



Q & A with Chris Fabry

Author of *Under a Cloudless Sky*

Chris Fabry is an award-winning author and radio personality who hosts the daily program



Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio. He is also heard on *Love Worth Finding*, *Building Relationships with Dr. Gary Chapman*, and other radio programs. A 1982 graduate of the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism at Marshall University and a native of West Virginia, Chris and his wife, Andrea, now live in Arizona and are the parents of nine children.

Chris's novels, which include *Dogwood*, *June Bug*, *Almost Heaven*, and *The Promise of Jesse Woods*, have won three Christy Awards, an ECPA Christian Book Award, and a 2017 Award of Merit from *Christianity Today*. His eightieth published book, *Under a Cloudless Sky*, is a novel set in the coalfields of his home state of West Virginia. His books include movie novelizations, like the recent bestseller *War Room*; nonfiction; and novels for children and young adults. He coauthored the Left Behind: The Kids series with Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, as well as the Red Rock Mysteries and the Wormling series with Jerry B. Jenkins. Visit his website at www.chrisfabry.com.

1. What is your hope for this book?

I'm hoping the story opens conversations between middle-aged children and their aging parents. I have a feeling there are some hidden secrets that need to be unveiled in many families. I also hope it helps people deal with the "dignity" of the elderly. How do you know when to take the keys from your parent is a big question adult children are asking, but the elderly parents are asking a different question. They want to know how to keep their children from taking away their dignity and ability to choose and live their lives fully. I hope this book fosters good conversations.

2. Tell us a little about this title, *Under a Cloudless Sky*.

The title is actually from an old hymn titled "Dwelling in Beulah Land." I set the story on Beulah Mountain, West Virginia, which is a fictional town. The story opens with two of the main characters excited to sing that song in church and the words have rich, spiritual meaning.

3. What themes are explored in this novel?

Elderly parent-child relationships, the power of secrets, trusting the wrong people, what God promises us and doesn't promise us, the power of telling the truth, how the past can affect the present and future, and the power of forgiveness.

4. You have described *Under a Cloudless Sky* as a "Gone Grandma" story (as opposed to *Gone Girl*). Without giving too much away, can you tell us a little about this unofficial subtitle? Is this book a bit of a mystery/suspense novel?



Ruby is the main character and at a pivotal point in the story her daughter comes to Ruby's house and discovers she has disappeared. There are several possibilities as to where Ruby might be—all of them pretty dire. The reader has to figure out the clues and follow them along the trail. These breadcrumbs lead to a truth that Ruby's daughter would never have guessed about her mother's past. I'm hoping this "Where's Ruby?" motif will pull readers into the story and make them want to find her.

5. **A key scene early in the novel involves two adult children taking the car keys away from their aging mother, insisting that she is no longer able to safely drive herself. Did an experience from your own life inform this scene? How would you advise someone dealing with this sort of situation?**

My own mother was in her late eighties when we had to convince her that her driving skills weren't as good as they needed to be. We could see this. She couldn't. So the trick was getting her to see what we saw and letting this decision come from her. This was a long, drawn-out process where we tried to appeal to reason, fear, and the dire consequences of an accident. We had long conversations with her. I live hundreds of miles away, so my interaction was mainly on the phone while my brother and sister-in-law had to do the day-to-day negotiation. We learned a lot in that process that I hope comes out in the novel—mistakes and victories.

6. **The changing relationship between adult children and aging parents can be difficult to navigate. What practical steps (on either end) can we take to maintain or repair this bond, especially when the balance of power shifts from parent(s) to adult child(ren), as it does for some of the characters in *Under a Cloudless Sky*?**

I like the phrase "live loved." When you know someone loves you and wants the best for you, you can take the harder words or be more open to the truth. Going into the situation with a secure handle on the "love" question—for you and your parent—is important. One of the main lessons we learned was that it is paramount to give the older person the dignity of their choices. For example, my mother still lives in the home my father built in the early 1960s. (He died in 2011.) My siblings and I have had wonderful plans for her life—moving to a quaint apartment or home where she could have more interaction with others and live out her days in an idyllic setting. But she wants to be on the farm. As much as it scares us to have her there, it's the loving thing to honor her choice and help her as much as we can as she navigates life there.

7. **The novel centers on the history of a mining town in West Virginia, a setting that relates to your own family's history. Are there any stories from your family's past that inspired you to write *Under a Cloudless Sky*? What about West Virginia's mining history needs to be told or remembered most today?**

I keep a picture on my desk of my father and his older brother sitting on the steps of the ramshackle company house where they lived in the 1920s. My grandfather came from Germany and was a coal miner and my father had a difficult childhood. My mother's father also worked closely with a coal and gas company in a town called Putney. So I have heard stories from them and from others who worked the mines about how difficult things were in the days when the company owned everything, including the workers. Fast-forward to today and you see the ravages of the land and the people. The unemployment rate has skyrocketed and many young people leave the state because



there simply aren't the opportunities for work that there used to be. Appalachia is in many ways ground zero for the opioid crisis. I've tried to walk the line between bitterness and romanticism about coal and West Virginia. It's a complicated story with complex people. But I think we can learn from the past and help people move forward by telling some of these stories.

