

The Well and the Mine-Author Q&A

Why did you have a baby thrown down a well? I knew from the beginning that this story started with Tess sitting on the porch one night and seeing *something*. I didn't know what. I liked the idea of an act that seemed irredeemably evil, committed by a shadowy figure that the Moores, the town, and the reader could dismiss as beyond redemption. At some point as I imagined Tess by the well, I saw the Well Woman walk up and toss in the baby. And everything clicked. Of course, after this supposedly purely evil act takes place, I spend the rest of the book unraveling it, complicating it. That's one of the themes that surfaces throughout the book in different ways—that sometimes things and people are not so easily labeled, not so simple, as good or evil, black or white, right or wrong.

Are you from Carbon Hill? I was born (quite a bit after the Great Depression) and raised in Montgomery, Al. My grandmother and her siblings grew up just outside of Carbon Hill, and my great-aunt still lives in their childhood home. I grew up spending holidays in that house, wandering around the yard where the cow and horse and chickens used to be, so I had a very concrete sense of place for *The Well and the Mine*, even though I wasn't raised there.

Why did you use multiple voices? I think narrative voice is one of those elements in writing that either clicks or it doesn't. You have to go more by feel than by logic. I started out thinking the story would be in Tess' voice throughout. Then one line from Albert came to me: "The kids all have Leta's eyes, wet-earth eyes. Rich like good soil." It was so obviously Albert that it seemed undeniable that he was going to be telling his side of the story. And if he was, then so was everyone else. I started playing with the alternating viewpoints, and it felt right.

Why are Jack's sections told from the future? First because he's really too young to add much to the story. A five-year-old's viewpoint would be 1) very limited, and 2) hard to do in a way that wasn't too cutesy and distracting. From the future, though, he adds a very helpful perspective—that of someone who can observe the past through the lens of time, of education, and of experience. He gives us a broader view of culture and society in 1931.

Did you know who the Well Woman was when you started writing? Didn't have a clue. I didn't have any idea why someone would throw a baby down the well, and I was desperately hoping she would appear at some point. About halfway through writing the first draft, I saw her sitting...well, I won't say that in case you haven't read the book yet. But I was halfway through the book before I knew who she was.

Why did you have Jack get hit by a brick truck? (This is usually asked in the same somewhat-accusing voice as "Why did you have a baby thrown down a well?") My great-uncle was actually hit by a brick truck, and the circumstances were much the same as in the novel. In terms of why it works for the story, though, Jack's accident refocuses the Moores. It brings us back to what matters most for them: survival. And family. It also leaves Tess alone, the only one left who really needs to know who the Well Woman is. She's the one who propels this search in the first place, and she's the one who finishes it.

How much of this is real? Well, the plot isn't. There was no Well Woman, no baby. The characters have a trait or two in common with real-life people, and anything from family stories to newspaper articles have worked their way into the background one way or the other. Mostly what's real are the details, the atmosphere, the family's daily life.

What kind of research did you do? Lots of listening to stories. My family was immeasurably helpful and patient, answering any question I could throw at them about how long it took to boil water on the stove or how they wore their hair or how many rooms were in the schoolhouse. I spent plenty of time looking through old union journals, history books, diaries, and newspaper articles. I wandered through Carbon Hill plenty, just looking at buildings and studying the layout.