

Ginny: I am thrilled to welcome Suzanne woods Fisher who is an award winning, best-selling author, who has written more than 30 books with over a million copies sold. That's a milestone! Titles include *On a Summer Tide* and *On a Coastal Breeze*, as well as the Nantucket Legacy, Amish Beginnings, The Bishop's Family, The Deacon's Family, and The Inn at Eagle Hill series, among other novels. She is also the author of several nonfiction books about the Amish, including *Amish Peace* and *Amish Proverbs*. She lives in California.

So we are both Northern California gals.

Tell us about *The Moonlight school*. It releases February 2nd. What was your inspiration? Share that with our listeners. I loved reading how you came up with this idea.

Suzanne: Well, first of all, thank you for having me. We met one time at a conference and I've never forgotten. You just have such a warmth and effusiveness and a way of bringing the best out of people, Ginny.

So, I write for Revell Books, that has been my primary publisher, which is a little different than some other authors. I've been very fortunate to sort of have a home there for now and every contract always feel like it could be the last. So I try to do my best with each one and learn and learn and learn as I go.

But the story of *The Moonlight School* came about in such a fun way, because who knows where inspiration is, it's everywhere if you're paying attention. And as I write in the morning, I'm a morning writer, early bird writer, I listen to a classical music station and there was this one day in history and it was probably September 5th. And I don't know, I remember it was a few years ago, where the narrator made a comment, I guess you wouldn't call a classical musical guy, a DJ, but the narrator, the host, he said "On this day in history on September 5th, 1911, the Moonlight Schools grassroots movement began by Cora Wilson Stewart and spread across the country." And that was all. And then he went onto something else, but there was something about that, that I just stopped what I was doing. I Googled Moonlight Schools. And then I Googled Cora Wilson, Stewart, and it was like falling into Alice in Wonderland, because this is a true story. And it's just the most remarkable story. And this is not a spoiler to the novel, which fictionalized the account, but Cora Wilson Stewart was the first female superintendent for her little town in Eastern Kentucky Appalachia. She was in charge of, I think, 51 rural schoolhouses and one public school house. And at that time around where she lived had an appalling adult illiteracy rates, well over 25%, the national average at that time was only 7.7%. And it was probably much worse than that because this is the hills and isolation of Rowan County, Kentucky. And the thinking of that day was that adults, couldn't learn to read. It was as if they missed that window as children, they would lose it forever. And Cora believed that too. She accepted that until a couple of circumstances occurred that challenged her thinking.

So she came up with this idea and talked to her teenage teachers, you know, they were basically just barely out of school themselves. There's a saying that the way you knew who the teacher was and who the students were, was the teacher was the one wearing shoes. I mean, these are like 16, 17-year-olds, mostly girls, and she had to talk them into staying at night after teaching children all day. And they all agreed. And she opened these little schoolhouses on moonlit nights

for adults who wanted to learn to read. And they hoped for maybe a 100 to 150 people in these 51 schoolhouses, but 1200 people came from the hills and the hollows to fill those schoolhouses. And in two years she wiped out adult illiteracy in the County. So that's the basic, the bones of the story. And it's just astonishing and that's something we should know because it's ours, it's American history.

Ginny: It's incredible the way you were able to take those factual events and weave in other stories with that primary story. You did a fabulous job doing that. I learned so much, which when I read a novel, if I can learn something along the way, it's just that much better. I was not familiar with this story nor was I familiar with our current statistics on literacy, which was startling. You created a really neat graphic that shows all of that information. I will link to that in the show notes for readers and listeners who are interested, but it's such an important issue. And it really opened my eyes as both a writer and a reader to something I have very much taken for granted. So it's an important book in that respect. How will the issue of illiteracy factor into your marketing plans for the book?

