

*Self-Publishing,
Serendipity,
& Success*



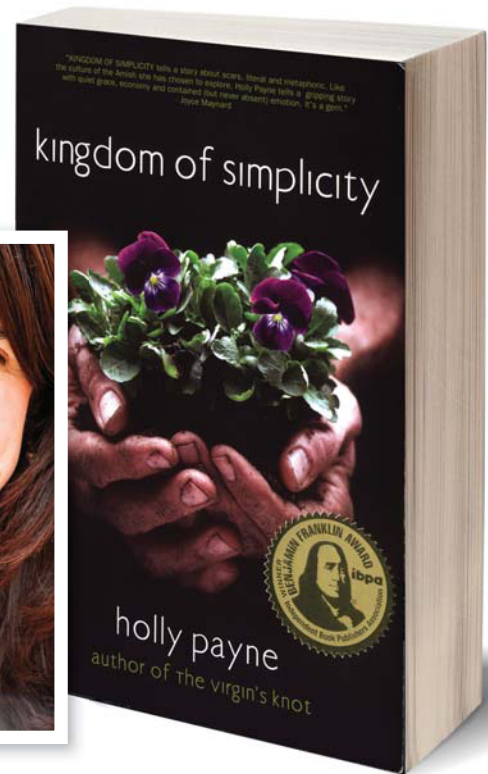
*An Interview with Holly Payne
Winner of Writer's Digest Grand Prize
for a Self-Published Book*

An Interview with

Holly Payne

Who has inspired you—in your writing and otherwise?

I grew up around the Pennsylvania Amish people and was deeply influenced by their culture. Their humility, belief in hard work and ability to forgive were things I probably took for granted during my childhood until I began writing *Kingdom of Simplicity*. Their work ethic proved to be very useful to the writer in me and taught me to show up to the pages with an open heart and do the best job I can, no matter how long or how difficult the work may seem to be—especially at the outset.



Describe your writing process for this book. (How long did it take you to write it? Where did you get the idea? Etc.)

The writing of *Kingdom of Simplicity* was very different than my first two novels, primarily because it was based on a true event that changed my life—surviving a drunk driver who struck me two weeks after I graduated from college and left me unable to walk for nearly a year. My whole perspective shifted and I vowed that night that if I lived, I would dedicate my life, at least this second chance, to using my gift for something that would matter. I had no idea I'd end up as a novelist. Six months after the accident, the driver wrote a letter asking for my forgiveness, but I wasn't capable of forgiving him because the pain was too raw, and I had no idea what forgiveness meant or how to do it. I had to heal and it took me 15 years to respond to the letter, five of which I spent writing *Kingdom of Simplicity* (which I dedicated in part to the driver), and I believe it was a critical step toward my healing.

Write a short paragraph telling readers what your book is about.

Kingdom of Simplicity is the coming-of-age story about Eli Yoder, a misguided Amish youth, confronted with forgiving the person who destroys his family. I wanted to explore the idea of choices, especially among Amish youth who are given the choice to join the Amish com-

Holly Payne (40, Mill Valley, Calif.) is an internationally published novelist, screenwriter and writing coaching living in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and young daughter.

Her most recent novel, *Kingdom of Simplicity*, based on a true story of forgiveness, won the Benjamin Franklin Award for Best First Book from a new press, received a Marin Arts Council Grant and was recently translated into Dutch and Chinese.

Payne is also the author of *The Sound of Blue* and *The Virgin's Knot*, her debut novel published in nine countries and selected as a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers book and a Border's Original Voices book.

Payne is the founder of Skywriter Books, a publishing consultancy and independent press and Skywriter Ranch, an annual writing retreat in Colorado.

She received a MFA from University of Southern California and has served on the faculty of the Academy of Art University, California College of the Arts and Stanford.

In 2009, University of Richmond honored her with a Distinguished Alumni Award. Her forthcoming novel is an epic, medieval love story involving Sufi mystics.

munity—or leave it during rumspringa, when they turn 16. In this case, Eli doesn't feel he even deserves to be Amish because he has not learned to forgive—a choice he is incapable of making until he leaves home and searches for acceptance from the Outside World. Here a surprising friendship with a barber prepares Eli to confront the biggest questions of his life.

