

Episode 1: Erin Bartels, *All That We Carried***Transcript**

Ginny: So, Erin, thank you for joining me today. I am, as I mentioned in our brief chat beforehand, I'm really excited to get to meet you and, I absolutely loved reading *All That We Carried* and was so excited that I had the opportunity to read it before it released. And the funny thing was I was actually reading *The Words Between Us*. I had just begun it. I was a couple of chapters into it and I went to your website, saw that you had a book releasing and asked if we could do this interview, which meant I had to put that book aside and I was completely hooked. So, I'm looking forward to getting back to that, but *All That We Carried* was really just exquisite in every way. So, let me introduce you for our listeners and I'm going to read it because I don't want to leave out any of the good stuff.

Erin Bartels is the award-winning author of, *We Hope For Better* things, a 2020 Michigan Notable Book and a finalist for the 2019 Christy Award. Her short story, *This Elegant Ruin* was a finalist in the Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction contest in 2014. And her poetry has been published by the lyric. A publishing professional for 18 years, she's the director of WFWA, which is again the Women's Fiction Writers Association, which I would love to talk about, you're the director of their annual retreat in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She lives in Lansing, Michigan with her husband, Zachary and their son. And you can find Erin online at erinbartels.com. And I will have all of that information in the show notes. And I'll ask you again about that at the end.

Erin: Kudos. You pronounce my last name correctly.

Ginny: Well, I have a last name that gets slaughtered regularly and so I pulled up a couple of interviews to listen to the pronunciation, so I didn't do that to yours. So, you have been in the writing world, the world for a long time. Tell me a little bit about your journey to fiction and the journey to publication.

Erin: I would love to. I've been, I feel like I've been in the writing world my whole life almost because I've always been a huge reader, which most writers I think are. I went to school as an English major. And then soon after graduating, I got a job at Baker Publishing Group, which is a Christian book publisher out of Grand Rapids, Michigan. And then eventually had my books published by one of their divisions, Revel, so I've worked for them for, I think in March it'll be 19 years, which seems

like a really long time. So I guess, you know, this year I turned 40 and I guess everything's going to seem like a really long time at this point.

So I've been working with authors for a very long time. I've been a copywriter for Baker, uh, trade books, meaning I've been writing the catalog copy and back cover copy and ad copy for those books for a very long time. And, having been an English major and then having worked with a lot of authors of fiction and just having been a big reader, eventually, I really wanted to try my hand at writing. And so, I had a stint at grad school that didn't quite work out because it wasn't quite the program I wanted. And I realized what I really wanted to do was write, I don't want to teach this, I want to make this. And the interesting thing about being an English major is that you learn how to critique, and you learn how to read, but you never learn how to create the thing you're critiquing. So that's something that you really need to be working on yourself if you're not in a creative writing program. You have to do the work yourself and it can take a lot of trial and error. And it did, in my case, you know, I started thinking about writing for publication in 2007, I started writing my book. That would be my debut in, uh, researching in 2013 writing in 2014. But I had written a failed novel before that. So, I was working on it a long time. I eventually got an agent who started shopping that around while I was writing another one. And I've just kept the ball rolling continuously writing while you're waiting for something else to happen. And eventually, *We Hope For Better Things*, which was my debut got published at the beginning of 2019. And then *The Words Between Us* followed quickly thereafter because it was already done, in 2019 as well, that came out in September. So I ended up having two books released in the first year. And I've been writing since, so I have two other finished books, one's coming out and well I guess when this releases it'll be the first day it's out, and I'm working on a fifth and you know, so it just is one of those things where you're continuously working because I didn't ever want to get behind.

The thing about *All That We Carry*, the book that we're going to talk about today is that it's the first book that I wrote with a deadline where you only have a year to do it. Whereas the first novel that came out with Revel, I took, you know, it was seven years practically from idea to shelf. So, it's a big difference writing like that.

Ginny: How did, how did the deadline change writing for you or did it?

