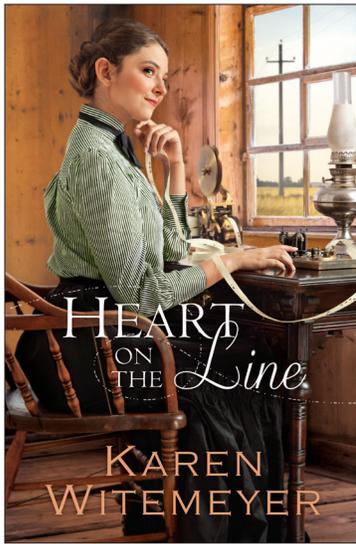




QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH KAREN WITEMEYER



Heart on the Line

by Karen Witemeyer

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1. Amos Bledsoe is not your usual Western hero, preferring bicycles to horses and depending on brains rather than brawn to win the day. What inspired you to create such a quirky, atypical hero?

I love rugged, alpha-male heroes, but they tend to dominate the romance genre. I wanted to switch things up a bit and remind readers that sweet, caring guys can be swoon-worthy too. Maybe it ties in to the fact that my own hero in real life is a bike-riding computer nerd. His passionate love for me and our family, his devotion to God, his kind demeanor, and his dry sense of humor make him my ideal man. So when I started crafting Amos, I followed the same pattern. As a telegraph operator, Amos is a nineteenth-century technology nerd. He’s smart, kind, funny, and sacrifices himself for those he loves without regret. A true hero in every sense of the word.

2. In Heart on the Line, Grace and Amos strike up a friendship over the telegraph line that turns romantic, a situation eerily reflective of today’s online dating culture. Was it your intention to parrot the modern world in your historical story?

No. When I started crafting Grace and Amos’s story, I just wanted to tell a fun historical romance appropriate for the late 1800s. Yet as I wrote, I recognized the similarities to online dating in our contemporary world. It reminded me of the movie *You’ve Got Mail*, where two rivals secretly fall in love via email. Or the older movie version, *The Shop Around the Corner*, where Jimmy Stewart unknowing courts a female coworker through heartfelt letters. The same questions arise in this 1890s telegraph scenario. Can Amos trust that Grace is the sweet young woman she hinted at being, or is she a middle-aged harridan with five kids having a laugh at the naïve telegrapher’s expense? Is he the gentleman he seems, or is he a malicious stalker? Then there’s the awkward first face-to-face meeting. It opens space for humor, for misunderstandings, and best of all, it creates room for true love to cut through the superficial level of physical attraction to the hearts of the people involved.

3. What inspired this story of telegraph love?

The inspiration for *Heart on the Line* came way back in 2011 when I was doing research on telegraph communication for another book. I stumbled upon a novel written in 1879 by female telegraph operator Ella Cheever Thayer, called *Wired Love*.

Apparently many operators were women in the late nineteenth century, and they were often identified as such by the delicacy of their “sounding” on the wires. The hero in Miss Thayer’s novel, Clem Stanwood, knows right away that the operator at the “B m” station is female.

Nattie Rogers is intrigued by the mysterious “C” at the “X n” station and seeks out conversations that soon turn flirtatious. These two telegraph operators fall in love over the wire without ever laying eyes on one another.

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There is one scene about halfway through the book that served as my inspiration for *Heart on the Line*. A case of mistaken identity has scared Nattie off, but Mr. Stanwood arranges a visit to her boardinghouse, and while sitting amongst others in the parlor, he begins tapping out code with his pencil against a marble tabletop. Nattie recognizes her call name, takes up a pair of scissors, and drums out her answer. They carry on an entire conversation this way with no one else in the parlor suspecting their actions are anything more than idle tapping. Until, that is, Mr. Stanwood reveals himself to be the real “C.”

Nattie jumps to her feet and exclaims aloud, “What do you mean? It cannot be possible!” Hysterical!

Of course, everyone else in the room thinks she’s lost her mind, except the hero, who crosses the room to take her hand. Aww...

In *Heart on the Line*, I had a great deal of fun creating situations where my two telegraph operators communicated through coded tapping without anyone else being able to understand the significance of their private conversations. It just goes to show that you never know when a random research trail will lead to the perfect plot for a new book.

4. Will we see more stories about the ladies of Harper’s Station in the future?

Yes, there will be one more story to finish off this series. The final installment will be a novella that features the young Irishwoman Claire Nevin, who came to Harper’s Station as a runaway mail-order bride. Claire has been apprenticing with the local midwife and learning the healing arts, which allows her to play a significant role in the secondary plotline for *Heart on the Line*. However, it’s not until her past thrusts itself back into her life in *The Love Knot* that she finds emotional healing for the broken heart that has plagued her for too long. Claire’s story will appear in the collection entitled *Hearts Entwined* coming in January.