

Night Bird Calling

Book Club Kit

"An engrossing novel. . . a sumptuous,
textured ode to small-town relationships. "

Foreword Reviews



About Cathy Gohlke

Four-time Christy and two-time Carol and INSPY Award-winning and bestselling author Cathy Gohlke writes novels steeped with inspirational lessons, speaking of world and life events through the lens of history. She champions the battle against oppression, celebrating the freedom found only in Christ. Cathy has worked as a school librarian, drama director, and director of children's and education ministries. When not traveling to historic sites for research, she and her husband divide their time between northern Virginia and the Jersey Shore, enjoying time with their grown children and grandchildren. Visit her website at cathygohlke.com.

Find her on social media:

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Visit Cathy's website to stay up-to-date on news from the author & sign up for her newsletter to receive updates directly to your inbox.

A Note to Readers

Years ago, my brother, Dan Lounsbury—wonderful writer, editor, and friend—took me for a drive in the foothills of North Carolina, not far from the farm where we were born. He showed me a street and a church he knew I'd appreciate because of the irony of their name: No Creek. Named because, you guessed it, there was no creek.

Now that might not seem too surprising until you realize that we were viewing a Baptist church, and nearly every older Baptist church throughout the foothills of North Carolina was built near water, most often a creek. Creeks, as Rosemary Belvidere said, “ran like a widow’s tears” through those foothills. Churches were built near water for the purpose and convenience of full-immersion baptisms and were often named for the creeks by which they reside: Grassy Creek Baptist Church, Mountain Creek Baptist Church, Big Ruin Creek Baptist Church, and so on.

My brother and I sat in the car, staring at that No Creek sign just because he knew I'd want to. In that moment the name of a community was born in my mind. Fully blown characters as real as the man who ran my small-town post office sprang to life and peppered the No Creek of my imagination. I knew those characters' names, their quirks, their faults and failings and their strengths beyond measure. I was privy to their backstories, and I dearly loved them. So I wrote their stories—short stories.

Sometimes I read those short stories aloud in café open mic sessions. I saw that listeners responded to those colorful characters—loved them—nearly as much as I did. But my stories were vignettes, moments in each character's life. There was no overarching story to connect them, nothing to tempt a publisher of full-length novels.

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So for years, those stories and the very real-to-me people that filled their pages sat in a drawer . . . until I realized that no story line from the people of No Creek could unite them. They needed characters drawn from outside forces, people who didn't understand them but wanted to gain acceptance, people who'd come from far away with issues of their own, issues from the world outside, to live and thrive—or die—among the locals in that time and place.

Questions of faith, concern for the oppressed, and stands against injustice claim the heart of my books. Exposing and fighting marital and domestic abuse and race violence have long been passions of mine. Readers may know that from the books I've written, might have guessed it based on my upbringing in the South through years of the civil rights movement. Jim Crow, following the failings of Reconstruction cut short, created a rough and ragged world of its own. Those remnants and attitudes sadly, tragically, have not altogether disappeared. We've come far, but there is still much work and healing to do and it can only be done when we reach out to others in compassion and in respect and appreciation for our neighbors.

What might not be so clear, because of my great love and respect for the church and the faithful of God, is that I'm also passionate about exposing the dangers of church leadership abuse and bringing healing to its victims. As Christians, we don't want to think such abuse exists. We hate the very idea. We want to believe that shepherds of our flocks are trustworthy, blameless as far as humanly possible, and embody the list of qualifications for elders and deacons found in 1 Timothy 3. But where there is power there is temptation to abuse that power, and reports in our daily news make it clear that in some places, in some churches, terrible abuse exists.

The horror of abuse—physical, emotional, mental, spiritual—reeks not only in those churches reported in the national and global news, but in churches, priesthoods, elderships, and pastorates not yet exposed. Dirty secrets are known to hide within the confines of cults, but they can also be hidden within the walls of legitimate churches. It is for the victims of abuse—those who've known intimidation, indoctrination, and physical, emotional, and spiritual trauma—that my heart bleeds. It is especially for them and for all who are willing to help in the understanding and healing process that *Night Bird Calling* is written and prayed over.