Erin: It did significantly. I tend to be somebody even with *We Hope For Better Things*, which was a very big story, it had three different timelines, it was kind of complicated, I still am not a big planner. So, I had an outline of some sort where I'm like, eh, I think these are the places I'm going, but then as you go, you end up

realizing that's not where you're going anymore. And you kind of reframe things and you move in a different direction. And that takes a lot of time, especially when you're first starting out writing. And you're first really learning how to tell a story because as an English major and somebody who loved writing for a very long time, I was always told that I was a very good writer, but that doesn't mean you're a good storyteller. It's hard to, it's hard to learn how to tell a good story. And especially in a long form, like a novel it's much easier, I think harder in some ways, but easier in others to do short stories where something's more compact, and less sprawling. So that was something that I had to learn. And I did it partially through trial and error, but also partially through joining writing groups. So, there's a local writing group that I've been a part of for a long time called the Capitol City Writers. And then the Women's Fiction Writers Association, which is an international organization at this point, and those are ways that helped me learn how to write more effectively and more efficiently. And the story that became *All That We Carried* is something that I actually started planning during one of these retreats that I now direct. Wow. I started planning it with a system that was developed by a woman named Jenny Nash and any writer, I really encourage you to look her up. She's got, she's got tutorials. She works with groups. She does retreats and conferences. I think she has books. Um, she was fantastic because there was a particular, I think it, I can't remember exactly what it was called, but it was like this inside, outside sort of outline that helped me figure out what do I actually want to say? And it made it much quicker to work on this book because I knew exactly where I was going, even though I didn't really outline it chapter by chapter. I knew what the end result I really wanted was.

Ginny: Interesting. It's always fascinating to me for someone who is not a plotter to find a system still that works for them. That's great.

Erin: Yeah. And it had a lot to do with, um, you know, when you're first starting writing and you're writing a story and you don't really know where you're going, you end up writing a lot of things that don't really matter. They don't move the plot ahead. They don't move character development ahead. And those are the things that, sometimes some of your favorite writing is that part, but it doesn't actually help the story. So, you need to get rid of it. And a lot of people have trouble letting go. Whereas when you're, when you're writing with an end game in mind, you can be more intentional along the way about your choices. Does this scene actually move the story forward in the ways that it needs to, or is it just there to, um, you know, illustrate something that's maybe not important or it doesn't need pages to illustrate it?

Ginny: Exactly. That's great. Okay. Before we get too far into the writing, because I think you and I could just exclusively dive into that, tell us a little bit about *All That We Carried*. It releases January 5th, it's received a Library Journal Starred Review, which must feel wonderful.

Erin: It does. Yes.

Ginny: And Publishers Weekly says “This subdued tale of learning to forgive is Bartels best yet.” So I, I don't know that I would have used the word subdued.

Erin: Um, maybe yeah.

Ginny: Maybe subtle. Because actually, I was very intrigued by some of the subtleties that you included in the way that you wove the spiritual theme. And so we can talk a little bit more about that, but tell us a little bit about the story, the inspiration behind it, whatever you would like to share.

Erin: Yeah. So there's two main characters. There's Olivia and Melanie who are sisters and they have a shared tragedy in their past. They lost their parents in a, in a car accident 10 years before. And since then, they've gone very different ways, both in their personal lives and in their spiritual lives. And in, in almost any conceivable way, they're very different people. And this is a story of them coming back together, at the behest of one sister, the sort of okay, fine of the other. And it's a story of them trying to reconnect with each other, trying to deal with the unresolved issues in the past, deal with unforgiveness. But also examining how what they believe about the nature of life and death and how that affects the way they live and how it affects the way they treat other people and, and all of these different things that have really long-term consequences. But they're easy to ignore. It's easy to put off those big questions when you don't want to deal with them because you're afraid of the conclusion you'll come to, or you're afraid of changing your lifestyle or you're afraid of what people will say or, or whatever.

So, the older sister, Olivia, is somebody who doesn't believe that there's anything outside of what you see. What you see is what you get. There's not an afterlife, there's no deeper meaning to any of this and her younger sister sees meaning in everything and wants to try a little bit of everything and has sort of a cafeteria style spirituality. And so those two worldviews make for a lot of arguments. And the fact that they're sisters makes for a lot of arguments. I grew up with a sister who was very close in age to me and most people who first meet me assume I'm the older sister, but I am not. I am the younger and we didn't get along for a very, very

long time. And in our twenties, we started thinking more similarly, and we realized that we're actually very similar people. And we kind of grew up a little bit about the things that we were in conflict about, and we're really, really good friends now, which you could have knocked me over with a feather if you had told me that was going to happen, and probably her as well, but I have to stress that the sisters in the story are not us because we're extremely boring because we get along really well. We do go hiking together and my experiences hiking with my sister are certainly what inform a lot of the story.

