

Woman of Valor Author Interview

October 4, 2023 | Author Interviews

After a devastating breakup with her college sweetheart John Hogan, budding journalist Sally Sterling dives into her work at *Chicago Magazine* to escape her sorrows. When her editor assigns a series of feature stories on local ethnic communities, starting with the Orthodox Jewish enclave of Skokie, Sally stumbles into a world she never knew she needed. Although her mother is Jewish, Sally was raised in a wealthy Christian suburb of Detroit as the daughter of one of Michigan's prominent senators. Religion was the furthest thing from her mind.

But as the women welcome her into a world that feels more like home than anything she's known, Sally is hooked. A year later, she meets Barry Lieberman on a blind date and falls fast. Over the next eight years, Barry and Sally build a happy life full of passion, partnership, and parenthood. She even reconnects with her Jewish grandparents, who move to Chicago to be closer to her. While so much about her changes, Sally retains her passion for running along the shores of Lake Michigan.

And then, Sally's life takes an unexpected turn. John Hogan finds her online. While Sally's reconnected with friends from her past, this feels like crossing a line. Still, she's curious about why John reached out. At the same time, Sally learns that her eldest son, Donny, has been physically abused at school. While Barry is equally angered, they have different ideas about what to do, putting them at odds for the first time in their marriage.

Lonely in the rift with her husband and exhausted from battling the community grapevine, Sally seeks distraction in John's apologies. When she realizes her mistake, Sally tells John to leave – but he won't. What happens next throws everything into a tailspin.

Will Sally lose the happiness she so carefully constructed? Or could this shakeup be just what she needs to finally define her life for herself?

A warm welcome to Lynne Golodner.

What was the inspiration for your book?

I spent ten years in the Orthodox Jewish community, and when I started writing *WOMAN OF VALOR*, I was three years out from divorcing my first (Orthodox) husband and leaving that community for a less rigid religious observance. I wanted to incorporate some of my experiences into a fictional character. Also, in college, I dated a Catholic guy and religion was always an issue between us, but I loved him and always wondered what happened to him.

Who is your favorite character in your book and why?

In a way, Sally, because she chooses her own identity in a very deliberate and thoughtful way and finds a way to maintain it even when it's challenged. But I also really like Barry because he is so grounded and loving and thinks for himself despite being raised in the religious world. And he's open to change in ways that many Orthodox men might not be.

What were the challenges you experienced while writing your novel?

Well, I wrote the first sixty pages in 2011 and then got stuck in the “saggy middle.” So I abandoned the project for ten years. When I came back to it, I didn’t like Sally at all. She was whiny and hated the life she had chosen in that early draft. So I reimagined what the book, which had good bones, could be. I wanted a character who was strong and confident and who wanted to stay religious despite its challenges. That’s a story you never hear! There are so many books about religious people wanting out. I didn’t want to add to that list. I wanted to create a book that shows the truth about the Orthodox Jewish world in every way and how it is worth pursuing. Another challenge was that the first sixty pages were reworked so many times and I felt those were the roughest pages in the end. I had to revise them so many more times than what I created anew in 2021.

Was there anything significant that you ended up editing out?

I don’t think so!

What themes are explored in your book?

Identity, relationships, parenting, abuse, infidelity, religion, communal expectations and pressures, conforming vs. independence

Do you have a writing method?

With this book, I did not outline—and it was a challenge! For my next novel, I did a Beat Sheet and a character sketch outline—took a month to do it, in fact. It made the writing so much easier! I write Monday through Friday for three to four hours in the morning. I write fast. I wrote this book in three months from when I picked it back up and then revised it in six weeks after an editor gave it a thorough look. I also have three critique groups—one is a group, two are 1:1 partnerships—and send chapters to them for honest feedback. I write in order! I wish I could write scenes as they come to me and then stitch them together.

What is your preferred writing environment?

I like low lighting, a candle burning, sometimes some incense, and great music. I have several playlists for writing!

