



The Christmas Heirloom

by Karen Witemeyer, Kristi Ann Hunter,
Sarah Loudin Thomas, & Becky Wade
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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH THE AUTHORS

1. How did the idea for this collection come about?

On a dark and stormy night . . . Well, actually it happened in the back of a hotel meeting room with fluorescent lighting and brisk air conditioning at a writing conference. Kristi Ann Hunter and Karen Witemeyer got to talking about novella collections and how to find co-authors who match one's genre and style. These two writers, who are also very good friends, wanted to do a collection together, but how could they make it work with Kristi's stories set in Regency England and Karen's in the late twentieth-century American West? Brainstorming commenced. Perhaps a British character could emigrate. Maybe a family heirloom could be handed down across the generations to span the time and distance gap. Excitement began to build. But a collection needs more than two authors. If each leap of time covered about three generations, they would need someone who could write in the 1950s or '60s era, as well as a contemporary author. Enter the perfect duo: Sarah Loudin Thomas and Becky Wade. Sarah and Becky joined the collection with very little arm-twisting, and the collection was complete.

2. What is the unifying theme between each novella?

While each story stands on its own, there is a specific thread that weaves them together: the heirloom. The authors brainstormed several jewelry options and settled on a luckenbooth brooch. The style of this pin was popular in eighteenth-century Scotland, where the family matriarch first receives it as a wedding gift. The interlocking hearts represent a love so steadfast it can endure all hardship. The sapphire stone in the center represents the rarity of such a love. It is handed down from mother to firstborn daughter or daughter-in-law. As generations pass and love matches prevail for those who inherit the brooch, a legend grows to surround the heirloom, promising that whoever possesses it will find true love. Each story in the collection centers on the brooch and a couple who find love at Christmas time.

3. How do modern Christmas traditions differ from those of the early 1800s in Kristi's *Legacy of Love*?

Christmas celebrations have changed significantly over the past two hundred years, becoming grander, longer, and a great deal more stressful. Today, people's attics contain boxes of decor they pull out year after year. In *Legacy of Love*, the decorations are natural items such as pine boughs, sprigs of holly, and, of course, a mistletoe kissing ball. Elaborate Christmas ornaments, ribbons, and shiny bits and baubles became popular just a few decades later, but a Regency-era Christmas didn't even have a tree. The decorating wouldn't happen until Christmas Eve, followed by a church service on Christmas morning and a grand family feast. Boxing Day, where gifts were bestowed upon the servants, came the day after Christmas. The festive air would continue through the twelve days of Christmas, and then life would return to normal. Fourteen days in all to celebrate the holiday. That's a far cry from today, where it isn't unusual to see a craft-store Christmas display as early as August!

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4. Karen, what was the inspiration behind *Gift of the Heart*?

I have done several novella collections over the years, but this was the first one where I wrote a story not tied to any of my previous novels. I've always loved the Ruth and Boaz story from the Bible, and I decided to play with that motif, using a wealthy, established hero and an impoverished widow who believes her one chance at true love lies in her past. I set up a fictional resort town named Hope Springs that was based on the true history of a Texas town called Mineral Wells. The mineral water discovered there had curative properties that brought people from far and wide to drink and bathe in the waters. I mixed things up a bit by giving Ruth a seven-year-old daughter named Naomi (instead of a mother-in-law), and I had fun with the hero's name—Beauregard “Bo” Azlin. I didn't plot this story on my own, however. My Facebook fan group The Posse played an integral role. They were the ones to spark the idea of Bo suffering from a childhood injury and needing to take the waters himself, as well as creating Theodore, the matchmaking cat. The story would not have been the same without them.

5. What's uniquely Appalachian about your story in *A Shot at Love*, Sarah?

First of all, my heroine is the best shot in her part of West Virginia! It was fun to write a character who refused to be fussy and embraced some typically male activities. I also worked in stories from my dad's Christmases on our family farm in West Virginia. He loved to tell us how his father and uncle would “build” a Christmas tree when he was growing up in the 1940s and '50s. They would go out and cut TWO trees from the woods on the family farm. Then they would drill holes in the trunk of the prettier of the two and insert branches cut from the second tree to give it fullness and shape. Of course, they didn't keep it up for a month back then! I love incorporating my family's stories into the my novels. It makes me feel as though I've gotten to travel back in time to visit relatives I never had a chance to meet in person.

6. What did you most enjoy about writing a Christmas novella, Becky?

The details! I love the traditions, the food, and the music of the Christmas season. Writing *Because of You* gave me a chance to weave the charming details of December throughout my story. My hero and heroine work together as a team to provide gifts to a family in need. They sip apple cider. They visit a Christmas tree farm. They attend a holiday party and dance to holiday songs. They explore the deeper themes of the season—generosity, peace, and hope. I wrote *Because of You* in July and discovered that visiting a Christmas setting is a treat, no matter the time of year.