How long have you been writing? How did you start? Do you write full time?

Poetry lead me to love words and I started writing short stories when I was eleven. Later, I was the features editor at my high school newspaper and published my first story for our local city paper when I was 14. I studied journalism in college and worked as a full-time reporter one summer and after college, I dreamed of becoming a foreign correspondent. The accident shifted a lot of that and I ended up going to USC for grad school, then teaching for 12 years. I no longer teach in the classroom but continue to coach privately a few days a week then write on the other days. I love the rhythm of dipping in and out of story worlds.

What are the challenges of writing a story inspired by a real life event?

It makes you very vulnerable and exposed, especially for a writer like me who purposely left behind journalism and all things related to non-fiction in order to 'hide' somehow in fiction. If I wrote about the real accident, I worried I'd reveal too much about myself and my relationship to my family. The irony is that because I wrote about something inspired by a real life event, both the accident and Nickel Mine School shooting, my research had to be as accurate as if I was working as a professional journalist.

What research did you do to help you capture Amish culture accurately?

Although I was a native of Lancaster County and had lived there for 18 years of my life, I had little factual knowledge of Amish history. Surprisingly, we never learned about the Amish in social studies but when I began to research them first for a graduate thesis about shunning, I realized there was so much I had yet to learn. I read and studied almost everything I could find specifically about Lancaster County Amish people including: Amish Society by John A. Hostetler; Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy, by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher; A History of the Amish, by Steven M. Nolt; The Riddle of Amish Culture, by Donald B. Kraybill; Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish, by Tom

Shachtman, which wasn't really focused on Lancaster County Amish, but gave me great insight into the period of experimentation and rebellion that my character Eli Yoder enters. I was also very fortunate to be able to return to Lancaster County many times during the writing of the book because my parents still live there. My father and I shared a wonderful weekend at the annual Amish mud auction. That was an abundant day of research, and though I'm embarrassed to admit it, I was able to get a lot of pictures from a respectful distance that captured some of great details for the story.

What elements do you think make a successful novel?

An interesting story world, compelling characters (but not overly populated), tightly woven narrative based on cause and effect, lyrical language, rhythm within the prose, and a soul.

How has writing through your forgiveness process changed you as a writer?

I don't know if any theme can actually change me as a writer, but every major theme I've explored in my novels has surfaced in my own life. It's unavoidable. I think that's the beauty of receiving a story like this. You have to face yourself fully—your shadows and your light, to understand the human condition and create a character that's fully dimensional and hopefully compelling. The flaws make our characters seem more alive and relatable to readers; it is our imperfections that make us human. I really know that now because my 18-month old daughter has discovered the huge scar on my leg and leaned in to kiss it the other day. What I realized while I was finishing the book deeply disturbed me—I was still ignoring the drunk driver. I thought I had truly forgiven him by writing the book, but I hadn't addressed the letter he wrote. I still hadn't forgiven him formally and it had been 15 years. So, whose turn was it to ask for forgiveness? When I finally wrote to him in 2009 and told him about the book and why I had written it, I soaked my keyboard with tears.

What advice has had the biggest impact on your success in life and as an author?

I met a woman on a train once in Hungary whose son was living in Germany. I asked her if she missed him and she said she did, but that it was her duty "to bring her child into the world and give him love, but also to let him go so that the world can give him character." I thought, wow, I want to be like that when I'm a mother. And now that I am, I want to be able to have the poise and confidence to let my work go into the world despite the fear of rejec-

tion. It's easy to give up or quit when you doubt the story or the reasons for writing it. But you have to keep going. You have to finish what you start or else you'll never get the lessons and get better.

What's the one thing you can't live without in your writing life?

Frequent access to a mountain. Hiking keeps me grounded and walking among those massive redwood trees here in Northern California helps to keep things in perspective. It clears my head and allows all that subconscious story matter to work itself to the surface.