I didn't have to do any research for this book. Let's say I had already lived the research of going on different hiking trips and being in the wilderness and not being able to contact anybody if something goes wrong. Thankfully, a lot of the things that happen in this book to these sisters have not happened to us, but you always have to prepare for them. So it's based partially on real life and just this sort of reality of being a sister and the kind of ways that you pick at each other and compete with each other, but also fight for each other and love each other. So that was really fun to bring to life.

My own sister has not read the book yet. She's waiting for her copy to come. And I keep saying, now, remember, this is not about you and me.

Ginny: It was fun as I was doing a little bit of research, to come across the trailer for the book. It's on YouTube. What I loved about it was that it shows a picture of you and your sister hiking and the beautiful scenery, which you described so beautifully in the book. It was really fun to get a visual that went with the visual you had created.

Erin: I think I do know what you're talking about. I think I made that for my publisher or the bookstore and they, and they put it out.

Ginny: How do you do your character development? How do you create these realistic, emotionally layered characters, and create the character arc? Where does that come from for you?

Erin: Well, a lot of people ask, do you base characters off of real people? And I have not based characters off of other people that I know, but their thoughts and their emotions and their problems and conundrums and all of their faults come from me in some way. So writing is a way to work through that. What do you think about things? What do you hope for, what are you afraid of? You know, what are all of these things that are roiling around in your mind all the time? For me, writing stories is a way to work through some of that. And so it's like with these two

sisters, it's not based on two different people, it's all me. So even though they have very different views about things, that's all things that I've thought, it's all things that I've wondered, or things that, you know, the things that bother you at night when you're thinking about big things.

So, in some ways, their development is my own development as a person, but also there are characters, especially secondary characters, who really aren't you as a writer or they're not developed from your sort of inner life. For them, especially antagonistic characters, I really try to put myself in their position and write from a position of empathy rather than judgment because - this is something that I explore in another book that will be coming out in 2022 - antagonists are the protagonist of their own story. So, every single person in your book has their own story, their own life. And for them, all of their decisions make sense. All of what they do is for their own self-preservation maybe, you know, so to write somebody who's really not like you in a way that's sympathetic, I think is merely putting yourself in their shoes and saying in this real situation that I'm creating for this person, what choice do they have? What choices have I given them? What's their background and how does that inform what they do and what they say?

There are a number of characters in my books that I don't think are very likable, but to me, they're sympathetic nonetheless, because even if they make bad choices, including protagonists, I definitely have heard some criticisms of them, I want them to be real people with real faults, not just, oh, they were misunderstood. People make real mistakes in life. I've recently made some really big mistakes in my life. And I want to be able to think that, gosh, you know, there's somewhere to go from here. You don't have to be defined by that. There's forgiveness, there's grace, there's mercy. And I think we live in a really unforgiving world where the minute somebody makes a mistake, they're raked over the coals publicly. People are like that with characters. When they're reading books, they make a split-second decision. I like this person. I don't like this person. And if you don't like the protagonist at the beginning of the book, I mean, give them a little credit, it's a whole book and they're probably going to change a little bit along the course of the book.

Ginny: Exactly. Well, you did a great job in this book of creating two very different characters. I don't have a sister, but it gave me such a strong sense of what that relationship might be like. And I could easily imagine the truth of what you were presenting in their relationship.

Ginny: Why women's fiction.

Erin: Oh, that's a big question. That's the, what is it? 64 million, \$64,000 question.

Ginny: You may have answered it actually in what you just shared.

