

Today, Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views is talking with acclaimed author Ann H. Gabhart about her memoir *"Angels at the Crossroads: Jerry Shepherd's Story of Redemption and Love."*

Ann has been writing since she was ten and has published over fifteen novels for adults and children. Ann was born and raised on a farm in Central Kentucky and still lives just a mile from her childhood home. Her first inspirational novel, "The Scent of Lilacs," was one of Booklist's ten best inspirational novels for 2006. "Angels at the Crossroads" is Ann's first nonfiction book and won third place in the Reader Views Annual Literary Awards 2006 in the Memoir category.

Juanita: Ann, welcome to Reader Views, and congratulations. We are excited to have the opportunity to talk with you about *Angels at the Crossroads*. How does it feel to win your award?

Ann: Thank you, Juanita. It's great to have *Angels at the Crossroads* picked as one of the top books in the Reader Views Annual Literary Awards. As a writer, I appreciate the pat on the back.

Juanita: Would you tell readers what your book is about?

Ann: *Angels at the Crossroads* is the inspirational true story of a friend of mine, Jerry Shepherd. When Jerry was a young man, he got involved in alcohol and drugs and ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time and a man died. At nineteen Jerry began serving a life sentence for murder in a maximum-security prison in Georgia. *Angels at the Crossroads* tells how the Lord kept placing good Christian people – earth angels – in Jerry's path to help him start making right choices in spite of the many curves life kept throwing at him.

Juanita: How did you meet Jerry Shepherd?

Ann: Jerry is a talented tenor singer for the Patriot Quartet, a Southern Gospel group. My husband, Darrell Gabhart, sings bass for the quartet. A quartet becomes a unique little family as the singers and their families travel around to concerts. My husband and Jerry have been singing together for over six years, so we all know each other very well.

Juanita: What inspired you to write his story?

Ann: I've been writing for a long time. Warner Books published my first two novels, historical romances, in 1978 and 1980, and after that I had twelve young adult novels published by various companies. But I went through a dry spell before I published *The Scent of Lilacs*. About the same time I placed that book with Revell, the Patriot Quartet bought an old transit bus, tore out the seats and made it into a traveling bus. Once the big old bus enters the picture, a quartet gets even closer as a family. As the group travels here and there on the bus, we have a lot of time for storytelling.

On a trip to Florida, Jerry shared some more stories about his past, and I kept thinking wow, this would make a great book. And that was while I still only knew bits and pieces of his story. The more he told me about his life, the more I wanted to write it down.

I think the fact that I was about to publish my first inspirational novel gave me the courage to believe I could do justice to Jerry's story. Then when he gave me the box of letters and newspaper clippings his mother had saved, that was a real bonanza. Reading the letters Jerry wrote home from prison helped me get to know Jerry the way he was when all this was happening. In the book I used excerpts from those letters just as they were written, and Jerry telling about what he was doing and how he was feeling in his own words gives the story an extra punch of reality.

Juanita: Ann, this was your first non-fiction writing project. Did you enjoy the process? How was it different from your typical format?

Ann: I tell people this is not only my first non-fiction writing project, it will no doubt be my *only* non-fiction project. I never planned to write any non-fiction. I like making up my stories, but no one should ever say never. I had a lot of doubts about my ability to write the story since I had never tried anything like this. I did some long interviews with Jerry, his wife, and his father. That information along with all the letters and newspaper articles his mother had saved made the story come alive in my head and I actually wrote it much faster than any of my fiction. I couldn't type fast enough to keep up with the words spilling out of my head. I had the feeling the Lord was helping me write the story.

Juanita: Would you tell us a little about Jerry's background? What did his childhood look like?

Ann: Jerry had a rough childhood. His biological mother was very young when he was born, and obviously not ready to take on the responsibilities of motherhood. His father, a World War II veteran, drove a Greyhound bus and was often away for days at a time. Sometimes his mother left Jerry alone overnight in his crib while she went out. At other times she took him to her sister's house in another state. After his father and mother divorced, Jerry was shuttled back and forth between several caretakers. Then when his father remarried, his stepmother was determined to make Jerry into a perfect child. As with all children, perfection was not possible for Jerry, and he never felt quite good enough. He had feelings of abandonment that he didn't understand. On top of that his parents moved several times while he was growing up and he had to keep changing schools. He often had trouble in school and felt as if his teachers were as impossible to please as his stepmother. He started singing at an early age and this was one of the few constants in his life. He was always sure he could sing even if he couldn't do anything else right.

Juanita: How did Jerry end up in jail? How long did he serve?