What does a typical day look like for you?

Very different than what my life looked like before I gave birth. My day is divided into windows—baby time, family time, feeding time, “dirt-deviling” the house time, and there's only one window in the morning when I get to work undisturbed. When I use that time to write (like now), I unplug from the internet. I'd never get anything done if I made myself available to email or phone calls, let alone all the social media pressures. I'm almost religious about this time and make it sacred. It's the only way I'd ever get anything written, and I was surprised that I was able to finish a new book this past year in the ‘window.’ I don't have the luxury of puttering around the page in long stretches anymore. While I miss that, I'm surprisingly much more efficient now. The writing is immediate or it doesn't happen. I must seize the window or suffer.

Describe the process of publishing this book?

First, I had to learn what I was doing because I had no clue what the first step was other than to give myself permission to proceed (and fail or succeed, but at least give myself a chance). I was grateful to stumble across Peter Bower's amazing book, *The Well-Fed Self-Publisher*, that pretty much taught me everything I needed to know about the steps along the way. Using a print broker, finding a printer (I chose off-set printing because my initial print run was 3000), choosing the right fulfillment services (wait, wasn't fulfillment seeing my book between a cover?) Basically, I was a complete rookie when I started, but I wasn't afraid to ask questions and I was determined to learn everything I could about writing marketing plans for distribution, etc. I dove in naively, having no idea how much work it would involve, but also discovering how capable of was of doing it. Writers are quick studies. We can learn to do these business-related tasks. I discovered how weirdly fun it could be as long as I stayed curious and not critical of myself.

Why did you choose self-publishing?

Kingdom of Simplicity was first represented under the title *Big Ugly* by a very well-respected agent, but after 12 rejections from some great editors in New York, I started to have that sinking feeling that I might not see this book come out when I needed it to come out—by the 15th anniversary of the accident. Something deep in my gut told me I had to meet this deadline, so in the fall of 2008, I made the most difficult phone call of my career and told my agent I was leaving to pursue this on my own. What I mean by pursuing it on my own was completing the process—getting my book out to my readers. It was a matter of trusting my gut about timing, which was all made clear when I found out my ‘gut’ was right. I was pregnant with my first child at the end of July 2009, one month after the book had come out, i.e. the publication date I had chosen. I truly believe my daughter was asking me to move on from this place in the past where I was so stuck with unresolved grief. By releasing the book when I did, I was finally making room for joy and grace in my life. I do not regret my decision because I've never known this kind of love.

What are the biggest challenges you've faced self-publishing?

First, I knew I had to create an imprint—Skywriter Books, not at first associated with my name, in order to battle the stigma associated with self-publishing. I wanted to give my book a chance to get distribution and be carried by the bookstores I love here in the Bay Area and elsewhere. Unfortunately, the negative perception associated with self-published books was and is still out there for many reasons, primarily because most self-published books sadly still lack the professionalism needed to be respected and taken seriously in the marketplace. I know a lot of New York published writer friends are still terrified of what self-publishing might imply about their writing career—some kind of failure, but I had nothing to lose, especially since I knew I would put my book through the same editing and marketing rigors. I am a survivor and knew no matter what happened at the end of this great experiment, I would still have my life, my love for writing, my family and my health. If by some stroke of luck I succeeded, I figured I could possibly help other writers through Skywriter Books. Even if I lost, I still had the opportunity to share my experience. Despite the perceived stigma, I saw it as a win-win.

What are the most important benefits of self-publishing?

You get as much time as you need to make the book excellent. You don't feel the pressure that so often accompanies a book contract. I loved being able to work with other creative professionals and collaborate on all phases of the book from editing, to the book's design, to the launch and setting up media engagements. I loved how responsible it made me for every outcome. The only finger that I could point would be at myself, so I wanted to give it all I had. It was one of the most daunting yet empowering projects I've ever undertaken.

What surprised you about the process of self-publishing?