What is your favorite line from your book?

Gosh, I don’t know!

Talk a little bit about your path to publishing.

Before WOMAN OF VALOR, I’d had eight books published by small presses—two poetry collections and six nonfiction books. I started querying agents and small independent presses for WOMAN OF VALOR, and I got great feedback and lots of requests for full manuscripts. I even got an offer from a small press—but I didn’t like the contract, so I turned it down. So many agents and publishers said they loved my writing, loved the story, BUT. One said literary fiction was hard to sell these days. Another just didn’t think they could sell it. It might be too Jewish of a story? But I didn’t give querying much time because my gut was telling me I wanted to publish this book differently.

I was fifty years old when I wrote it and fifty-one when I started pitching, and I didn't want to wait years to potentially see it come to life. So I created a hybrid press for women over forty with strong voices—SCOTIA ROAD BOOKS—and WOMAN OF VALOR is the first title we are releasing. So I guess you could call me an indie author. I felt a little conflicted because when I was raised in the publishing industry in the 1990s, you didn't self-publish. But I did a ton of research as things have changed so dramatically, and I felt good about doing this my way, on my terms. I didn't want to change the characters or the story. I knew it resonated with readers. And I plan to write a book a year for the rest of my life if I can, so I want to be able to publish them as they are ready.

The next novel is in revision now. I plan to release it in the fall of 2024. I worked with a wonderful pair of graphic designers, a husband-wife team in York, England, on the cover design. I received endorsements from five amazing women authors. Early feedback is fantastic. I feel really good about it. I'm planning a book tour now—mostly to synagogues and Jewish communities, but also to book clubs and private events. With my marketing expertise (I've owned a marketing and PR company since 2007), I knew I could build attention for my books. Now I just hope it sells!

What advice would you give writers looking to be published?

Connect with a community of writers. Other writers are so generous and supportive—and it's imperative to learn from each other! Consider ALL options—and I do mean all. Traditional publishing, hybrid publishing, self-publishing, and even a combination of these. And be prepared to be an integral part of marketing and sales. You just have to these days. Don't be afraid of it - embrace it. Also, don't expect to build your career or pay your bills on ONE book. There's writing a book and there's being an author. An author has a long view of their writing career. It's lifelong—book after book after book. That's how you make the money—and build the audience!

What is your favorite part about engaging with readers to promote your books?

It is so exciting when people like what I've written!! I love to hear what parts of the book resonated most with them and where they had trouble. One reader had her own experience with infidelity and she had a lot to say about how it unfolds in WOMAN OF VALOR. It was a fascinating and enlightening conversation.

What are you working on now?

My next novel! It's with beta readers and my critique groups and it's already getting really good feedback.

Here's the synopsis:

Four storylines. Two continents. Secrets buried in Scotland for two centuries. Until a plucky American digs them up.

Sam left his Orthodox Jewish family for a place where he could be openly gay, but can't quite commit to the love of his life for fear of losing his daughter.

Eve quit a promising journalism job for an archival fellowship in Scotland and stumbles upon a trove of letters that reveal dark secrets about British aristocracy. But she must choose between love and purpose.

Mags lifts herself out of poverty and finds a love that can transform her life—if only she can find a way to love herself.

Mac rejects the stuffy path of his aristocratic family and falls in love with a determined American woman who challenges his notions of truth and family.

CAVE OF SECRETS is a novel about love and loss, antisemitism and homophobia, hiding in the open, sexual awakening, and family legacy. But ultimately, it's a story about choosing love—love of self, love of another, love of where we come from, and a love that carries us forward.

This is a story of accepting who you truly are and the kind of love that allows you to live out your secrets. It's a story about choosing the parts of our past that we want to inform our present.

Do have any exciting news to share?

I have book events planned in California in February 2024 and Portland, Oregon in March 2024. This fall is devoted to events in Michigan and lots of podcast interviews. I'm just super excited!