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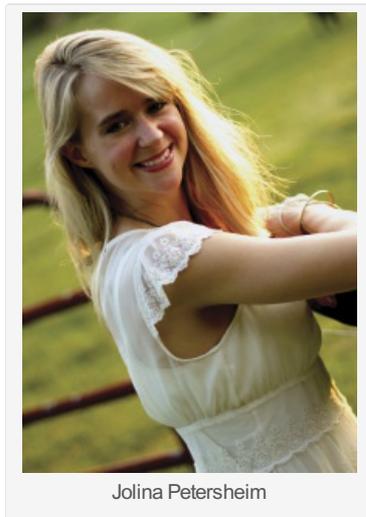
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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOLINA PETERSHEIM

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Jolina Petersheim

**APM:** Thanks for taking the time to talk to *Southern Literary Review*, Jolina. Your latest novel, *The Midwife*, follows closely on the heels of *The Outcast*. Did you expect these books to be the successes they've been?

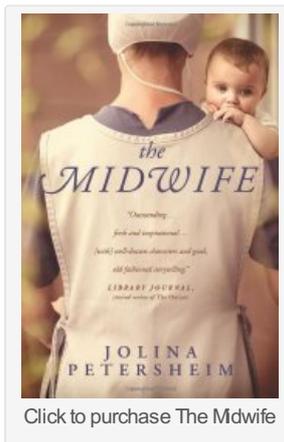
All authors dream that their novels will be successful, and I was certainly no exception. Still, I had no idea these two stories would resonate so deeply with readers. I have been moved almost to tears, time and time again, to hear a personal story about how these novels touched a reader's life. This means far more to me than best-seller status or critical acclaim. I am so grateful.

**APM:** I recently mentioned your book to a friend, who said she didn't know that "Amish literature was a thing." She was referring of course to genre. I suppose I didn't know this genre was as popular as it is, but it makes sense to me. There's a certain suspense to this way of life that we—many people I mean—no longer practice in our current culture. I'm reminded of Jane Austen: the pleasure of reading her books is heightened if you understand the mores and customs of the characters. What do you make of all this?

With both of my novels, I try to go deeper than the quintessential Amish boy-meets-*Englischer* girl dilemma. I grew up on a Christian camp (or community) from the time I was six until I was fourteen, and during those eight years, I witnessed the elements that can bring a community together and tear it apart. Since I have a Mennonite heritage, it seemed natural to combine these two interests: the definition of community and the Mennonites. So far, the questions keep spinning entirely new plot threads. I just follow wherever they lead.

**APM:** Could you give our readers the premise of *The Midwife*?

*The Midwife* is a story about a mother who risks everything to save a child not genetically hers. The concept of surrogacy was first brought to my attention when my dear friend in college discussed using a



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gestational surrogate in the future because she would be unable to carry a child of her own due to the medication she was taking for a heart transplant.

This made me contemplate all of the many obstacles in surrogacy that everyone involved would have to overcome:

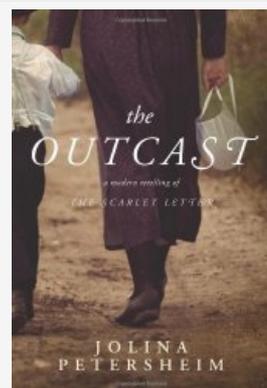
What if the surrogate became attached to the child? What if, God forbid, something happened to one of the parents, or if there was a chromosomal abnormality, and the parents decided they did not want the child any longer?

All of these disparate ideas coalesced into the concept for *The Midwife* once I gave birth to a child of my own. I knew that even if I was of no relation to the child, if my body had sustained her for nine months, she would still be my daughter, even if we shared no genetic connection.

From there, the story went on to expound upon the heights and depths a mother will go to protect that child, and what is the definition of motherhood: genetics or love.