The collaboration and serendipity involved. So many amazing people showed up at the right time—just when I needed editors, book designers, even the chance meeting of the photographer who took the hands shot for the cover (who helped me recruit my husband as the hand model). I owe much of the book's success to the Skywriter team and was so touched by the faith they had in the story. I started to believe I really had made the right decision when everything was falling into place. Here I had written a book and ended up with a business! I could have never foreseen this outcome, but the truth is I'm having fun with the entrepreneurial aspects of running a small press and publishing consultancy. The whole process has been such an education.

What are the biggest misconceptions about self-publishing?

That the author didn't hire a professional editor and that it's the cheap and quick way to 'get published.' In my experience, nothing could have been further from the truth. I made sure my book went through a rigorous rewrite, cutting nearly 200 pages from the original manuscript. By the time *Kingdom of Simplicity* was published, it had been read by 37 test readers, 12 of which were professional editors (12 passed) and the rest were iterations of people who vowed to give me 100% honest feedback. I wanted to know what wasn't working so that I could make it better. Good, thorough notes can be a writer's best defense against failure. I didn't just want my book published, I wanted to publish a great book. I wanted to give my readers greatness.

What's your advice to other self-publishing authors?

Join IBPA and SPAN. Read publications like this one. Vet all book designers in your area or on the web that you

might be able to work with on future covers and interior design. You really do need the best you can afford. It makes a huge difference and people really do judge a book by its cover. Sad but true. It's the "Blink" phenomena. Surround yourself with positive people who want to raise the standards of excellence and dissolve the stigma that's made it so difficult for self-published writers to be respected, celebrated, or even critically reviewed. The Internet is changing some of this now. We are in the midst of historic shifts. Choose to be a leader. Choose a vision that can help others. It's an exciting time to participate in self-publishing so demand excellence from everyone you work with including yourself.

What are the keys that have made your book a success?

I stayed true to myself and true to the story. I trusted my gut and I sought help when I needed it. I didn't give up and didn't lose faith. I finished what I started and rewrote until I got it right.

What's the worst mistake that self-publishing authors can make?

To assume the book is ready for publication when it hasn't been thoroughly edited and worse, putting the book out in the market when it is not yet ready to be received. Writers need editors. I seek the very best and brightest editorial minds I can and I am always grateful for what a talented editor can provide. They will make the book better. They will help to refine it. As much as we try to think we know it all because we are the 'authors' we have a lot to learn about taking editorial notes well. We have to give that much to our readers and ourselves. Readers complete our process and we owe them our excellence. So if you have any inkling that something's not quite right with the book, wait, give it time, and rewrite again and again until it's ready. I always tell my clients that fiction is an endurance sport—but the same can be said for all writing. It requires persistence. Stay committed to making it great.

If you were to self-publish again, what is one thing you'd do differently?

I would schedule weekly massages to alleviate the stress. Just kidding. Seriously, I would have to pace myself differently now that I have a young child. I don't see how I could possibly recreate my kitchen-sink operation, literally doing every mailing from my kitchen table and office. I would have to hire an assistant, and I would definitely utilize social media more. I was too relaxed (lazy, afraid?) about this and I know I could have sold more books if I had been more proactive. I just couldn't get myself to Tweet and do Facebook, etc. without feeling self-conscious. I'm

still overcoming my resistance to self-promotion, but how can I possibly publish successfully without learning how to promote myself in the same manner? (Thanks to cajoling yet loving friends, I Tweeted this award!) The point is that even if I am published traditionally again, I will still have to put as much time and effort into my own marketing and publicity. That's just the way it is these days. The savviest authors get that and are taking the necessary steps to educate themselves and improve their marketing and social media skills. We know we are writers for only part of our jobs.

Imbued with the history and lore of Turkish culture and tradition, *The Virgin's Knot* chronicles a young woman's journey from innocence to knowledge and loneliness to love.

To be savored like the dark intensity of Turkish coffee.

San Francisco Chronicle

A thoughtful, tempered debut... Payne keeps the story simple, elemental, and reserved, emphasizing the timeless quality of the tragic tale... a well-crafted, meditative piece.

Kirkus Reviews

Creates an almost mystical tableau.

