

INTERVIEW WITH METTE IVIE HARRISON

Tell us about the inspiration behind your new novel, *The Bishop's Wife*. What was it about the Susan Powell case that made you want to write this novel?

I was really horrified by the unfolding of the events in the Powell case. After the final unbearable ending, I started to ask myself questions about the ways in which Mormonism might or might not have impacted the way the case was handled and/or came about in the first place. Of course, I didn't want to tell the same story, so it's only the beginning that's the same. But interestingly enough, I've talked to some of the news people on the case since *The Bishop's Wife* has come out and there are a number out there who feel very torn about the case and may even believe Susan Powell is alive. Which makes some of the turns I wrote about fictitiously seem rather prescient, even if they weren't at all.

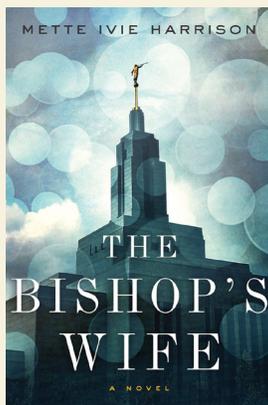
***The Bishop's Wife* takes place in Draper, Utah, and depicts characters and situations that are familiar to most Utahns. Was it difficult to convey the unique culture and religion of the state to readers who may not be familiar with Utah and its history and culture?**

This was a constant back and forth with my editor, who is a curious non-Mormon. My first draft had much less information about Mormonism and an early reader, an atheist friend who lives in Utah, felt like it needed more, even for him—for someone who lives amidst Mormons. So for several drafts, I added explanations and even a couple of scenes that I purposely set during worship services so non-Mormons could see what it was like, to normalize Mormons, really. Then the final edit was with a ruthless copy-editor who cut about 5,000 words of explanations she felt were unnecessary. I've heard from a number of Mormons who think that

there is too much explanation about Mormonism; much fewer non-Mormons say this. And ultimately, though I hope some Mormons like the book, I did write it for a national press and, therefore, for a national, non-Mormon audience.

You've written books that span many different genres including mystery, nonfiction, fantasy and romance. Do you have a favorite genre? Is there anything that these different genres have in common? What attracts to you to these genres?

I read a whole lot of romances as a teenager, somewhere around 10,000. I may have OD'd on them for a long time, but I think it taught me a lot about a strict form and how you can subvert and play with it. I didn't start reading fantasy until my early twenties, when I needed something lighter than the dark German classics I was reading for my PhD. I was so nervous about it that I would hide in the library rather than check books out because I was afraid my professors would somehow find out about my lowbrow reading. And that was naturally the form I started writing in when I got more serious about submission in my 20s.



Mystery has been a later interest. I honestly never thought I could write a mystery because I'm not interested in forensics or weird staged murders like are often on TV. I'm not interested in the death itself at all. I'm interested in the characters and lives that went before. I think in that way I'm more of a traditionalist. Many readers have responded well to this and have said that the plotting is really good in *The Bishop's Wife*, but it's not the kind of thriller/mystery that you often find in the bookstore these days. I happily spends hours perusing the reference shelves of her local library. Sarah has twice served as the Master of Ceremonies for the LDStorymakers Writers Conference and acted as the Writer in Residence at the Northwest Writers Retreat.



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Libraries attract book lovers, so naturally many of our library patrons are writers. What is the most valuable piece of writing advice you've ever received? What do you tell budding writers who look to you for writing advice?

Well . . . Lately, I've been saying a lot of "don't quit your day job." I've been in the business a long time, and I work harder than just about anyone I know. And I still don't make a living at it. So, that can be discouraging.

On the other hand, I think that it's good advice to never stop learning, never stop questioning assumptions, never stop thinking about why people do what they do. Writing *The Bishop's Wife* was a really great tutorial for me in something my agent had been encouraging me to do for a long time: to write the book of my heart. Before that, I wrote books that I loved and that mattered to me, but weren't necessarily books that came out of my own unique experience, that only I could write. I was in a very discouraged place, ready to give up writing, when I decided I'd give it one last try and write something completely for myself. And that's how *The Bishop's Wife* was born. I thought it was a small book that would appeal to a handful of people and have been astonished at the response. But in the end, I think it's because it's so personal, so unique.

Many of us find escape from the daily grind within the covers of our favorite books. If you could spend a month-long vacation in any book, which would you choose? Why?

Well, offhand I'd say *Persuasion* by Jane Austen is probably my favorite. I love all of Austen. But on the other hand, I'm not sure I could stand to live that far back in the past

without the modern conveniences of today. So maybe I should say I would very much like to live in the world of Sara Zarr's characters, which is contemporary, and difficult, but seen so humanely and poetically.

Apart from being a critically-acclaimed author, you're also an accomplished runner. How do you balance your writing with the demands of training for a triathlon? Are there any connections between the two? Things about your running that make you a better writer and vice-versa?

I could go on and on about this. I was a terrible athlete in high school, never taking first place in anything in my life, and when I stood on the podium after my very first triathlon in my 30s, I was blown away. I suddenly saw myself very differently, as capable of anything. I started to learn how to play the piano after that, something else I'd been terrible at as a child. I think I treat my children differently, too. I really focus on encouraging them to work hard, not just pat them on the back for their natural talents. Once, I paid my daughter for getting less than an A for the first time. Parents often pay kids for getting straight As, but for this kid, at this time, it was important she see how proud I was of her for stretching herself and taking chances.

