

The Woman Alive book club



Hosted by Amy
Boucher Pye

This month I'm reading . . .

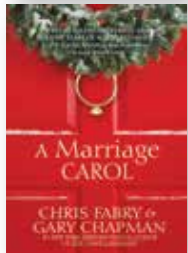


The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

Barbara Robinson (HarperCollins, ISBN 978-0064402750)

A Marriage Carol

Chris Fabry & Gary Chapman (River North, 987-0802402646)



I love Christmas. I love the decorations, the baking, the presents . . . all the trappings. But more than those sometimes stress-inducing material things, I love the traditions, the anticipation and, of course, the life-changing story behind it all: God the Son coming to earth as a man, ushering in the kingdom of heaven.

An industry of Christmas merchandise starts to appear in the shops months before the main event. Some are the many beautifully presented Christmas novellas that Christian publishers (mainly American) churn out. I've read probably a dozen of them; they're easily consumed and digested. Their messages of hope are gentle in tone, if sometimes verging on the saccharine. This month I want to highlight one novella in particular, along with my Favourite. Christmas. Story. Ever.

A Marriage Carol combines the power of Chris Fabry's storytelling with Gary Chapman's years of counselling insights. It's deep and meaty, and has much to ponder regarding

relationships (whether or not you're married). Using the device of Dickens' classic, *A Christmas Carol*, it explores the power of our actions in the here and now – just how much does that word, that argument, that show of love change our lives? It's an honest grappling with a marriage in trouble, including the couple's fears, disagreements and disappointments but ending with hope. One to read and mull over.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, called an American classic, tells the story of the six Herdman children, whose father has abandoned them and whose mother works double shifts at the nearby factory. They are the town bullies and rabble-rousers who, each year, miraculously move up to the next year group at school because teachers can't bear the thought of having two Herdmans together. When the Herdmans are enticed to church with tales of endless doughnuts and juice, they end up latching onto the Christmas pageant (UK: nativity play) as their next obsession, taking over the key roles. Will the regular churchgoers – and the mother who has been roped into organising that year's play – survive the spectacle? The young girl who is the narrator thinks not.

The book, which is aimed at the youth market, manages to reveal the true meaning of Christmas with humour, grace and wry insights. The opening lines give a flavour of the humour: "The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down toolhouse."

To our delight, we read it with my husband's family one Boxing Day. One to add to your Christmas traditions?

You recommend . . .

One Perfect Day

Lauraine Snelling (FaithWords, 2011)

The story of two mothers who both are planning their last, perfect Christmas in the hope of creating memories. For Nora, it is the last Christmas before her twins Charlie and Christie leave for college, so she is reviving all the family traditions. For Jenna, her daughter Heather needs a heart transplant and is getting weaker, so this is her last Christmas, unless she receives a new heart. Disaster strikes Nora's family, and life will never be the same again, as the family struggles to live through their grief. For Jenna, it is the miracle she has been hoping for, as Heather receives her new heart.

This book is well written and you get engrossed in it, as you live through the highs and lows of both families. However you do need to read it with tissues nearby! Julia Wilson

Mary's Diary: An Advent Journey

Emily Owen (Owen Publishing 2011)

At the age of 69 I just love Advent calendars and candles, but the thing that has really given me joy this last Advent is this little book. It tells Mary's story in 25 small chapters as if she was talking to you as a friend.

This book has drawn me so close to God over this last Advent period, and I

all just seemed so amazing to me.

One thing I've learned during my 28 years of writing is that creativity is not infinite. Each time I sit down to dream up imaginary characters and the vivid worlds they inhabit, I'm tapping into a source that resembles a bucket more than a bottomless well or a flowing stream. If I don't take time to refill that bucket, sooner or later my creative juices are going to run dry.