- 8. One of the most engaging aspects of the novel is the dual timeline, which has some chapters set in 1933 and some in 2004. Only the protagonist Ruby appears in both time periods. How did you go about writing the same character at two vastly different points in her life?**

I love that we can see Ruby living in a time when there was very little technology around her and lots of squalor. Then, as we fast-forward, you can see all the changes in society and the culture and how she's pretty much remained the same person. You're also able to see the importance of faith in the 1930s and how it has changed and morphed through the decades. The Ruby who sang about Beulah Land in 1933 is the same Ruby in 2004, but things around her have drastically changed.

- 9. Though *Under a Cloudless Sky* is a work of fiction, it raises questions about the accuracy of accepted history, and whether the history we are taught has been molded to fit particular interests. How does storytelling of all sorts help us obtain a fuller view of the past, whether it be the past of our state or country or the past of our own family?**

We're all products of our stories. Things you believed about family members growing up simply become part of you until you open yourself to the possibility that there's a different interpretation. There are things I believed about my family growing up that I see differently now, more clearly with time. This is something I hope the novel will help achieve—viewing the past through a new lens so we can see the truth instead of what we wanted to see.

- 10. The novel brings to light, both for the characters and the reader, certain appalling abuses that women suffered in mining camps—abuses that some would like to cover up in historical records. What lessons do we need to take from this history? Do any of these apply to current cases of similar abuse?**

Power corrupts. And people who hold power over others have the opportunity to sin greatly. This is what happened in my story and there is anecdotal evidence from oral history that reveals this same type of behavior happened in these camps. Some historians dispute it and say miners would never put up with such abuse of their women. I see their objections, but I tend to believe eyewitness testimony of those who lived through that time. My novel asks the question "What if this happened?" rather than try to prove it actually did.

- 11. Faith plays a vital role in the novel, and we see faith from a variety of angles through the different characters. Some characters have strong faith, others have little or no faith, and some have faith but it's "complicated." Did writing these different characters teach you anything about how we look upon the faith, or seeming lack of faith, of others?**



What I try to mine in all my stories is the difference between the head and heart of belief. It's one thing to sign on to a doctrinal position or a belief about God, Jesus, and the Bible. It's another to struggle to live out what you say you believe. In this story, you see people on a wide spectrum of belief and disbelief and searching, but what I love is that many of them who are in one spot at the beginning of the story will move closer to true belief by the end, and by that I mean a real relationship with God rather than a set of ideas they adhere to. I'm not a big advocate of trying to get people to be more "religious." What I want to show them is the effects of a real relationship with God.

12. Many of us think that faith follows a certain script or set sequence of events in someone's life. What is the danger of this assumption and how can we push back against it? Did any of your characters' faith journeys surprise you as you wrote this novel?

In the 1933 sections of the book, faith is much simpler, more childlike. The world is black-and-white. A character is good or bad, or so it seems. In the 2004 section, things are more complex because of the age progression and the complications of different relationships. But throughout there is a set of presuppositions about who God is and what he does in our lives. Some characters live in a quid pro quo relationship with God—that is, if they do X, God will do Y. So in a sense, we control him. I control God's actions by my obedience or disobedience. But there are breakthroughs where a character realizes that everything bad that's happened might not necessarily have happened because they did something wrong. Sometimes God allows us to go through things we don't like for our own good. His goal for his children is to conform us into the image of his Son; it's not to necessarily make us comfortable. And there's a whole lot of discomfort in this novel.

13. Family is very central to the plot of *Under a Cloudless Sky*, and many will probably recognize some aspect of their own family life in the characters. What do you hope readers will take away from being immersed in the drama and imperfections of the novel's families?

I really want readers to be able to look at family members and have hope. Most of the time we put those we love in a box or slap a label on them and believe they're set, they'll never change. Part of that is because we don't fully know their story. And if we were to climb into their skin for a while and see the world as they see it, we might understand them a little better and have more hope for them in the long run. This happens especially with children. Sometimes parents can be oblivious to the small, incremental changes in children and not see movement in their lives. I also think family members can evoke changes in us that we don't expect. In other words, God has placed us in a family to help us move forward in life and have some of the rough edges knocked off of us—if we're willing to do the hard work of "living" that family calls us to.

14. Ruby, the main character in the novel, has a secret she has kept most of her life, and this secret drives much of the narrative, especially the drama within her family. How can keeping secrets be detrimental to family relationships? What steps can we take toward building trust and honesty, especially if we have kept a secret for a long time?