Suzanne: Well, and that's a great comment for writers because how do we, how do we take a novel and look for ways to, to promote it? And this story in particular. What would be relevant to today? And so I started looking into today's literacy rates and I was stunned. I really assumed if it was in the 1910 US census, if illiteracy across America was only 7.7%, logically, you think, oh, I bet we've almost eradicated it. But it's the opposite. We're at 21% illiteracy in our country -- functional illiteracy. And that means adults who cannot read their medical prescription bottles, or the news headlines, or just take part in simple things in life. And it doesn't mean they aren't intelligent people. It's just simply a lot of it is, of course, immigration, there's so much immigration, as there always has been. This is what our country's built with, but it is really a very troubling issue facing our country. And we have so many troubling issues, you know, where do we start?

But as writers and readers, maybe we could do something about it, even if it's, even if it's just local, even if it's reading to your neighborhood kids or donating school books to your local school. But I think one of the things that troubles me the most is the cycle - when parents don't read well, books are not in the house, and children don't read well. It's not supported. And then you look at prisons and it's like 85% of the prison population struggles to read past first or second grade levels. I mean, it's so critically important in a country like ours to start to address some of these issues.

There's a phrase I love: Reach one, teach one. And I think that's just such a wonderful way to not feel overwhelmed by these statistics, but to look at, okay, well, what can I do? I have a little free library out in front of my house, for example. I love it. And it's created so much community people walking down the street, leaving books, childrens books, adult books, all kinds of fiction, nonfiction, it's just available, and now there are four in my town. I live in an unincorporated town, so there's no library. And all of a sudden there are little free libraries. And it's like, you know, the joy of reading and sharing books are helping, like I mentioned, donating books to a school or going in and reading, or even the importance of sitting down with a child, your child, your grandchild, what you are doing by reading, you're modeling. You're giving them a sense of

how good this is and how wonderful this is. They're practicing their reading skills. So anyway, I'm now really quite a fan. And I love that reach one, teach one concept. Yes. I have friends who actually go to our public library in another town and they tutor adults who are from other countries and just practice with them just one hour a week, but what a difference, right?

Ginny: Absolutely. So when you consider the topic, this really is an issue driven novel. It's historical fiction, but it really is wrapped around this issue of illiteracy. And as someone who writes mostly issue-driven fiction, it's always sort of a balance to want to bring awareness to the issue, and then to use it as marketing material. And so I'm always very careful how I word that because really what we are doing is bringing attention to something through our marketing efforts. So have you considered ways that you will market around the issue?

Suzanne: It's that fine balance of wanting to not make it about the bottom dollar, but it's about really exposure. So this story was planned to release during National Literacy Week. And it's also right in front of Women's History Month, which was another thing. And there's so many little opportunities like that. I think that if you really look and think outside the box and brainstorm with friends and brainstorm with your publisher, you can start to find some of these connections that become jumping off points or talking points, or a way to just get a little bit of momentum rolling, because it is really hard to get a book out there. It's so hard, especially under COVID, especially with stories disappearing. It's just, it is just hard, but everybody loves to read and there's still a place for books.

Ginny: Yes. And, and I think statistically, I've seen recently that in 2020 and 2021, while we are still at home and fighting a pandemic, book sales have increased. I just read just recently that the numbers are up. So more people are reading and that's a gift of having to stay at home because we have a little more time, some of us, on our hands. Probably moms with kids at home do not, but anyway, I hope this book will reach a wider audience just because more people are reading right now.

So when you are looking for opportunities to market the book, that's part of your research. And I read in your acknowledgements that research is one of your favorite parts of the writing process. This book was research intensive I would imagine. And reading your acknowledgements was a study for me in what it takes to research historical fiction. So, for the writers listening, make sure you read the acknowledgements. Share with us your process. You know, where do you begin? What does that look like for you?

Suzanne: Well, I've done a couple of different historical novels and I just love them. In fact, in some ways, I think I enjoy them more than contemporary because you have a little bit more of a framework to work with. That's a little harder, I think, in contemporary where you've got some of the technology that's a part of today. I mean, where do you hide a secret in today's world? You know, whereas back in the historical novels, there are so many. They didn't have DNA testing. They didn't have, you know, there's so many things that were a little bit easier to hide things, to create plots with some turns and all, but I think some of the things about historical novels are

original sourcing and original research and being there and getting a sense of what it was like in that timeframe.

