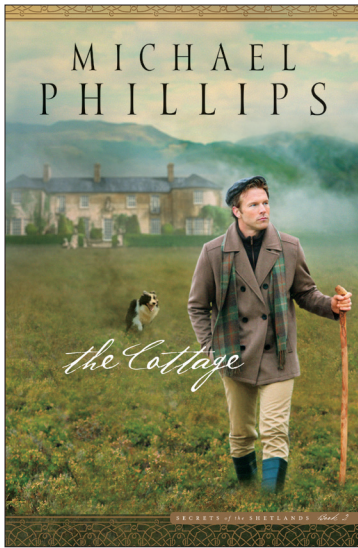


**QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH MICHAEL PHILLIPS**



**The Cottage**

SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS #2  
by Michael Phillips

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**1. *The Cottage* is the second novel in the SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS series. Is it a continuation of the first book or can readers begin with it?**

Yes to both. The story and series are definitely continuous. However, I always try to structure my series such that readers can start anywhere and enjoy one or another of the books on their own. *The Cottage*, therefore, opens with a brief recap that introduces the characters and their situation in such a way that everything flows and makes sense as the new book moves off in its own unique direction. Obviously it is best to read all the books sequentially, but not absolutely imperative. I have every confidence that those who come to *The Cottage* as new readers will enjoy it almost as much as veterans who already have the first book, *The Inheritance*, under their belts.

**2. How did this series originate?**

Interestingly, though this is the second book, for all the years I have been working on this series I have called it “The Cottage.” As it turns out, that title now goes with the second book. But the whole thing began with the idea of a “cottage” somewhere in Scotland that is inherited by an American woman who has grown up knowing nothing about her family roots. She has to come to Scotland to investigate this strange inheritance that has fallen into her lap. Gradually she falls in love with the village and its people and, well, you know how these things go. She also falls in love with a handsome and somewhat mysterious local man. But I’m sure you wouldn’t want me to give away any more than that, would you?

**3. Why did you set the series in the Shetland Islands?**

I have loved Scotland ever since discovering the writings of George MacDonald forty-five years ago. It is a magical land with magical history, music, and beauty. I think the magic stems from the history, the music, and the wildness of its geography—the highlands and moors and rugged coastlines. I’ve always said that to write a good novel means creating a world that readers want to visit, like C. S. Lewis did with Narnia. MacDonald’s “created world” was in fact a real place—Scotland. You feel like you’re stepping back in time into George MacDonald’s “Narnia,” if I can take the liberty of describing it like that.

The Shetlands, being technically part of Scotland (though with as many historic links to Norway as to Britain), therefore comes in for its share of my affection. When I visited the Shetlands, what most struck me was the sense of isolation. It is a long way from anywhere! And there is something deliciously fascinating and romantic about that. Actually I started a book set in the Shetlands years ago, after that visit. But nothing came of it at the time because I was immersed in other projects. Suddenly three or four years ago, the former book came drifting back into my consciousness on the Atlantic winds for which the Shetlands are famous. Now, however, a whole new batch of characters and plot ideas came along to invigorate the original idea. Now here we are with SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS off and running. Some ideas take a really LONG time to mature in your heart and brain. This one has definitely been worth the wait!

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**4. What have you written about in *The Cottage* that you haven't explored in any of your previous books or series?**

I would say that the importance of generational legacies, though a favorite theme of mine, is one I have developed in far more depth in this series than I have before. I have tried to illustrate that many influences—books, ideas, spiritual influences, and of course the men and women of one's ancestry—really do have a lasting impact “unto the third and fourth generation” in the lives that come after them. That was one of the reasons for interweaving Loni's and Emily's stories, to illustrate that amazing truth. Even though Loni grew up knowing nothing about Emily, that influence from the past was at work and would eventually surface in Loni's life.

**5. How do you come up with so many different and interesting characters, in this case a whole Shetland village full of diverse and sometimes quirky characters?**

I love growth. Writing novels for me is about watching people grow. I like to put characters into settings and situations and relationships and watch what they will do, how they will respond. I can be as surprised as the next person to see how a character develops. Sometimes a mere “walk-on” character will take a book over, or a main character will suddenly move in directions I hadn't anticipated. In this series, for example, one of the most minor of minor characters has become the central character for a whole new spin-off series I am anxious to pursue. One of the major characters took a completely unexpected turn. It's like planting a garden of many different kinds of flowers, then watering and nurturing that garden to see what blooms appear. I have to begin envisioning people one at a time, put them on the page with a line or two of description, and then allow them to work on me and see what develops.

When Loni, the main character of *The Cottage*, first set foot in the village of Whales Reef, she knew no one. The place was a complete unknown to her. And indeed, it was unknown to me too! I had Loni walking around and there was no one there, no shops or people. I began to despair and actually gave up on the series for a while. But gradually I began envisioning first one, then another person. As I envisioned them, Loni met them too. I sowed a few more seeds in the character garden and then started describing the island—the seashore, the moors and cliffs—as Loni walked about. The garden slowly began to grow. Developing characters and a setting and relationships is sometimes a slow process. But there are people everywhere, people with stories and idiosyncrasies and backgrounds and pains and histories. And as you put those personal elements into people, and then have characters meet and start talking and caring about one another, gradually things happen.