

Novel Specifics & FAQ for *Sticks and Stones*

By Shellie Arnold

SPECIFICS:

Title of Novel: *Sticks and Stones* (Book Two in The Barn Church series)

Genre: Contemporary inspirational fiction

Publisher: Lighthouse Publishing of the Carolinas

Release date: October 20, 2016

Other books in series: *The Spindle Chair* (October 2015) and *Abide with Me* (October 2017)

High concept: Days before a long-awaited audition, Julie Matthews, an aspiring singer and frequent choir soloist, who unwittingly hurts her family with her toxic words, has a near-fatal accident and awakes in a hospital unable to speak.

Scriptural inspiration: If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless (James 1:26 NIV).

Theme: How we treat our spouses and/or family is our primary act of worship. And, marital peace is not found in the absence of conflict, but rather when both parties are living in obedience to God.

Summation: *Sticks and Stones* is the story of Julie and Rick Matthews, a couple whose near twenty year marriage has produced three children, a thriving horse stable business, and one very frustrated wife. Days before a live audition, a horseback riding accident leaves her unable to speak. Julie turns to Rick for care and support, and their relationship undergoes a short hiatus. When Julie's voice returns, Rick pulls away from her, fearing she will return to her old ways. After their daughter's journal reveals painful truths about their family life, Julie discovers how much she has hurt her family, and is faced with another woman's quiet pursuit of Rick. Julie must admit her mistakes, and learn to depend on God to change her words by changing what is inside her heart. Rick, longing to lead his family but wary of Julie's changes being real, doesn't buy into Julie's assessment of the other woman. As she and Rick cautiously rebuild their marriage, Julie is forced to choose between her dream of singing to multitudes, or blessing her family with a worshipful life before God.

Back cover blurb:

Sticks and stones may break bones, but words can crush the spirit.

Since childhood, Julie Matthews has felt closest to God when singing. Mere days away from realizing her lifelong dream of singing professionally, she awakens in a hospital room unable to speak. Suddenly her dreams and God seem distant.

Rick Matthews supports his ambitious wife, but has no solution for the constant tension between them. During Julie's recovery, Rick becomes Julie's caregiver and their marriage undergoes a wonderful change--they rediscover each other.

But as Julie's voice grows stronger, unseen wounds surface and years of unhealthy habits begin again to pull them apart. Faced with losing their newly rekindled love, Julie and Rick are forced to evaluate the state of their marriage and how their dysfunction has affected their children.

FAQ:

1. Share about your journey to publication:

My journey to publication has been very long. I attended my first writers conference in January, 1994, and dabbled at writing for many years. I worked toward writing non-fiction until 2002 when I became ill. On May 18, 2005, God healed my brain and turned my head to fiction. I said, "That's not what we were doing." God's response was, "That's what we're doing now." So, I started learning about fiction in 2006/2007 as a total newbie after being out of the industry for several years.

2. What do you feel is your calling as a writer?

There are two parts to my answer: With my fiction, I hope to offer a really good read in a captivating story. By doing so, I hope to cause readers to consider their own life and marriage. But mostly I want them to enjoy the story. Fiction gives me the means to touch a reader's emotions. To stir them.

Part two of my answer is, I really want to help marriages. I write about the "perfect storms" in marriage—what happens when our weaknesses hit head-on and we're both left wondering what can be salvaged. That's my fiction. Through my web site and (hopefully soon) non-fiction books, I hope to provide solid teaching which addresses the issues found in my novels. So, my fiction can be a really good read, and, if the Holy Spirit leads a reader to consider the same type of issues in their own life and marriage, I'll have resources available to address those issues.

3. What is The Barn Church series?

I call it The Barn Church series because all the couples in this series attend the same church, Rowe City Gospel Church in Rowe City, Alabama (a fictitious church in a fictitious place). The church is literally a huge converted barn. Very welcoming. Very

rustic. Each book is about a different couple within the church, so each story stands alone. It's a series, but a reader wouldn't have to read them in order to enjoy the stories.

4. Is the wife in your books the only main character?

Not in this series. Both husband and wife are my main characters. I write from both points of view, so I can focus on the marriage as a whole.

5. What gave you the idea for *Sticks and Stones*?

Throughout my entire marriage, I've had trouble with controlling my mouth and my attitude. Of course, my husband and family have borne the brunt of the worst of that. And as I've watched other marriages, I see this problem isn't unique to me. So many of us wives wrestle with being snippy, snappy, or downright nasty to our mates with our words. It's sad, but true, and I believe God has answers for this tendency.

I spent years praying intentionally about this weakness in me, and figured if I was struggling so much, others must be, too. I wanted to offer what I'd learned the hard way, offer hope to others who felt God leading them to address the issue in their own lives. I also wanted to be brutally honest about the fallout that can happen from this weakness, so I used the children, especially the daughter in this story, to show that, too.