You have no idea how many bookshelves and books I have in my house! So many, in fact, that I recently converted my living room into a library! What may surprise you is that the majority of my books are non-fiction. (Books on theology, spirituality, Bible customs,

really prayed beforehand that God would – as I find Christmas very hard. We lost our youngest daughter 22 years ago in a car crash in Australia, just before Christmas, and our older daughter now lives in

This book has drawn me so close to God

America, so we do not see our daughters at Christmas. I find so much comfort in my faith and this book has really been a help. Rosemary A Rowe

The Advent Calendar

Stephen Croft (DLT, 2006)

I read *The Advent Calendar* a few years ago and think it will be my Advent book again for this year. It is both a novel and a devotional with a reading every day through the season, but it is a good story as the Christmas narrative unfolds through the images on the advent calendar. No chocolates behind each door, but something much more precious. Caroline Seal

The Big Book of Angels

Wendy Schuman (Hinkler, 2003)

When you think of angels, what picture

devotionals; big, colourful books of master artists and their paintings; and lots and lots of books on writing and creativity.) Most of the fiction I buy gets given away to friends once I'm finished.

The best love story I've ever read? This is a very tough question because I've read so many! But the one that seems to stick with me the most is *The Shell Seekers* by Rosamunde Pilcher. It makes me cry every time I read it.

My all-time-favourite research experience was the month I spent on an archaeological dig in Israel. The first books I ever wrote were the five-book *Chronicles of the Kings* series, based on the life of the biblical King Hezekiah. I needed to know what everyday life was

do you have in mind about these supernatural beings created by God? The broadest definition is one who serves as a messenger of God. They are mentioned nearly 300 times in the Bible and play a dominant part in Bible stories.

This is a book of wisdom with many contributors telling you what they believe about angels, and the most common questions are answered by experts along with stories of angel encounters and experiences of ministering guardian angels. It is a very readable, informative, beautifully-illustrated book and you will be surprised at how much you don't know. It is a fascinating and delightful read which arouses one's curiosity, and is one to savour and not to be rushed. Deborah Gallacher

Carol: A Story for Christmas

Bob Hartman (Lion Hudson, 2009)

I have read and re-read this book, which is a modern re-telling of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. It's a short tale – only 95 pages in a small book. Jack O'Malley, who hates shopping, storms into a bookstore for a cup of coffee and meets someone who changes his past, present and future! The difference a cup of coffee can make in more ways than one has a huge message! Wendy Horn

like in 700 BC, but more importantly, what it was like to see the Israeli sky at dawn and at sunset, and to breathe the Middle Eastern air. What a wonderful experience to watch the sun dawn every morning, accompanied by a chorus of doves in the almond grove below us.

Win this month's book choice

Send us a short review of a book you are reading and you could win Amy's recommendation and a copy of *Pilgrimage* by Lynn Austin. You can send your review to Amy at *Woman Alive* at the address on page 5, e-mail womanalive@cpo.org.uk, or post your review on the Facebook group: Woman Alive Book Club.



On the sofa Lynn Austin



Lynn Austin is the author of 20 novels and her first non-fiction work, *Pilgrimage: My Journey to a Deeper Faith in the Land Where Jesus Walked*. Her latest novel is *Return to Me*.

When I'm writing, I live in my imagination like I did as a child, creating stories that will take my readers

to faraway places and times. Writing is play for me (and of course, it's also very hard work!). But the adults don't yell at me any more for telling "lies" – now I get paid to do it. Best of all, I get to share my

faith, incorporating the lessons God is teaching me into the lives of my characters. I wouldn't trade my life for any other!

When the 2013 Christy Award finalists were announced last May, it was the first time in a few years that my name wasn't on the list. I spent a few days wondering why, and worrying that my writing skills were slipping. A week later, I

heard from my publisher, who explained that instead of being a finalist again, I was being inducted into the Christy Hall of Fame. I was completely overwhelmed! Being a finalist is always such an honour, but this was more than I ever imagined. It took a great effort not to cry when they presented me with the award. I kept thinking back to before I was published – and how I nearly quit several times – and it