Some suggestions I would make are probably one of the best tools has been the academic community, going to textbooks, going to professors who have studied these topics. Even sometimes in fact, one of my books about Cora Wilson Stewart, was by a PhD. So, you know, there's, there's so much information that people have studied and done before you, which is great. Another tip is, of course, being there. I remember one time I was writing about this woman, Mary Coffin Starbuck, who was from one of the founding families of Nantucket. And I was at the Nantucket Library, which the historical association, and they have a vault that goes deep into the earth and you can apply for papers and see a lot of the Quaker books that kept the notes of every meeting and all the reading notes.

And one of the things, I had to sign my life away, I had to wear gloves, I couldn't have a cell phone or anything with me, but I was able to hold Mary Coffin Starbuck's accounting book in my hands. 400 plus years old. And to see that, and what I learned from it. They had of her accounting book because she kept a store on Nantucket. And so she worked with everybody. She and I started to just see, first of all, the beauty of her handwriting, the intelligence, the accuracy, it was all English pounds. At that time, she worked with everybody on that Island. You know, her influence was amazing. I thought it was interesting with her handwriting because her husband was illiterate. So interesting, you know, and they had a wonderful marriage. And I, I just, I feel like there was something that was just a kind of spine-tingling moment when I'm holding her, you know, this sheepskin ancient book, but it just meant so much.

So that kind of original sourcing is what I mean. Another one is going to these little museums that are part of historical places. They have books there that aren't on the market that you're finding all kinds of little tidbits of information and seldom read kinds of things. They give you a whole other perspective. It's just so fun. So those are the types of ways to start to almost create the, you know, how would I describe it? You've got the bones, which is the story, and you're starting to add the flesh and then the skin. I used to write for magazines. And I think some of that has helped with historical research because you just have to start digging and putting yourself out there and hitting dead ends. I knew I had the story when I information started overlapping quite a bit, especially a brand new topic. So, you know, even getting used to people, not calling you back and having to pursue and, you know, getting to know academics, I think can be a bit, forgive me if any of you are, are academics, but sometimes they can really make you feel stupid, you know, and getting over that. That's okay. That kind of thing.

Ginny: What would you say to the very shy writer who might be reticent to make a phone call, make a connection? Have you found that people are willing to talk most of the time?

Suzanne: You know, I think for the shy writer, I feel as if you're going to miss something. If you don't push yourself, you're going to have to, even if you feel stupid, even if you feel clumsy, even if you're tongue tied, you are going to miss something. If you don't turn a stone over and you have to try to do it because there's just nothing like it. I remember one time I was writing

about falconry and I happened to interview a woman who was a falconry up in the Santa Rosa area in California. And she made this one comment, one last comment about how a true falconer, it's a trust relationship. You have to let them go to have the falcon come back to you. And that became such a critical part of the story, where a father was trying to let his son go and you had to trust, you had to give him the space to go. And I thought, I would've missed that. I would have missed it. So those, those moments are priceless and worth pushing yourself.

Ginny: It is amazing how often, while doing research, some snippet of something will inform the rest of the story that you're writing. And it's so valuable, that kind of inspiration that comes as you're reading and talking to people and learning about the topics. So that's neat.

One of the things that I was so amazed by in this book was, well, there were many things, so I have a hard time choosing, but one of the things that both surprised me and amazed me was the way you were able to naturally include the dialect of the area and the time in the character's dialogue and balance it so it wasn't overwhelming. It took, you know, reading a few lines of dialogue to kind of go, okay, this is what we're doing, and then get used to it. How did you research that dialect and then decide what's too much? What's too little? To give the reader a real flavor of the people?