If a person has never experienced abuse, it is sometimes hard for them to understand why a victim tolerates it—why they don't report it, stand publicly against it, expose it, stop it, or simply leave the abuser or abusive community. Sometimes those abused are too intimidated, too afraid of what will follow for themselves or loved ones if they expose an abuser. Sometimes they know of nowhere and no one to run to, no one to trust—have even been taught not to trust outsiders or the police, or are so beaten down they don't believe in their own worth or that they deserve love or protection. They may even believe they deserve the abuse and become unable to stand for themselves. But sometimes even the severely downtrodden can be roused to help and protect others they deem in need of protection. That God-given desire to help and protect is where Lilliana of this story, abused herself, finds some of her strength to help Ruby Lynne.

It was pointed out to me, during a vulnerable time in my young life, that God hates abuse and that oppression is one of the reasons He severely warned and chastised His own people, Israel. Bottom line: God does not tolerate abuse. Never has. Never will.

It was a revelation to me at the time that allowing oppressors and abusers to go unchecked is not a sign of forgiveness or a freedom or gift to them—even if they stand in places of marital, administrative, political, or spiritual authority, no matter the moral lens of the time or place. I learned that for the sake of the abuser as well as the abused, abuse must be stopped and the horror exposed. We were not created to be doormats.

The Scripture pointed out to me that registered, that allowed me to say, “No more!” is found in Matthew 18:6—“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

That is the message Lilliana discovers in this story. No matter how she feared and had suffered, she did not want that millstone to be the end for her abuser. She just needed the abuse to stop.

Night Bird Calling is a work of fiction. Its characters are fictitious, except for the offstage characters of Oswald and Biddy Chambers. Theirs is a love and lifelong-ministry story worthy of books, despite the fact that Oswald's life was cut short. His wife, whom he affectionately called “Biddy,” recorded his talks in shorthand and faithfully transcribed them.

Those writings, particularly in the devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest* that Bidy published after Oswald's passing, have long been a great blessing and source of conviction for me. In that book you will find blessings upon blessings, insights upon insights into life and following in the footsteps of Jesus, into building an intimate, full, and rich relationship with Him.

I hope, as you read *Night Bird Calling*, that you will consider those around you—family, friends, colleagues, students, even strangers. If you or someone you know is or was intimidated or abused in any way, please reach out to them and let them know that abuse, oppression, attitudes of control or lording over a person or over a congregation do not come from God, do not come from the lover and Creator of life. Lovingly point those abused and those who abuse to our Savior, who forgives the repentant, who loves and heals each of us, cruelly broken though we may be. All we have to do is ask Him. Know that He holds accountable those who abuse authority and power, whether in relationships of marriage, family, community, or the church. Know that the pain of those abused is not forgotten and that the abuse is not their fault.

Show others that you love them—love them with the perfect, healing, unrestrained love of Christ.

Scripture tells us that we are so dearly loved and delighted in that we are rejoiced over with singing. With great loving-kindness has our Father drawn us. He never means us harm but offers each of us hope and a future.

God's great love and blessings for you,

Cathy

Discussion Questions

- 1 Lilliana ran away after learning of her husband and father's plans to have her committed. Given the time and viewpoints of the police and church community, do you think she had other choices? What might those options have been?
- 2 Once she was safe in No Creek, Lilliana said she would rather die than go back to her abusive husband. Have you ever felt that hopeless or known anyone who felt that desperate? What did you do, or how would you counsel someone in that situation?
- 3 In the news we frequently hear of spousal abuse, workplace abuse, or abuse by people in political and spiritual authority. Sometimes it seems that abusers are all but excused. Sometimes they are exposed, sometimes they are prosecuted, and sometimes they are simply removed from their positions of authority. What public action or punishment do you think is appropriate? What kind of consequences would you have liked to see for Lilliana's father and husband?
- 4 Celia often leapt into situations without realizing the full repercussions of her actions. List some of those situations. Did they ultimately lead to good changes or transformations? Did you find yourself cheering for her, admiring her innocence? Or growing frustrated with her perhaps-foolish lack of fear?
- 5 Lilliana unexpectedly found herself enmeshed in situations of abuse and racial injustice in No Creek. Why did she choose to take on these battles? Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation, where you felt convicted to get involved in a domestic, workplace, political, community, race, school, or church situation that appeared oppressive or off-kilter? If you're able to briefly share about the experience without betraying confidences, please do so.

