the baby boom era generally a time of happy, carefree days? How has your opinion of the era been reinforced or changed after reading this novel?
5. Millie believed that her own pride led to her family's tragedy. Do you agree? At one point Kelsey says, "Grandma, did you ever think that maybe pride had gotten in Papaw's way first?" Discuss the nature of pride in this story, including Millie's and Dennis's—and that of Millie's mother. Are other characters prideful?
6. Millie never knew her father. Kelsey never knew her own father either. Discuss the extent to which Jane, who had a close relationship with her father (Dennis), really knew him. How well can any child truly know a parent?
7. Opa taught Millie that sometimes good people make mistakes, and sometimes bad people get something right. In your opinion, is Dennis a "good guy"? Did your views of Dennis change over the course of the novel? Why or why not? What about Abbie? Is she a good person?
8. How are maternity wards of today similar to or different from maternity wards of the 1950s? How has the treatment of expectant mothers changed, if at all? Are doctors still seen as gods?
9. Were you aware that one in three women who give birth in US hospitals have cesarean sections? What factors contribute to this trend? How do you feel about it?
10. Which do you believe Millie longed for more: to be a wife and mother and raise a large family? Or to make a professional contribution to business and earn her own money? Do you consider Millie a feminist?
11. Describe the role of friendship in Millie's circle. Did her lifelong friendship with Pauline resonate with you? Was Abbie Glenn ever Millie's friend? Was Nurse Breck?
12. What were Millie's motivations for keeping the truth from Jane for so long? How might their mother-daughter relationship have been different had Millie been open about Kathleen early on?
13. How do you feel about the book's ending? Did Millie's story resolve in a way that you expected or hoped? What will Millie's family look like five years from now?
14. Discuss the grandparent relationships in this novel: that of Opa and Millie, and of Millie and Kelsey. Share a special memory of one of your own grandparents. Do you have a photograph of when this grandparent was young?