**APM: There's a lot there—womanhood, motherhood, fertility. What draws you to these themes? Is there someone in the so-called literary canon from whom you draw inspiration or motivation?**

I don't believe I would've been able to write either of my stories without the perspective of being a mother. I was expecting our firstborn daughter when I wrote *The Outcast* – a modern retelling of *The Scarlet Letter* set in an Old Order Mennonite community in Tennessee – and she was only twelve weeks old when I began crafting *The Midwife*. It was a transformative experience to place myself in the midwife Rhoda's shoes and imagine my daughter being taken from me without any power to get her back. I actually miscarried during the editorial process of *The Midwife*, and it was beautiful and heart-wrenching to read back over the scenes my own fingers had typed and find such healing through the midwife's journey of overcoming loss and learning to love again. My prayer is that this story will touch my readers' lives to the same extent it did mine.



[Click here to purchase The Outcast](#)

**APM: Let's talk about you—Jolina the writer. In a sense we can never divorce our subjective self—the “I myself” whom Whitman celebrates—from our writing, but I'd like to know or to try to know who you are as a writer. Writing can be a very private and solitary activity—at least when the muse strikes. Writing almost always eventually becomes a collaborative activity, what with editors and proofreaders and the like. But the initial product is yours alone, a creature of the imagination. What makes you write what you write? Do you ever find yourself lost in a world of your own creation?**

Long before I knew how to read or write, I would sit on the front porch and try to make up stories. My parents inadvertently encouraged this because my father—a barn builder by trade—would pause in his labors to jot down lyrics on his 2 x 4 boards with a carpenter's pencil, and my mother would read excerpts from her novels to me like a

bedtime story. We also didn't have a TV for the majority of my childhood, so once I learned how to read, I would bring stacks of books home from the library. This, naturally, developed into a love for writing. I attempted to write my first novel when I was in sixth grade, and I've been compelled to create in this vein ever since.

I do often get lost in a world of my own creation, but I have also found that it's necessary to continue working even when the inspiration isn't there. Oftentimes, just sitting down to write each day will force those creative juices to start flowing. Even if they only flow for the last half hour of a four-hour stretch, that last half hour is then when the magic happens. It's addicting!

**APM: You don't shy away from the psychology of your characters. Why not?**

I've always been fascinated by our motivations, for good and for evil. I like to explore these motivations—these behaviors—through writing to better understand why people do what they do, even if they're fictional. I love how crafting a novel helps me understand myself and those around me.

**APM: You and your husband have similar backgrounds. How long did it take the two of you to figure that out, and if I could push this question into two, what effect does your background have on your books?**

My husband and I met at a church mainly composed of ex-Amish and Mennonites, so it sure didn't take long to figure out that we share the same background. Before we even journeyed down to southern Tennessee, my father was in contact with my husband's grandfather, Amos Stoltzfus, who was kicked out of the Amish church when he was seventeen. He was the one who invited us to church and who

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made sure that our family got introduced to everyone.

Even if I didn't write "Amish fiction," I believe my background would still remain very evident in my books. The Pennsylvania Dutch heritage is just something you cannot shake, and the customs are being carried on in our own family, although we're often not aware of it. (For instance, I use certain PA Dutch phrases with my daughter like *brutzing*, *ferhoodled*, *redd up*, etc.)

**APM: Thanks, Jolina. There's just one more question I want to ask you, and I already know the answer because I read it somewhere, but I find it to be compelling and inspiring and selfishly want it to be archived here in *Southern Literary Review*. The question is, how did you come to find an agent and publish your first book?**

I met my agent, Wes Yoder, at an author reading when I was 25,000 words into the first draft of my debut, *The Outcast*. He asked if he could read the portion of the manuscript I had completed. I was skeptical at first because I had no idea that he was an agent; I just knew that he was a writer. Once we cleared that up, I went home and started working like crazy. I sent the polished version to him one month later. He read the story on his way home from a book festival in Brazil and told me he thought the story had potential, so I began to write as quickly as I could. I was expecting our little girl at the time; therefore, I knew I had a narrow window in which to finish the manuscript. I completed *The Outcast* in six months, and Wes and I had a two-book publishing contract with Tyndale House when my firstborn daughter was 12 weeks old. She is now twenty-eight months, and I have her little sister on the way— who we're expecting to meet in September—and all I can say is that it has been a delightful, somewhat challenging, but always a rewarding journey!

**APM: I appreciate your taking the time, Jolina, and wish you the best on all your future endeavors.**

Thank you for having me here, Allen!

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