Ann: Jerry joined the Army out of high school. This was during the Vietnam War and he thought he would be sent to Vietnam and that would be his way of committing suicide, something he had attempted several times while he was in high school. Instead he was sent to a school in Georgia that he hated and he went AWOL, hitchhiking home to his parents' farm in Kentucky. His parents had no choice but to send him back although they were assured by his superiors that Jerry would receive

help and counseling. That didn't happen and Jerry tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of cold medicine. This landed him in the base hospital.

After he was released from the hospital he didn't go back to his barracks, but instead hid out in the chapel without food for days before he finally walked off base and stole a car. He picked up a hitchhiker who bought them some beer and pills. They ended up sneaking into a motel room to use the bathroom. When Jerry came out of the bathroom, the man who had rented the room began yelling at him. Jerry felt threatened and tried to fight his way out of the room. In a panic state, he kept pounding his fists into the person blocking his escape until he passed out. When he came to, the man was on the floor beside him dead.

He stole the man's credit cards and car and went on the run for a few weeks before he tried to go home again and was caught. He pled guilty in a private trial and was sentenced to life in prison with no chance for parole for seven years. Due to his stepmother's unceasing appeals on his behalf, Jerry's exemplary behavior and personal growth in prison, and to a tragedy in his life, the judge who had sentenced him commuted his sentence and Jerry was released after five years.

Juanita: Significant to Jerry's incredible story is how he turned his life around while still in jail, and undergoing profound personal hardships. How hard was this for Jerry and how did he manage to cope in the depressing setting of prison?

Ann: One thing that helped Jerry was that his father had spent a few years working as a guard at a Kentucky penitentiary and knew about prison life. So when he kept telling Jerry that if he stayed on his best behavior and became a trusty that would help him make it through prison, Jerry believed him and tried to do what he said. Also, as I said before, Jerry was and is a talented singer. Before his trial he was in a county jail in Georgia for several months where the sheriff and deputies treated him well and became fond of him. Whenever he got bored, he'd sing all the songs he knew.

When he was sent to Reidsville Penitentiary, he was determined to get involved in Chapel programs so he'd be able to keep singing and to be a model prisoner so that he could become a trusty as his father and the sheriff had advised. Once at the penitentiary Jerry was put in the safest dormitory and did his best to stay away from trouble. He saw bad things happen, but he somehow escaped the worst of prison life. His parents were unfailingly supportive and he and his mother became closer than they'd ever been.

Jerry took advantage of every organization in the prison system that offered him a chance to learn and grow. Alcoholics Anonymous and a program called Guides to Living that helped inmates prepare for life outside of prison were instrumental in helping Jerry not only understand his problems but to believe he could overcome them. His success in these programs and as choir director in the chapel programs gave him new self-esteem. The prison chaplains and other officials took special interest in his progress and helped steer him away from some of the common pitfalls in prison. Above all else, Jerry feels the Lord kept his hand over him and helped him survive in what he called "the prison jungle."

Juanita: How do "angels" play a part in Jerry's story? Ann, what are your thoughts on angels and the presence of angels in one's life?

Ann: You sometimes hear people saying their guardian angel must have been watching over them when they safely come through a bad experience, and we smile at those signs that read, "Don't drive faster than your guardian angel can fly." It's a great comfort to think of a guardian angel

hovering over you and protecting you from the bad things in life. However, bad things do happen to all of us whether we believe angels are flying with us or not.

I've read stories of people who have seen angels or heavenly beings, but I have not had any experiences like that. Nor, as far as I know, has Jerry. The "angels" in Jerry's story are what I call "earth angels," Christian men and women who allow the Lord to use them to help their fellow man. We can all encounter many of those "angels" on our path through life and we can be that kind of angel to other life travelers. The "earth angels" Jerry encountered reached out and took Jerry's hand when he was in trouble. They lifted Jerry up with their words and actions and helped him straighten out his life.

Juanita: What did Jerry find to be missing in his life that he found while incarcerated?

Ann: Jerry always thought he wasn't good enough as he was growing up. It seems a bit of a contradiction for a person to find self-worth while in prison, but that's what happened to Jerry. He could no longer cover up and try to forget his problems by using drugs and alcohol. He had to face those problems, and the programs he got involved with in prison helped him do that. Then when he re-dedicated himself to the Lord, his whole focus of why he was living changed. He made a decision to serve the Lord whether that was in prison for the rest of his life or wherever the Lord might lead him. That's a promise he made to the Lord that he is still keeping.

Juanita: How has Jerry's life purpose changed from his experience?

Ann: As I said, Jerry made serving the Lord his main purpose. Even before he was released from prison he was going out to churches and schools to give his testimony and try to keep other young people from making the same mistakes he had made. He continued that once he was released from prison by sharing his story wherever he was asked. Everywhere he went he saw decisions made for Christ. He has also served as music and youth minister for several churches.