6. Tell us a little about your book:

Like *The Spindle Chair* (Book One in the series), *Sticks and Stones* takes place in Rowe City, a town in southern Alabama. The reader meets Rick and Julie Matthews in book one, but doesn't know much about them, other than Julie sings in the choir and befriends Laurie Crane. Julie has always felt most loved and closest to God when singing and songwriting. Though she won a singing contest and scholarship to the finest vocal institute in New York, her mother refused to let her accept the prize after graduation from high school. So, Julie married Rick. They had two children, just like they planned. Their youngest, Rachel, is finally starting school, so Julie believes she can now pursue her lifelong dream. Then a surprise pregnancy happens, and Julie gives birth to a special needs child, an event which derails their marriage and plunges them into crisis management mode. Fast forward seven years, and their marriage is suffering.

7. At the beginning of this novel, the husband appears almost flawless, while Julie is cantankerous. Later we see the co-dependency and dysfunction in both of them, and begin to understand what brought them to this way of living. Why did you write the story this way?

First, I hoped women readers could identify with Julie—her frustration, her exhaustion, her high-output life and schedule. I think most women relate to being pulled too many ways by too many needs. We love our families, but over time, we often find there's less and less room in our lives for us as individuals, or simply as people. Julie is stretched too thin—a cliché, I know, but still true.

Second, I really wanted to show the cycle that can develop when one person (Julie) is living out of balance—by necessity, but still—and the marriage gets sidetracked. This happens with crisis or when managing life’s storms. We don’t realize the unhealthy coping mechanisms and relationship habits we weave into the fabric of our lives.

8. So, what’s your background? Are you a counselor? A psychiatrist?

No, I’m just a kid from a broken home who was scared to death to marry. I figured either there was no way to marry and be happy, or God wasn’t telling how to do it. When I knew God wanted me to marry, I did so only after telling God I needed Him to teach me how to do this. I started studying and paying attention to my marriage and what was happening inside me. As God addressed issues and hurts inside me, I saw the benefits manifested in my marriage. I simply want to share all I’ve learned the hard way.

9. Back to your novel, the book deals with the idea of toxic words, but even deeper, isn’t it about bad habits we bring to marriage?

Yes. I think many problems in marriage come from what we learned wrong or didn’t learn at all before we married. When life throws us a curveball, that deficit is going to show up in a big way, and usually wreaks havoc on any delicate balance we’ve maintained to that point. Julie never learned how to communicate in a healthy way during stressful times, so she attacks. Rick is a conflict avoider, ends up being an enabler, and perpetuates the dysfunction in their home. It’s a cycle all too common in Christian marriages. I wanted to show a couple breaking a very ingrained, detrimental cycle, even though that’s a difficult task.

10. What about the “other woman” in this story?

Yes...Angelina Rousseau. Her presence doesn’t help the tension between Julie and Rick, does it? To me Angelina represents the fact life doesn’t stop when we’ve conflict in our marriage. Seldom do we get to isolate ourselves, isolate a part of our lives, and handle one problem or issue at a time. The fluidity of life, the simultaneous presence of challenges makes dealing with those challenges even more difficult. Still, if both husband and wife listen to God, I’m persuaded they can rebuild and be stronger than ever.

By the way, book three (*Abide With Me*, to be released October 2017) is about Angelina’s marriage.

11. What would you say to someone God is pushing to deal with bad habits, something they learned wrong before marriage, or didn’t learn at all—and they know these habits are damaging their marriage?

Consider the tension, hurt, and havoc those habits have brought to your home. What if all that could be erased and replaced with good fruit—love, joy, peace, etc.? What if, say, a year from now, your marriage could be almost completely free of this particular problem?

Isn't the effort to change worth that? God is always working to change us, grow us, make us new, make us more like Jesus. That kind of growth always benefits a marriage, because you can't separate spirituality and relationships. They're intertwined and interdependent. Walk with God on this journey of growth and change. Be humble enough, submit to God enough to let your family see it. You won't believe the results. ☺

12. What would you say to someone whose spouse is trying to change a bad habit?

Be honest enough, vulnerable enough, to examine yourself with God's help. Dysfunction is never isolated. *You do this, so I do that* is a toxic mentality, but nevertheless true in areas of dysfunction and co-dependency. Ask God what you're doing to contribute to the unhealthy parts of your marriage. No, maybe you didn't "start it," but your reactions might be keeping the cycle in place. If you change your behavior, you will stop the cycle. And, if you change with your mate, the healing will happen even more quickly. But if only your mate changes while you stay the same, complete healing won't come.

13. Finally, tell us about your tagline "Live Happily Even After":

I can't take credit for it, my best friend and I brainstormed together to come up with a tagline and I think she nailed it. Basically, I believe any marriage can be healed and thrive—no matter what baggage or bad habits we brought into it—if both parties obey God. God is all about redemption, restoration, and resurrection. He's all about making old things new. Making seemingly irreparable things better than new. No matter what's happened to you, what you've done, or what you brought to your marriage, if you'll walk with God you can *Live Happily Even After*.