

Writing

BY DAVID DORION MA '94

FORGIVE

*“If I am alive,
I am going to write.”*

Holly Payne '97 spoke these words as she lay on the edge of a road beside a cemetery. Seconds earlier, she stopped to assist two stranded cyclists. A passing pickup truck struck all three.

Payne was propelled several dozen feet onto her back. She was badly hurt and believed the two cyclists were most likely dead. Yet, they survived. But regardless of injuries that would leave her unable to walk for nearly a year, as she gazed up at the evening sky, she made a promise she has since kept.

“If I am alive, I am going to write.”

As with many novelists, the life they experience parallels the fiction they create. In Payne's latest novel, *Kingdom of Simplicity* (Skywriter Books, 2009), her own experience with pain and healing coalesces with a real-life tragedy in Lancaster County, Pa., and the Amish community's remarkable ability to forgive. >>

Left: An X-ray showing the 10 screws and titanium plate used to reconstruct Holly Payne's leg after a drunk driver struck her on a Colorado road.

The Master of Professional Writing program graduate crafts a tale in which a car collides with a horse-drawn buggy, killing five Amish sisters. Their surviving brother and Payne's main character, Eli Yoder, must then embark on the difficult quest of forgiving the person who ultimately caused their deaths.

Forgiveness — this is what both Eli and Payne struggle with. Even as being a true Amish hangs in the balance, Eli is unable to offer absolution. It is only after progressing through feelings of anger and denial that he is able to arrive at forgiveness. And rather than let rage swallow her whole, Payne has likewise chosen a different path. She has dedicated the novel to the drunk driver who struck her.

12 Years, 10 Screws and a Titanium Plate

As a result of the accident on that dark mountain road in her then home of Crested Butte, Colo., Payne endured countless injuries. Her head was covered in lacerations; She had a broken pelvis as well as a shattered femur held together by a titanium plate and 10 screws. Intensive physical therapy followed. She eventually healed, but only after nine months in a wheelchair, behind a walker, on crutches and then a cane.

Thanks to her conditioning as a tri-athlete, she was once again competing in races. Nevertheless, for Payne it was the emotional scars that needed more time to mend.

Harboring a silent fury as they question the circumstances that aligned against them, where Payne and Eli's fictional character part ways is in his desperate search for reminders of his sisters. Payne avoided any connection with her accident. One refusal in particular — and probably the most significant — was her response to the letter that arrived one day from the driver who hit her.

"I was in Hungary at the time, teaching English. It was six months after the accident; I was 22 and on crutches," Payne explained.

Even with this remoteness from the United States, not to mention Crested Butte, her past and its disquietude still caught up with her.

Payne recognized the name and return address from insurance documents. She opened the envelope. After reading the letter up to the point that the driver asked for her forgiveness, Payne came to a succinct conclusion: "I thought, 'How dare he contact me,' and I put [the letter] in a pile and forgot about it," she recalled. "I was so angry that I pretended he didn't exist. I was going to play out his punishment my way, which was to not respond."



Writer at peace: Holly Payne '97 today, fully healed 15 years after surviving a drunk driving accident.

Twelve years passed. Payne went to graduate school. She also wrote two novels, *The Virgin's Knot* (Penguin, 2002) and *The Sound of Blue* (Plume, 2005). She was at work on a third book, which was to become *Kingdom of Simplicity*.

Everything came to a halt on Oct. 2, 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV burst into the West Nickel Mines Amish School in Payne's childhood home of Lancaster County. Roberts shot 10 Amish girls execution-style, killing five before taking his own life.

Suddenly news helicopters were buzzing over the same fields Payne knew growing up and described in her book. The shooter, in fact, made his way to the schoolhouse along the same road her characters walk in her novel. The fictional terror Eli experiences in *Kingdom of Simplicity* had become real and it deeply affected her. She pushed aside her work, breaking the vow she made to herself outside of the cemetery.

