



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH JODY HEDLUND



Together Forever

ORPHAN TRAIN #2

by Jody Hedlund

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1. What is the inspiration behind your ORPHAN TRAIN series?

I have long been fascinated by the era of the orphan trains and the heart-wrenching stories of the homeless and helpless young orphans who were taken from the streets of New York City and other eastern cities and shipped west by the dozens. I was familiar with stories of those scared orphans who were placed out in what was thought to be a more wholesome, healthy environment of the newly settled midwestern states. Some of the orphans found happy endings and were adopted into loving families. Others experienced great abuse and heartache in their new homes.

While stories of the orphans who rode the trains have been told—and rightly so—the stories of the women who were involved in the movement are not as well known. One of the things I particularly like to do when telling my stories is focus on women who have been overlooked within the pages of history. I consider it a great privilege to be able to bring forgotten women to life for our modern generation. Thus, throughout this series, each book will focus on a different aspect of the orphan train movement, particularly from the perspective of women who experienced riding the trains in one form or another.

2. How did you come up with the idea for the second book in the series, *Together Forever*?

Since the first book in the series centers around the jobless and homeless adult women who rode the orphan trains, I decided for this second book to show the orphan train experience through the eyes of placing agents who worked for the Children’s Aid Society.

The Children’s Aid Society (CAS), started by Charles Loring Brace, was the major orphan placing organization in New York City from its inception in 1853 well into the twentieth century. CAS hired numerous ministers, single men and women, as well as married couples, to escort orphans from the East to their new homes in the West. The agents spent weeks and months on the road caring for the children, all while trying to place them in loving homes.

Thus the main characters in *Together Forever* take on the role of the placing agents, giving readers a glimpse into the lives of these dedicated men and women who wanted to make a difference in the lives of homeless children living on the streets of NYC.

3. What special research did you do in writing *Together Forever*?

In researching the roles of CAS placing agents, I came across one of the most well-known placing agents, Clara B. Comstock, who traveled west with children from 1911 to 1928. During her years as a placing agent, she made seventy-four trips and wrote about her experiences.

I drew from her notes about what it was like before the trip, from the clothes the orphans were given to the detailed lists of supplies and food she packed. She also wrote about what it was like during the journey west and what happened once they arrived at their destinations—including an incident where she was quarantined with a young five-year-old boy who contracted diphtheria.

At the end of her life, Clara Comstock said this about her experiences: “The work was a great adventure in Faith. We were always helped and grew to expect kindness, deep interest and assistance everywhere. A sense of responsibility was keenly felt by all the workers. My life has been greatly enriched by the varied experiences found in everything the Children’s Aid Society has done. It is an honor to have followed from afar, the founder of this work.”

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4. Usually readers are more sympathetic to the orphans and less forgiving of the charity organizations that placed the orphans in the West. How do you elicit empathy for the placing agents?

In *Together Forever*, I hoped to portray the struggles that placing agents felt right along with the struggles of the orphans. I have no doubt what the orphans experienced was far more emotional and painful; nevertheless, the job of the placing agent was not an easy one. It consisted of weeks of demanding travel and difficulty in placing children, as well as the logistical challenges of revisiting each child before returning to New York City.

The agents faced not only the ups and downs of handling such a wide variety of children, but they also faced the challenges of the job itself. Since nothing like the placing out had ever been done before, the agents basically had to learn on the job and make up the rules as they went.

In the early years, record-keeping was inconsistent, placements irregular, and the screening process non-existent. While many of the agents meant well and truly cared about providing better lives for the children in their care, the lack of consistent practices provided further hardships to many orphans. Overall, I hope readers are able to gain a better appreciation for the well-meaning efforts, even if things didn't always turn out the way everyone wanted.

5. You make the conditions of New York City and the orphans sound so bleak. Was it really as bad as you portray in your books?

It's hard to believe, but an estimated 30,000 homeless children really did roam the dirty streets and alleys of New York City in the 1850s.

Thirty thousand children. Let that sink in for a minute. That's the size of a town.

Historians look back on that time and try to make sense of what led to such horrific conditions for children. The influx of immigrants was at an all-time high. The financial disaster of 1857 caused even more problems. Jobs and housing were scarce.

Diseases were rampant. Hunger and poverty became a norm.

6. What do you hope readers take away from *Together Forever*?

I pray that in reading this story, readers will not only gain greater insights and a different perspective of the orphan train movement but also that they will be encouraged to know God is present in their weakest moments.

He doesn't necessarily promise to give us the courage of a lion or to make everything perfect. But He does promise that His strength is available and that His power will rest upon us. Perhaps that strength will be just enough to get out of bed for another difficult day. Or perhaps it will be just enough to face the illness or hurt or heartache we bear.

We can rest assured it will always be just enough. His strength is made perfect in our weakness.