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- 6 In No Creek, making, selling, or running moonshine was a way of life, especially during the Depression. Addiction and the consequences of addiction often followed. Today, many depressed rural communities are riddled with issues of addiction to drugs and alcohol. Are there remedies? What are they? How can we help?
- 7 Lilliana expressed doubt that Rhoads Wishon could change, saying, "Leopards don't change their spots." Do you believe change is possible for someone like Rhoads? Like Troy? Like Fillmore? Like Gerald? Why or why not?
- 8 Do you see parallels between the treatment of Jewish people in Europe during WWII and the treatment of African Americans in the US at that time and before? Do you think the people of No Creek or across America saw those similarities? Why or why not? Do such similarities exist today?
- 9 Much has changed since the days of WWII and the world painted in *Night Bird Calling*. Legal rights, cultural expectations, and opportunities for women and minorities have come a long way in the last seventy-five years.

So has our understanding of the proper treatment of other human beings, regardless of race or gender. Discuss what has changed, why, and what still needs to change for the good of all.

- 10 Citizens of No Creek, like much of America, wanted nothing to do with the war in Europe until Pearl Harbor was bombed and the war came home in a very personal way. Once Congress declared war on Japan and Germany, the country mobilized, united in a way that it has not been since. What do you think inspired that unity? Do you see that spirit in our country today? Why or why not?
- 11 List some of your favorite characters or scenes from the novel. What made these so memorable for you?
- 12 What would you like the future to hold for Lilliana, for Jesse, for Ruby, for Marshall, for Gladys and Fillmore, for Celia and Chester?



Scenes that Inspired the Story

When they are writing a story, sometimes an author will envision a specific location or a moment from their own life that helps them channel their creativity. Cathy Gohlke shared with us some photos of places that inspired settings in *Night Bird Calling*. Take a peek at them below and find more story inspiration on the *Night Bird Calling* Pinterest page: <https://www.pinterest.com/cathygothke1/night-bird-calling/>



No Creek, North Carolina



Friendly beasts for No Creek Christmas Pageant



Church at Tanglewood Park, Clemmons, North Carolina



Inspiration for No Creek General Store & post office

Discuss with your book group: How do these photos from the author align with how you envisioned the story's setting? How have these photos given you a better understanding of the story's time and place?

Bonus Story

Journey back to No Creek for a special short story featuring Celia and others from *Night Bird Calling*. Read the story for free in *Into the Starry Night* on Cathy Gohlke's website.

<https://bit.ly/IntotheStarryNight>

Into the
Starry Night

CATHY GOHLKE

Your Discussion Questions

Jot down questions about the book that you'd like to ask in your next book club conversation:

Q&A with Cathy Gohlke

Read this Q&A prior to your book group discussion to learn about the research that went into the novel and what the author hopes readers will take away from the story. Then talk with your group about how this deepened your own understanding of the characters and the story.

Q *Night Bird Calling* presents intriguing and lovable characters in heartbreaking and challenging situations. Did the journeys of any of the characters surprise you as you wrote?

A Marshall, the fifteen-year-old nephew of Olney Tate, descendent of slaves, surprised me. Marshall was sent to live with his aunt and uncle, Mercy and Olney Tate, after his father was murdered in Georgia. Though Marshall could barely read or write, he had a keen eye and a thirst for learning. I knew Marshall was a hard worker and an honorable young man, but I did not anticipate his excelling so quickly or that he would develop a passion for healing and a desire to apprentice himself to Dr. Vishnevsky—a desire cut short due to the dangers of racism in No Creek. But it is in leaving No Creek that Marshall finds his future—a future that will be explored in my next book.

Q The novel is set in a rural community divided by racism, in a country on the brink of World War II. What prompted you to write about this particular time period and setting?

A I see a number of correlations between the years leading up to WWII and our present day. Economic fears, joblessness, uncertainty about where our world is headed, questions about our responsibility and ability to help those who've been abused or are in need, and our serious racial divide are all issues people grappled with in 1941 just as we do today. Sometimes it's easier to understand our complex difficulties and find creative solutions by viewing them through the lens of a historic time frame rather than the busyness and political divides of modern day. Historical fiction provides that little bit of distance to enhance our objectivity.