"At first, I thought I should stop writing the book because no one would want to read a fictional account of something that had just happened," Payne said. "For at least a month, I sat at my desk and cried for those girls and their families. ... It took a full hour each day to face the pages and continue to the end."

Despite this being the single worst act of violence against the Amish since they arrived in North America, Payne salvaged inspiration from equally phenomenal events that occurred days later. The community set

able to see how much I needed to reach out to the driver and hope that he knew I had forgiven him and would find a way to forgive himself."

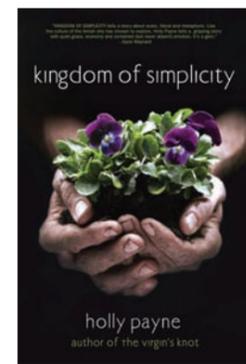
It's Been Done

Despite its compelling story and despite Payne's prior success as a writer, publishers turned down *Kingdom of Simplicity*.

"Dutton told me that it's been done, and that they weren't interested," she said. "I was devastated."

Payne, who now resides in Marin County, Calif., came up with another tactic. Instead of scurrying to find another publisher, she founded Skywriter Books, a publishing house whose first endeavor would be to publish *Kingdom of Simplicity*.

"I remember thinking I had nothing to lose," she said. "That I have no timeline, and I'm going to write it and see what happens."



"In many ways, **GETTING STRUCK** was a **GIFT** and it set me on the course of a **WRITING LIFE**. I wanted to be **FREE** from the power the **PAST** had over me, and writing the **BOOK** gave me the **KEY**."

up funds not only for the families of the five slain girls, but also for the Roberts' family. This outreach to both the victims and perpetrator of the Nickel Mines massacre continued when the Lancaster Amish attended, in equal number, the memorial services for the girls as well as for Roberts. As the Amish daughters were lamented and buried, the shooter was absolved.

Payne was fascinated by these actions. Though not Amish herself, she had grown up in their shadow and came to understand the solemnity and lament that were sacrosanct to their religious beliefs. It wasn't until the shootings that she learned of their unbelievable strength to absolve in the face of tragedy.

"Many people couldn't understand how they could forgive so quickly," Payne recalled. "But what they do not understand is that forgiveness is one of the first lessons an Amish child learns, 'Forgive the sinner, but not the sin.' Let go of any attachment to the act itself, move on; however, this is where so much of the confusion remains for us."

Witnessing this prompted Payne to revisit the driver's letter she had hidden away for well over a decade. Upon opening it and again seeing his request, Payne immediately knew she had to finish the novel with the driver in mind. She also knew she had to dedicate the book to him. For all along, her novel had been about forgiveness, and with that she planned not only to forgive him, but to use her book as a vehicle for sharing the importance of this difficult and necessary act.

"I was so angry, I dismissed his entire existence," Payne said. "But through the writing, I completed something in my own life and was

What Payne did insist on, however, was the stark honesty found in her novel.

"I want to show the Amish are real human beings who are no different than us. Eli is a real human who wants to be Amish, but can't forgive, which is core to the Amish community," she said.

"Culturally, forgiveness is a subject we don't discuss. But the Amish are very progressive with it."

And what of Payne's own offering of forgiveness through her novel?

"After 15 years, I wrote back and told the driver I forgave him, and that I do hope he can release himself from any shame and pain that he still carries. He never sent a letter in return."

So, to that, one has no choice but to move on, which Payne has done.

"I am a survivor," she said. "In many ways, getting struck was a gift and it set me on the course of a writing life. I wanted to be free from the power the past had over me, and writing the book gave me the key; though nothing would have prepared me to see so much of the plot become real in life, and affect real people."

With harm and pain so inherent to the human condition, forgiveness is a powerful countermeasure. Payne knows this, and her dedication is proof. ■

To read an excerpt from *Kingdom of Simplicity*, visit www.kingdomofsimplicity.com

David Dorion is a 1994 graduate of the Master of Professional Writing program.

PHOTO BY CINDI KINNEY