



VEIL OF FIRE

– AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR MARLO SCHALESKY

(provided courtesy of www.MarloSchalesky.com)

Q: Where did you get the idea for this book? When? How did it come about?

A: People often ask where I get my ideas for my books. My answer? You never know! For *Veil of Fire*, the idea began at my favorite Mexican restaurant in the mission town of San Juan Bautista. There I was, sitting with my family, nibbling chips and salsa, when a wedding party came by. The bridesmaids were dressed in beautiful turn-of-the-century style gowns. As they passed, my mother-in-law began to tell me of the dresses that her great grandmother, who lived in Hinckley, used to sew for the rich ladies in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

From there, came the story of the great Hinckley fire and the rebuilding that this woman, my husband's great-great-grandmother, was a part of. And finally, I heard the tale of the mystery figure in the hills, a person burned beyond recognition. A person never identified, living as a hermit until one day he just disappeared.

At that moment, the first inklings of the story that would become *Veil of Fire* were born in my heart. Who was the hermit in the hills? What happened to him? And how would I solve the mystery if I could? As I pondered those questions, I knew that I had to write the hermit's story. Had to explore what it would be like to lose everything, even your identity. Had to hear the hermit's voice in my mind, and hear the story for myself.

So, the writing of the book became for me a process of discovery, as I hope it will be for my readers. I hope that as the mystery of the hermit drew me, so too it will draw others to this story of how fire can change you, take from you, and in the end, may just set you free.

Q: Can you explain the research process, since this is such a historical novel?

A: The research for *Veil of Fire* was particularly fascinating not only because of its link to my personal family history, but also because of the incredible first-person accounts of the fire that were written by people who were actually there.

These stories are compiled into a book written entirely by survivors who recount their personal experience of living through the firestorm that swept through their town. I read about a man whose hat lifted from his head and exploded above him as he ran through wind and fire.

I read about another whose horse raced beside the Eastern Minnesota train as fire billowed around him. The horse swerved into the smoke, and the man was never seen again. I read about a boy racing down the tracks, falling, and surviving as the fire roared over him.

I read about fire on the surface of the Grindstone River, darkness broken only by bursts of flame, the St. Paul and Duluth engine backing up to Skunk Lake through blinding heat and smoke.

I read about a train trestle disintegrating into flame moments after a train passed, about Jane Tew praying on that train, and the brakemen who saved them all.

Those eyewitness accounts, as well as information gathered about the fire from other sources, created the realistic feel of the fire and its aftermath in *Veil of Fire*. Plus, you can be sure that if something seems almost beyond belief in *Veil of Fire*, it will be drawn from an actual account that came directly from the research, so amazing were the real stories of the fire on that day!

Today, a number of books about the fire, as well as artifacts, photos, and other articles can be seen at the Hinckley Fire Museum in Hinckley.

Q: What takeaway points do you hope your readers pull from this book?

A: Once, when we were children, we believed in miracles. The impossible was only a prayer away. Fairy tales were real, and dreams were free. Where did we lose the ability to trust? When did we stop daring to believe? What happened to us?

Life happened. Failure, discouragement, pain, loss. Somewhere, somehow, life burns us all. And we realize that this life we live is not the one we once dreamed. The realities of life scar us. Doubts rise. Fear whispers that hope is gone. And what was once a simple faith can fail in the face of that fear.

In the midst of life's disillusionment, choices appear. Do we retreat? Hide our hurts far from probing eyes? Do we embrace bitterness and cynicism? Do we use deceit to try to obtain our goals? Do we give up, give in, forget that we ever dared to dream?

Or is it possible to reach the high places of faith in the low valleys of life's reality? Can we still live a life of bold faith, of fierce hope, when fairy tales don't come true? How do we live this life that God has given us when it's not the life we dreamed?

These are the questions I wanted to explore in *Veil of Fire*. These are the questions which underlie each character's journey in the aftermath of the great fire of 1894.

So, for those burned by life, for those who carry scars that cannot be seen, for those who have retreated for fear of more pain, this story is for you, this journey from the hidden places of pain to a new hope in the unhidden truth of Christ's love.

Q: Which character in *Veil of Fire* do you most relate to, and why?

A: Even though I base no character on myself, they all reflect a little of me – my questions, my struggles, the issues that have shaped and molded me. In *Veil of Fire*,

this is particularly true for the hermit in the hills. Just as the hermit questions God's love, believes "I am Esau, unchosen, unloved," so I too have struggled with those same feelings, doubts, and questions. I, too, have cried out to God, "Why don't you love me?"

For the hermit, it was a question born out of fire, abuse, and disfigurement. For me, it was a question that came out of failure, infertility, and miscarriage. So, in many ways, the hermit's questions were my own, the answers mine, the external scars reflections of my internal ones, and in turn, I think, symbols of the scars of us all.

