



BEYOND THE NIGHT

– AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR MARLO SCHALESKY

(provided courtesy of www.MarloSchalesky.com)

Q: *Marlo, how did you come up with this idea for a series of novels with surprise endings?*

A: It was all God's fault. And it started with a dream. Not one of those "I have a dream" kind of dreams, but a real, honest-to-goodness, it's-3am-and-I'm-asleep kind of dreams. I dreamt Paul and Maddie's love story. And when I woke up, I couldn't get the two of them out of my head. I thought about them in the shower, on the way to seminary classes, in the grocery store. Everywhere! For weeks, I found myself replaying tidbits of their story in my mind, until I finally figured out that maybe God wanted me to write their story.

"But," said I to God, "there's not enough here. It's not compelling enough."

"Yes," said God to me, "but Maddie's going blind." (Well, maybe it wasn't so much in those words, but just in the revelation of what was going on with Maddie.)

"Oh," said I, "That's very interesting. But it's still not enough. Not quite."

Two more days went by, and Paul and Maddie's story still kept teasing my mind. "It's not enough," I kept saying to God. "There's got to be more."

And then I saw it – the big twist. The incredible truth that I had no idea about before. It took my breath away. So, after I finished picking my jaw up off the floor, I sat down and starting working on the proposal for *Beyond the Night*.

As I fleshed out the story, I realized that this is exactly the type of book I'd like to keep writing – something with the poignancy of a Nicolas Sparks love story (without the sap!) matched with the knock-your-socks-off twist of a M. Night Shymalan movie (without the horror!). That kind of story excited me, spiritually, emotionally, mentally. And I figured that there had to be more people like me out there – people who want to be both moved emotionally and surprised and delighted intellectually. People who want to be changed, challenged, and caught with wonder by a story. People who just want something more in their stories, because the typical story is just not quite enough.

Happily, Multnomah agreed. When my agent sent them the proposal for *Beyond the Night*, they asked for two more ideas in one week. But how could I come up with two more stories like that in such a short time? It usually took months, even years, for me to find the right story. But God was faithful again. On the first day of that week, the

storyline for Book 2, *Faces in the Sand*, came to me. And on the last day of the week, I got the idea for Book 3 (with five very nervous days in between). Multnomah contracted all three, and now I'm pressing forward, writing these books that God has given me to write, and praying every day that I'll see the story as *He* has dreamed it. And I'm hanging on to the belief that He who gave me this mission will be faithful not only at its inception, but in the execution and beyond.

Q: Maddie is faced with some very hard events in this story. From what personal experiences or stories did you draw to paint her struggles so vividly?

A: When my grandfather was going blind, he took a shotgun to the backyard and ended his life. He was a good man, kind and wise. Blindness didn't change that. It wouldn't have changed it. But the fear of it did.

It didn't have to be that way. Today, there are 1.3 million people in the United States alone who are legally blind. Another nearly 9 million are visually impaired. Every day in this country people find out they are going blind. Seniors, mothers, fathers, children. Last year, it was my own mother.

So, Maddie's journey through blindness and fear grows out of my family's experiences. It also, in a broader sense, comes out of my own. For even though blindness is a specific malady, Maddie's condition is also a metaphor for the dark times we all face. For the difficulties that come and rattle our faith, for those times when we can't see what's ahead, when life is masked by shadow and doubt.

For Maddie, losing her physical sight prompted her journey through doubt and fear. For me, it was infertility and miscarriage.

If there's one thing I know about, it's living the life God has given you when it's not the life you dreamed. Infertility taught me how to do that. It taught me that life takes unexpected turns and dark, difficult times come. And it taught me that it's not the darkness that will destroy you, but the fear of it.

So, in many ways *Beyond the Night* explores my own questions, my own doubts, my own faith journey in facing the darkness, facing fear, with hope and dignity. That's why *Beyond the Night* is about overcoming the fear of the unknown, rather than letting it overcome you. It's about finding the light, the hope, the promise that lies beyond the darkness.

And I think we could all use that, whether we're going physically blind or not.

Q: You've been in the publishing industry for a while now with four previous novels and a nonfiction book to your credit. How has your publishing experience lined up with expectations? How has it not?

A: You'll find that most of my books include a theme about life not turning out the way you plan or expect. That's because God has given me the equivalent of a PhD in "My plans are not your plans, saith the Lord . . ." And my publishing experience has been a significant course in that learning process.

Nothing in my experience with publishing has gone according to expectation. At first, that was just because I was naïve. I thought I just had to write some good stuff, and I'd get a contract for my first books, which, at the time, was an end times series (this was before the Left Behind craze). So, I went to conferences with my proposal and heard from all the editors, "We aren't interested in this type of futuristic fiction." What they meant, of course, was they weren't interested in that type of story from a newbie like me.

So, I tried historical fiction. And got a contract just as expected. Except the contract was canceled . . . that was unexpected. And it hurt.

Eventually, another publisher contracted that book and it became my first published novel. I received a few other contracts, had those books published, and then came another rude awakening in the form of sales figures. I expected to write a good book and have it do well. But that's not how it worked for my third novel. Because of internal publishing house changes, sales went badly. And there wasn't anything I could do about it. That was hard because I'd written the story as an act of faithfulness to God's call, I felt He was pleased with it, I'd done everything I could in promotion and marketing, and still it "failed." Ouch!

At that time, I was told to expect the numbers for that book to prevent other publishers from wanting to publish future books of mine. "It would have been better for you if that book hadn't even been published," they said. But God was about to crush that expectation as well.

A publisher contracted my next historical novel, I wrote it, and then just before it was scheduled for release, the company went through a large restructuring – they cut fiction, most of the members of the PR department left, the fiction editor left, and my book was stranded. I hadn't expected that either.

But God was up to something in the meantime – a new story idea that I simply had to write. A story that so moved the Multnomah team, even in its synopsis form, that they wanted to publish it despite my previous sales numbers. They wanted that story, plus two more. The story was *Beyond the Night*. It came as an unexpected gift from God.

And just like everything else in my publishing experience, it has taken me by surprise. Pre-readers are calling me and e-mailing saying how the story has moved them, impacted them. But it's not because of my great planning. It's because God has again done something that I didn't foresee, didn't expect. And I thank Him for it.

Q: What's your favorite part of being a novelist?

A: Hey, don't be asking me that question when I'm a few weeks from deadline, because now I can't remember! . . . Just kidding.

What I love best about writing novels is partnering with God in the creative process. Sometimes it feels like I'm listening in on his musings. And I'm finding that there's a moment in every book when I see something, when I write something, that I did not plan, did not expect, and didn't realize the story had been leading up to. That's when I feel the touch of God, I sense His pleasure, and it's like getting a glimpse of heaven. I love

those moments . . . those flashes when I know that *this* is what God has been doing, and the story impacts my heart and life in some new and wondrous way.

Of course, don't ask me about those other times – when I'm staring at the blank screen, the clock is ticking, and I can't think of a single thing to write that doesn't sound like the dumbest thing I've ever heard. There are plenty of those times too.

But I gotta say, those moments when I glimpse God's vision for a story are worth all the others when I don't.

(My second favorite thing is hearing from readers who say a book opened their eyes to the wonder of God, or helped them see Him more clearly, or made a difference in their lives in some way. I love that too!)

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