Suzanne: Dialect is so tricky. It's hard because I think it can really be annoying to a reader. It can just be tiresome and, you know, stutter stops and that kind of thing. So it is a hard thing to do. And I think in this story, I have a young woman and there's one other part I wanted to talk about, and we can maybe talk about this later, why I didn't make Carol Wilson Stewart who is really the central figure, but not necessarily the main figure in the story. And I had a reason for that. And we can talk about that later, but I use this young woman who came from Lexington. Who's a relative of Cora. Who's been asked to come and help her as sort of an admin. And she was a great device to us as she didn't understand what they're saying. She had to sort of learn the accent or get interpretation for it, which I sort of liked. It was fun to be able to be in her mind and think, oh, that's what he meant. That kind of thing.

So to talk about the dialect of Appalachia, it is so intriguing to learn this because it sounds dumb to us, it sounds uneducated. And yet it is out of Chaucer's era. I mean, it is Shakespeare's language. It is so intriguing that much of the wording and the choice of words and music, the dancing and, you know, a lot of their culture has been so well preserved from when they came over and immigrated and went into these isolated little towns high in the mountains and kept that culture preserved. So it's fun. That was sort of a fun thing to learn and to realize how we just make assumptions so quickly, so unfair, but yeah, I'm glad you didn't feel it was tiresome.

Ginny: No, not at all. And much like your protagonist, I learned it. And so then it became easier and easier to read, but it was just fascinating to me. So why isn't Cora the primary protagonist?

Suzanne: Okay. And this is a, a debatable thing, but this is sort of my thinking as a writer that every book needs a love story. Almost. I can only think of really like to kill a Mockingbird was

not a romantic story, but it was Gregory Peck, but you know, it is almost every war story, almost everything. There's a love of story. And because of that, Cora Wilson Stewart was probably in her late thirties, we're talking 1911, divorced three times, twice to the same man, she did not have luck with love. And there was a point when I think she decided that her passion was not really going to be men. It was going to be her work. And that was what she threw all her energies into, and really, she became the voice of literacy for America. And in a grassroots way, she did not come with government funding. It was all volunteer. But I think that was it. I made a decision that I really was going to honor who she was and not try to change, or not put anything into her life. And someone else could write this whole story and come up with a whole different way of doing it. And it would probably be wonderful. But I think I just wanted Cora to be Cora, as truly who she was. So I interviewed a lot of people who had studied her, one woman who even had her desk, who, you know, had her rug in the room. There are so many details that were accurate to what Cora's actual office was like at Morehead state university. So it was just kind of a decision to make it a love story, does that make sense to you as well? Does that resonate? That you have to find a love story.

Ginny: Well, and you have to create a story that is readable and that primary character, in this case, Lucy, you have to create what's going to work for the story you want to tell. Do you call, I wouldn't call it specifically historical romance, maybe it is. There's definitely romance in it. There's definitely a love story in it. And there's a secondary love story kind of going on in the background, which I just loved. It's been a long time since I've read a book where I have fallen in love with the characters like I did in this story. Finley James, and Angie, and Brother Wyatt. I want to marry Brother Wyatt!

Suzanne: Okay. I'm picturing Johnny Cash.

Ginny: Yes. Yes. You just did an incredible job with your characters. How do you come up with characters? How do you create those layered, realistic personalities?

Suzanne: I love that part. I think for me, it probably comes a little easier. I don't know why. I just even feel when I read scripture, I love the narrative stories. I love trying to see the flaws in Moses and his great strengths and things like that. And so probably that. It's like a muscle that works sort of well for me versus other things. I mean writing, it's just hard. It's hard, hard work. I mean, you're talking 85,000 words from nothing and to make a story pull readers through to the very end. It's remarkable what writers do. And there's a place for so many books still to be written, you know, but I think to create a character, I really like them having flaws. I really like seeing their insecurity. I also love bringing humor in. Finley James was just so much fun. He's a 16 year old boy in this story who thinks he doesn't need education. Doesn't need this girl who was just crazy for him. Star struck by Lucy, this woman who smells good and looks good. He was just so much fun.