Jerry allowed himself to be used by the Lord and that's why he wanted his story to be written down. He says it will be worth opening up his life to readers everywhere if one person is changed by what he reads in this book and steps off the roads leading to addiction and perhaps prison and starts walking the roads that lead to the Lord and hope.

Jerry is now singing with the Patriot Quartet, a Southern Gospel group that travels all around the eastern United States and he's still sharing his testimony. He's been happily married to Connie ever since shortly after he was released from prison, and their three children have blessed them with seven beautiful and talented grandchildren who think their "Daddy J" is one special person.

Juanita: Would you elaborate on your theme of "crossroads" and how it applies to the choices we make?

Ann: We all face crossroads in our lives, times when we have to choose our direction. Sometimes we make the wise choice and sometimes we take the wrong roads and end up having to pay for our bad choices. In his life, Jerry has faced many of those kinds of crossroads, times when his life took

a whole new direction because of the decisions he made. As a young person he just ran down whichever road was easiest or looked the most inviting no matter what the consequences, but once he began to rely on the Lord's leadership, Jerry was able to avoid temptation's road and keep his feet on the roads the Lord had intended he walk all along in service to him.

Juanita: What is the underlying message of "*Angels at the Crossroads*"?

Ann: No one is ever beyond forgiveness and the Lord's love. The Lord's love knows no bounds. That's something we have a hard time wrapping our minds around because most of us humans have difficulty forgiving and loving people who have done wrong things to us.

Juanita: Ann, do all of your books have an inspirational message?

Ann: I suppose many books might be considered to have some sort of inspirational message. Love endures. Love conquers all. Growing up is sometimes hard, but at the same time full of joyful delight. Real heroes stay true to their beliefs. You get the idea. But my first published books wouldn't be considered inspirational books in the usual sense. The first two were historical romances, and the ones I published for young adults and middle readers were mostly coming of age stories. *The Scent of Lilacs* was my first book for the inspirational market. I wasn't particularly aiming for that market when I wrote it. I was just trying to write a good story about a young girl and her preacher father set in small town America in the mid-sixties. Once I wrote the story, it found a loving editor at Revell Books, an inspirational publisher. Now that I do have books out there on the inspirational market, I like it and I hope to write many more books with an underlying inspirational message.

Juanita: What did you enjoy most about writing this book?

Ann: I read a quote once – and I can't remember who said it – that most writers enjoy having written and not the actual penning of the words. Another writer said writing was easy. All a writer had to do was sit down in front of his typewriter and stare at the blank page until beads of blood popped out on his forehead. That might be a little over the top for me. I love to write, but at the same time it is sometimes very difficult to get the story out of your head and onto the page.

And Jerry's story has some dark moments. I had to get inside his skin and go down those painful roads with him in order to write the story, so I'm not sure I could say I enjoyed those parts at all. However, it was great to walk out of those dark valleys with Jerry and back into the sunshine of his realization of the Lord's love and rejoice with him in his second chance at life. I also enjoyed getting to know Jerry and his family better. I felt as if I had gained a brother as I wrote his story.

Juanita: Do you have any other projects in the works? How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Ann: *Orchard of Hope*, the sequel to *The Scent of Lilacs*, was published in March of this year, so is out in stores now. That will be followed by *Summer of Joy* to complete the trilogy about Jocie and her family in Hollyhill. I also have a novel about the Shakers in the early 1800's in Kentucky that is

in the process of being readied for the market. It's tentatively titled *The Gift of Knowing*, but I have a feeling that title might change before it hits the bookstores. Right now I am writing about a whole new set of characters in a community called Rosey Corner. The story is set in the mid-thirties with flashbacks to World War I.

To find out more about me, I have a website, www.annhgabhart.com, that I try to keep up to date with what's going on in my writing life. People can contact me by e-mail from there, and it's always great fun to hear from readers and get the readers view.

Juanita: Ann, thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about your compelling book "*Angels at the Crossroads*." Jerry's journey will certainly serve as inspiration to readers, and we encourage everyone to look for this and your other books at local and online bookstores. Before we let you go, do you have any final thoughts?

Ann: I guess now would be a good time for a joke if I was any good at telling jokes. They say it's good to leave 'em laughing, and I've always wanted to write something laugh out loud funny. But, alas, about the best I've ever been able to do is bring a smile. So I'll just say thanks to you, Juanita, for the interview and thanks to all the great readers out there, especially those of you who tell me you couldn't put my book down. Now that's something that really makes a writer smile. So keep reading and enjoy!