Q Opening a lending library from their home to everyone in the community, regardless of race, was a radical move in 1941 Appalachia. What inspired this?

A Sometime after fleeing my abusive marriage as a young woman, I bought an old trailer in a run-down neighborhood—a far cry from Garden’s Gate—but the best I could afford at the time. Children in that neighborhood ran as wild and untended as weeds in a garden run amok. I befriended many of those children—or they befriended me—bought a used bookcase and books at yard sales, and opened a lending library right there in my trailer. Children came for hours sometimes to color pictures, read or be read to, enjoy glasses of milk and homemade bread with jam, and just talk, asking questions about life and God and prison (where one of their fathers served time)—everything imaginable. Parents often took advantage of their community’s new “free” babysitter, but those were precious and healing days for the children and for me. Years later I remarried and bore my own precious children. When they were old enough, I worked as a children’s librarian in a school. Those memories became the inspiration for Aunt Hyacinth’s lending library in *Night Bird Calling*.

Q Can you tell us about the historical research that went into writing this novel? Did you learn anything new that surprised you?

A Much of my prior WWII writing has focused on foreign shores, but for this story I researched the American home front before and during WWII through books, Internet research, archival film footage on the Great Depression, Jim Crow laws and their results, the history of lynching and the KKK, racism and the great migration, and the work of Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as histories of Wilkes and Surry Counties in North Carolina and the Appalachian home moonshine industry and its culture. I read about and visited lifesaving stations on the Outer Banks.

Legal sources were interviewed for information regarding trusts, wills, and divorce proceedings in 1941. Newspapers archives for Wilkes County were helpful. I interviewed some wonderful older people who had lived there during those years and pulled some real-life stories from them, my family, and my own life, then enjoyed a trip to the North Carolina foothills and mountains, soaking up its music and a visit to the church and cemetery where some of my ancestors were buried.

For the Oswald and Bidley Chambers threads, I found wonderful information in the biography *Mrs. Oswald Chambers* by Michelle Ule and in *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God* by David McCasland, as well as pertinent passages in *My Utmost for His Highest*.

I was surprised to learn how close to civilian life the military in North Carolina practiced war games as they trained recruits. I can only imagine it was startling and perhaps frightening to those able to observe.

Q What did you learn by writing this novel, and what lessons do you hope your readers take away?

A *Night Bird Calling* is fiction, as are its characters, though parts of Lilliana's escape from an abusive marriage and her challenged growth into believing that God really loves her and has a plan for her life were drawn from my own life. I found the dredging up of memories I've wanted to forget and the necessary baring of my soul to write this story emotionally challenging, yet in the end I also found it freeing. Shame loses its hold once confessed. It is truly a gift if that confession helps free others. Abused women are often told not to tell of their abuse and are threatened with dire consequences to ensure their silence. Often they are filled with shame that they cannot stop the abuse, cannot change their abuser, and feel helpless to change themselves or their circumstances. They believe their situation is unique, that no one will believe them, that they are truly alone. I hope that in writing Lilliana's story, other women will realize those things are not true, and that abuse does not come from God, no matter what their abuser or oppressor insists. I hope women realize their value lies in the very life God has given them and that He is above all the Husband who never fails us, never hurts us, the One who loves us and always wants a strong and healthy relationship with us. He wants us to be whole.

"With her signature gift for delving into topics and truths as relevant to us today as they are to the characters found within these pages, Cathy Gohlke delivers a poignant story rich with vibrant characters, woven with spiritual depth, and bound together by hope."

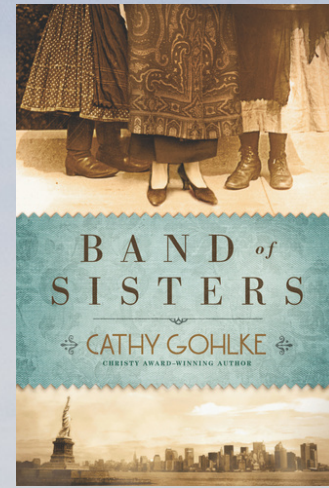
AMANDA BARRATT, author of *The White Rose Resists* and
My Dearest Dietrich on *Night Bird Calling*

My Book Club Notes

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