

Connellsville woman releases her second novel, "The Book of Grace"

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- 7 hrs ago



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S.J. Cunningham of Connellsville holds up her second novel, "The Book of Grace", which was released last week and can be purchased through major booksellers.

Submitted photo

Just five months after the debut of her first novel, a Connellsville woman has published her sophomore effort.

Last week, the new novel, "The Book of Grace," was trending in the number-one spot in a teen and young adult category on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

The novel's author, S.J. Cunningham, said the release of her second book came after her first book, "All This Was Mission," was honored with an award from the International Book Awards.

"So I was able to remind readers about 'All This Was Mission' while beginning to promote 'The Book of Grace'," Cunningham said.

The inspiration for "The Book of Grace" came from the observation by the late novelist Toni Morrison that someone must write the book they want to read if it has not yet been written, which was the way Cunningham felt about young adult fiction, pointing out that novels in that genre left her dissatisfied.

"They just didn't deal with the themes that I wanted to read about," she said. "Of course, as a budding English Literature major, I read a lot of literary fiction, and some of that fiction had younger protagonists, but they weren't necessarily marketed for younger people."

In the new book, the readers are introduced to Grace Meyer, a 17-year-old high school student who mostly has everything she has ever wanted -- popular friends, an awesome boyfriend and plenty of money.

"She also has an overbearing mother who's trying to plan her future and control her life," Cunningham said, adding that Grace finds herself in a rundown cabin in the forest, and

the cabin's owner, Lucy, claims to be Grace's aunt. "Grace knows something has gone terribly wrong in her life. The problem is, she can't remember what that is."

Cunningham said what follows is a journey back and forth between a world of reality and an existence that feels slightly fantastical, but infinitely more comfortable.

"Grace realizes that maybe her existence isn't really what it seems, and it's going to take a lot of soul-searching to find her way back -- or forward -- to where she truly belongs," she said.

As with "All This Was Mission," Cunningham said she has a little bit of herself in all her characters, and that's no different with her 17-year-old protagonist in "The Book of Grace."

She added that she didn't find it difficult to write from the perspective of a teenager like Grace because she thinks the same way now as she did back then about a lot of things, and even her family has helped along the way.

"My daughter isn't so far removed from that age, so I remember her struggles well," Cunningham said. She remembers her insecurities, issues with her parents and peer pressure, explaining, "I don't think those go away more than they just shift into other areas of our lives."

She had a great challenge while pulling the book together, Cunningham pointed out. "The Book of Grace" moves back and forth between two realities and Cunningham enlisted two editors to read the novel to make sure the shifts between the two worlds were smooth.

"I'm fairly certain my writing professors would have advised me against this device, but I think it works for the story," she said.

Cunningham hopes readers take away the idea that the veil between this life and the next is very thin -- that death is simply walking through that veil to the universe next door.

"It becomes clear early on that Grace is in a different type of reality, but she's just fine where she is," she said, adding that people take life so seriously and spend so much of their lives stuck in the details, "Maybe even more so when we're teenagers, and we're trying to find our way in the world."

She recalled, "I wish someone had told me to relax a little bit, although even if they had, I probably wouldn't have listened."

Being stuck at home during the pandemic helped inspire Cunningham's third work of fiction. She has completed the first draft, and it's tentatively titled "In the Land of Blood and Hope."

"It's a post-apocalyptic novel and is the first in a series," she said, adding there is a Connellsville connection to the novel. "At the risk of giving a little bit of a spoiler, the book ends at the Casparis Caves, which is where much of the second novel in that series will be set."

Cunningham said she's also working on a romance novel of sorts, and it's tentatively titled "Soul Saver: A Love Story." It will return to the mystical, spiritual themes of her first two books, she said.

"The Book of Grace" is available now on the websites of Barnes and Noble and Amazon, and from other major booksellers.

For more information, visit www.sjcunningham.net, www.facebook.com/sjcunninghamwriter or follow her on Instagram at www.instagram.com/sjcunninghamwriter for updates.