Ginny: It's such a good story. One of the things I want to highlight for writers who are listening... I read the ARC and I read it on my phone. I read the whole thing on my phone. And so, because it was the ARC, there weren't scene breaks. And so I didn't always know when we

were switching to a new character's point of view, but I very quickly realized that we had, because you did a masterful job with voice – character voice - and making them unique. And that is something that writers can really learn from as they read this book, the way you captured each unique voice and they were all so different. You knew the character that you were reading, you knew whose POV you were in right away. And that's great. That's skill.

Suzanne: I do know what you mean. And I think that's a good piece of takeaway for writers to make sure that these are distinct people. They're distinct voices. I remember helping to edit a novel once and every female was the same person over and over and over. It was a male who wrote the book and we worked on that.

Ginny: It's something that does take a lot of work. I'm still working at that. I will always work on creating those unique characters. That was something that really stood out from a writer's perspective as I read your work. You have done a really good job with that. So, as I mentioned, we are both California gals, which means - we are recording this in January of 2021 - we have been dealing with the pandemic. We have been at home more than we have been outside of our homes, especially in California, I think. What has this time meant to you as a writer? Do you have takeaways? Things you've learned? Wisdom to share with other writers who might be struggling with the distraction of everything we have going on?

Suzanne: Well, you mentioned we have more time for reading. I actually have been trying to learn new things. My husband made this great comment about how he feels one of the gifts of this time period of the pandemic is that it sort of sped things up. So things like remote work and everything's really fast forwarded and webinars for example, are amazing, remarkable. So I was watching one the other day on floral design. It's just very well done, and it was so intriguing and there was this, they actually took a moment and they created a floral arrangement, and explained why they placed things where they were. And they said, now the amateur tends to stuff the flowers, like every part of it is stuffed in the arrangement, but the professional knows to allow for negative space because the eye needs a place to rest before it picks up and moves on. Interesting. There was something about that. I listened to it three times. I never have thought about negative space like that because it sounds so negative, but it's so important. It is the Sabbath, the rest time we allow ourselves. I know it's a design principle, but you know, to give yourself time for rest before something wonderful is about to happen, or before we pick up and move on again. And I really just have thought about that ever since, because it just seems so spiritual, so grounded in what we are needing right now.

Ginny: Yes. Wise words. That's also a writing principle, you know, when we are in such intensity in a story, as we are in the story we're living right now, we absolutely need to give our readers that rest. And we are certainly are needing it right now.

Suzanne: So yeah, Ginny, I'm so glad you said that because I don't think I realized that that is part of an actual plot, you know, climax one, resolution, climax two, and then the big one that you need, the resolution you need, the pause, just sort of give your reader a little chance to, to kind of, okay, calm down. We just can't live on the edge all the time.

Ginny: No, we can't. And we have been living on the edge now for months and months and months. So, anyway, it was a gift to get away and read *The Moonlight School*. So, thank you for that opportunity. And thank you for your time today. Where can readers and writers find you online?

Suzanne: Well, I am, my website is got a contact page, www.zuzannewoodsfisher.com. I'm actually probably more on Instagram than Facebook these days, just simply because Facebook feels a little heavy hearted and Instagram is so light and fun and quick, but there are lots of ways to connect. I read my own mail and I try to answer back quickly. I hope to get back to people within 24 hours. I really enjoy connecting with readers and other writers too. I just feel like kind of the best part of the whole author gig. There are people I would've never met who have just been such bright lights in my life and I'm so thankful for them.

Ginny: That's so neat. Well, good. I will link to your website, and to your social media, and to the graphic that you made, the chart on illiteracy. All that will be in the show notes for people to find, along with my very strong recommendation for this, book.

Suzanne: I read recently that's almost like 90% of why someone reads a book, just because it was recommended by someone they trust. That means a lot to me, Ginny. Thank you for sticking with it on your phone, which I don't know if I could do.

Ginny: Well, it's a fairly big phone. I really enjoyed it. Thank you so much for your time and best wishes on this book. And I look forward to the response from readers and seeing those reviews come in from them.

Suzanne: Take care and stay well and stay home and read.

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