Q: When writing *Veil of Fire*, did you plan the plot before sitting down to write the story, or did the plot develop as the story progressed?

A: I am a "headlights" writer, which means I can see the chapter I'm writing and a few chapters ahead. I may also glimpse a few "signposts" in the distance. The funny thing about *Veil of Fire* is that I wrote three quarters of the book thinking the hermit in the hills was one character only to find out as I neared the end that I was wrong! And the impact of that discovery was both a shock and a delight. Suddenly, I understood what God was getting at through the theme and nuances of character in the book.

And truly, while I may complain that it would be easier to write a book if it were all mapped out (it certainly would be quicker!), this sense of surprise and delight is one of things that I love about the writing process.

I love when the story and characters take on a life of their own. I love to discover what God has been planning for a story all along. And I love to be surprised by a sudden turn of events. And I know if I'm surprised and delighted, my readers will be too.

Q: Through *Veil of Fire*, what do you want readers to know about how God works in the midst of tragedy?

A: I hope that readers will come to understand that we cannot measure God's love by our successes and failures, or even by our happiness. Who we are on the inside, how we are being shaped into the likeness of Christ, the character of our lives – the color and beauty of it – are what are important to God. And to create that color and beauty, sorrow is necessary. Hurtful things happen.

And yet, our sorrow still matters to God, our tears are counted by him as precious. He does not leave us alone in our hurt. He touches us, he heals us, he creates beauty from the ashes of our pain. He can transform tragedy into something of wonder and glory. He can use it to set us free.

So, for me, I'm learning to walk through the fires in my own life. And to dig deeper – not to answer the question of why but the question of who – who is God really, who am I, and who is he making me to be? Those are the questions that matter. Those are the things that help me to face my own fires, accept my own scars.

Q: Why are scars, both the physical and the spiritual ones, so difficult to reveal to others? How can we be more accepting of those who bear the marks of life's difficulties?

A: I think we want to hide our scars because we're afraid of rejection. We want to be accepted and loved, and we believe that we must be perfect for that to happen. So we

hide our scars and hope no one ever finds out, no one ever sees us for who we really are.

But Christ came for the scarred and the hurting. He came for the adulterous woman, the tax collector, Jairus with his dying daughter, Nicodemus with his doubts.

So we, too, should be there for those who bear the marks of life's difficulties. And I think that the best way to be more accepting is to remember that we all have scars. Those scars may be different, more hidden or in different places, than the scars of others, but no one gets through life unscathed.

In Chapter 30 of *Veil of Fire*, the hermit says, "It's not the scars that matter; it's who I am, who He is . . . I have encountered evil and endured it. I have been clothed in pain yet lived to tell. That is what life is. There is sorrow, and injustice, and sin. There are scars that cannot be erased by time. I wear mine on my skin. They wear theirs in their hearts." We all wear our scars. We all need acceptance. We all need love.

And that, truly, is the answer: To love as God loves. To see past people's scars and into their hearts, just as Jesus did. And to love them.

My pastor is fond of saying, "You've never looked into the eyes of another person who isn't loved by God." When we focus on how much God loves another person, even with all their scars, it becomes easier to love them too.

Q: What do you think is the most important step in rebuilding after the fires of life? What do you want readers to know about having a new beginning?

A: Hope. New beginnings are born out of a hope that comes from a deepening trust in God. It comes out of grief that we live through, and survive. Out of choosing to trust God in the face of dreams that didn't come true. Out of looking up and moving forward despite the pain.

And what do I want readers to know? That God can transform anything and make it new, make it beautiful. Just like He did with the symbol of the cross. Before Jesus came, the cross was an instrument of execution. It meant horror, shame, pain, death. It was the ugliest thing of its day. But now, we wear the cross as jewelry. It adorns our homes and churches. Why? Because Christ transformed it to a thing a beauty. He took what was ugly and horrific, what meant shame and death and made it into something else entirely. He made it a symbol of salvation, life, love, and reconciliation with God. It is now the symbol of the greatest hope of mankind.

So I am convinced that if God could do that with the cross, He can also do it with my pain and tragedies. And, He can do it with yours.

Q: What book project can we expect from you after *Veil of Fire*? Can you give us a sneak peek of the storyline?

A: After *Veil of Fire*, I'm writing 3 contemporary novels for Waterbrook-Multnomah. All of them are "Love Stories with a Twist!," a new type of story that I think will knock readers' socks off.

The first, *Beyond the Night*, releases in May 2008. Check the “Up Next” on my web site for more information!

Visit www.MarloSchalesky.com for book excerpts, interviews with Marlo, and news about upcoming releases!