The San Jose Mercury News

Every page of *The Virgin's Knot* is a tightly woven and bountiful gift to readers. Like all who lived in her Turkish village, and two exceptional men, I fell in love with the remarkable weaver and her magic carpets.

Diane Leslie, author of *Fleur De Leigh's Life of Crime*

Infused with poetry and perfume, *The Virgin's Knot* is that rare thing: a soulful page-turner. Holly Payne is the new Scheherazade!

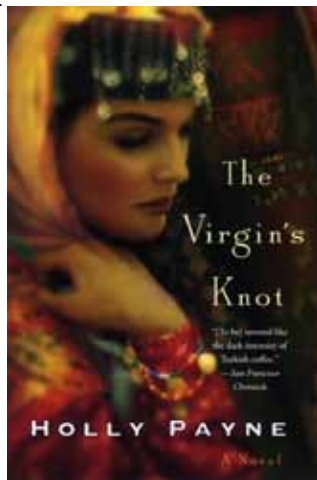
Laurie Fox, author of *My Sister from the Black Lagoon*

The hearts and minds of today's observant Muslim women are as hidden from us as their faces. In her novel *The Virgin's Knot*, set in the inaccessible reaches of the Taurus Mountains, Holly Payne unveils a world the casual tourist never sees, a world virtually unchanged for a thousand years.

Jacqueline Park, author of *The Secret Book of Grazia Dei Rossi*

A beautifully written and evocative fable. . . . An entrancing blend of myth, history, and religious feminism that results in a tale as compelling as it is elusive.

Booklist



If you were to self-publish again, what is one thing you'd do the same?

I would ask as many readers as possible for their opinion, hire the best editorial and design services I can afford and spend as much time as I can to ensure the book itself was excellent. I would assemble a team of experts to make sure the book had met this new standard of excellence so that it could be competitive and thrive in the marketplace.

The Sound of Blue takes readers on an exquisite and soulful journey into a rare part of the world, exploring the healing power of music in the lives of three strangers during the last Balkan War.

Against a background of stark wartime imagery, Payne laces her tale with poetic musings on the healing and redemptive power of love.

Deborah Donovan, American Library Association

Holly Payne's greatest achievement is to move the story beyond the never-ending volleys of who-did-what-to-whom into a realm where the only thing that really matters is not whether her characters are Serb or Croat but that they are refugees.

San Francisco Chronicle

I feel like I know Luka as well as Payne

does because I am a "Luka." Like every character in Payne's novel, I understand what it means to be a refugee, and how we are all survivors of the assembly of the hurts and slights that define us. Payne's insightful and vividly detailed story reminds us of our common daily struggle to ensure our triumphs outpace our disappointments.

David Breshears, Everest mountaineer, author of *High Exposure*

Here is a courageous, compassionate new voice filled with elegant and assured prose. Payne is a masterful storyteller who proves again to tackle ambitious subject matter with great delicacy.

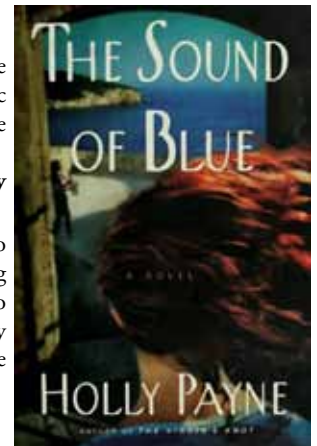
Ishmael Reed, winner of the McCarthy Genius Award

The book's heart matches its author's – expansive and exploding with passion. Payne's understanding of music, especially rhythm, rings true on every page.

Liberty DeVitto, drummer of The NYC Hit Squad and formerly of Billy Joel

With Holly's intimate and poetic writing, book reader groups can comfortably travel to the tension of unfamiliar places.

Rachel Jacobsohn, Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders and author of *The Reading Group Handbook*.



Learn more about Holly Payne at <http://www.hollylynnpayne.com>
Learn more about Holly's writing workshops at <http://www.skywriterseries.com>
Learn more about forgiveness at <http://www.kingdomofsimplicity.com>