This is one of the things I've noticed in doing a radio program for the past few years that's somewhat confessional. People will call the show and reveal some deep things about their past. I'll ask who they've shared this particular story with, and almost to a person they'll respond, "This is the first time I've told anyone." I'm grateful for the breakthrough, but also heartbroken that they haven't been able to share this with someone who loves them—and some of these callers are women in their sixties and seventies. I can hear the relief in their voices after they reveal whatever hard thing they tell. I believe the enemy wants to keep things bottled up inside. If he can't move us away from God, he'll tempt us with holding things inside and covering them. That's why it's so reparative to confess our sins to one another. Something spiritual happens when I trust another person with that thing that has been hidden for a lifetime. And when Ruby's secret is revealed, there are ramifications she couldn't have dreamed she would experience.

15. The title of the novel is taken from a hymn called "Dwelling in Beulah Land." What about this hymn led you to make it central to your story?

I remember singing it as a child in a little church in West Virginia. There's something about the tune that hearkens to a different time and echoes in the soul. The hymn talks about the noise of strife, the sins of earth, the doubt and fear that encompass all of us. But in the middle of the muck and mire, we are able to rise above, to "dwell" in a safe place that God has prepared. No matter what happens, I can be content and the storms of life won't shake me because I'm held by his power, his Spirit. That's an idea we desperately need today.

16. Many churches are moving away from traditional hymns as their method of musical worship. What do you think the church loses when the hymnbooks go into storage in favor of more contemporary music?

Let's be fair—at some point the hymns in the hymnal were new. So it's not about whether we sing new songs or not, it's whether or not we're tethered to the truths that have been tested and tried by the generations that have gone before us. One of the things I considered as I wrote the 1933 sections was how many of the hymns the people on Beulah Mountain would sing that we don't consider any longer. When I sing a hymn that has been sung for hundreds of years, I'm singing truth to my own soul as well as joining others in that same truth. When I sing "Dwelling in Beulah Land," I'm singing something my mother and father sang as they sat by me in the pew. There is much more to share about this, but being connected with those believers who have gone before us is a wonderful reason to sing hymns. And there is so much theology in the songs we sing, good and bad. Just because it's in the hymnal doesn't mean it's true, of course, so we have to analyze what we're singing, and think carefully about style and repetition and if we're actually singing solid, biblical truth. I'm not tossing aside worship songs of today; I've been encouraged by them as well. I just don't want to lose the legacy of great hymns.

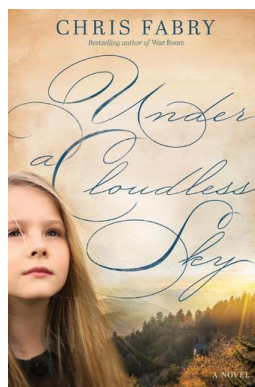
17. Forgiveness can be a difficult topic, and you include it as a core theme of the novel. Sometimes it is not enough to hear we are forgiven; we have to come to accept it in our hearts. What are some ways that people and the church miss the mark when it comes to forgiveness?



I believe one of the main reasons we see so much division in the church and in society in general is this topic of forgiveness. We have a fuzzy idea about what it really is and we're unable to extend it. That's because we don't understand what God has done for us in Christ. And our problem is that we are trying to give something we haven't fully received. In other words, it's hard to give grace to someone if you've never received it yourself. This is part of the struggle of the religious leaders of Jesus' day—they had a righteousness based on their own ability. They felt justified in their attitude toward sinners, not realizing how sinful their own hearts were. So they pushed back against the kindness and forgiveness Jesus offered. I wonder how much like them I am.

18. Can fiction really change hearts? And is that your goal with your stories?

I suppose what I try to do with each story I write is to faithfully paint portraits with words so that we see ourselves in a different way. I could write a nonfiction book about how to treat an elderly parent, how to draw someone out about a secret in the past, how to extend forgiveness, how to treat scoundrels—and any other number of themes in the book. However, I've been moved by fiction in the past and I want to replicate that in others' lives. So really, what I see myself doing, is the same thing the prophet Nathan did when he approached King David. David had sinned greatly—but the prophet told him a story that made him angry and want to judge the unkind protagonist. The story slipped around the back door of his heart and when he let it in, it convicted him because it showed him truth in a different way than simply didactic teaching. I'm aware that no two people reading the same book will come away with the exact same feeling or application to their lives. That's the power of a story—if it's well-told. And I also believe a good story, to really change people on the heart level, has to have spiritual truth as its underpinning in order to achieve the desired goal. As a writer, you don't want to force that or impose your will on someone else, just tell the story truthfully. The reader, for the most part, will participate with you in the telling and find those truth nuggets for their own hearts.



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