Erin: So, the reason that I'm part of an organization for women's fiction is partly because I felt like what I was writing, if it had male protagonists or even a male author, perhaps it would just be fiction. It would just be general fiction. It's not a particular genre, even though there's a historical timeline in my first book, it's not historical fiction. It's not romance, it's not historical romance or suspense or romantic suspense or any of those very particular genres. It's just general fiction. It's not really commercial fiction. It's not really literary fiction. It's kind of in the middle, it's in like book club fiction zone. But I joined this organization because I wanted to be part of a writing group that was focused on a certain type of writing. So, my group here in Lansing, the Capital City Writers is for anybody. You have fiction, non-fiction, any genre, whatever, and that's great, but you can get a lot of really great insight from people who are doing the same thing that you're doing. And so I saw either in Poets and Writers or Writers Digest or online somewhere, I saw this information about this group. I joined it and I've been a part of it since I think 2014. Their definition of women's fiction is a book where the focus is on the emotional journey of the protagonist, whether the protagonist is male or female. To me, that's kind of what I was writing. I was writing something that was focused, not on a romantic relationship that somebody was developing or anything like that, but it was on this emotional journey, this growth of this character.

A lot of people have problems with the phrase women's fiction because they think it unnecessarily limits the to women. Now, certainly women are most of my readers, but they're not the only readers. And I think that more and more men are realizing that you can read a story with a female protagonist and you can relate to it just as women have been doing for generations. You know, I mean, we were reading all sorts of stuff with male protagonists and even, you know, as a mother of a son, when I read stories to my son when he was younger and we got to the point where we were reading longer books, I wanted him to love the books that I loved as a kid. And a lot of them had female protagonists, and he took a little convincing and I was very careful about my choices. I said, you're going to like this. You're going to like her, trust me. And I was always right. And he always liked them, *Harriet*, *the Spy*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Wrinkle in Time*. I'm like, you're going to like these girls.

Ginny: I love that. I loved *Harriet the Spy*. Your abbreviated hook for this book, the most treacherous terrain is found within, shouts women's fiction. It is that internal journey that becomes the character arc - that internal growth of the character. One of the reasons I love both writing women's fiction and also talking to authors of women's fiction is it seems oftentimes there is real emotional and relational literacy. Women's fiction authors are often fairly self-aware. And as you talked about, in many ways, we're working out our own issues, our own growth, our own emotional health, through those character. Those characters become a vehicle for our own processing. I find that fascinating. It's always interesting to me to connect with another women's fiction author, because we hear some of those same things from one another, and that's really fun to feel like, okay, I'm not alone in what I'm doing, because sometimes it can feel a little crazy making.

Erin: Yeah. And honestly, I mean, that's what I feel like really good fiction is always saying to you as a reader, that whatever secret thoughts you have had, or ways that you think about yourself in negative ways, everybody else is doing that too. You're not alone. I remember as a child the day I realized that other people had their own thoughts in their heads, that it wasn't just me. And I was just like, oh my word, what are they all thinking? You know? And it turns out we're all pretty much thinking the same thing.

Ginny: That is very true. So, another question: did you intentionally choose Christian fiction over general market fiction? You've been in the publishing world, you are an excellent writer, you're involved outside the Christian circle in terms of your writers' groups and things... So why Christian fiction?

Erin: That's a wonderful question. I did not purposefully seek out a Christian publisher for this book, or for any of them. Well, for this book I did, but my first book was shopped around to a lot of different places. It got, you know, a little way through the editorial process in a couple of different places, but ultimately it wasn't picked up. In the meantime, I had given the manuscript to my then boss who was the vice president of sales for Baker Publishing Group. And he read it in a couple of days, which I thought was extraordinary because it was very long. And he had really good things to say about it. And he's one of those people who doesn't say nice things, unless he means them, which is why we worked so well together, we were actually really similar.

He really wanted to publish it. And I said, well, you know, I have some reservations about publishing with the people I work with. And he's like, well, what? And I said, one of the things is if it doesn't work, if it doesn't succeed, I don't

want to pass people in the halls and have them give me that sort of like, oh, I really liked it, sort of pity look, you know? And he was like, oh, that's dumb. You know, 70% of books don't earn out their advance. You know, most books don't succeed by, you know, that standard. And I said, well, there's a few other things.

I'm just not sure because I didn't feel like what I was writing was Christian fiction. I felt like it was general fiction. And there are some readers who also think that because they're like, I don't understand why this is labeled Christian fiction. Whether they are a non-Christian who's like, well, this wasn't so bad. There wasn't too much God or a Christian who's like, well, I feel like there ought have been a lot more God than that. And why didn't she do this? So, I live in this no man's land in between where I'm very comfortable with both groups, whether it's Christian writers or non-Christians. I'm very comfortable writing in the space that I'm in, but it's harder to categorize. And so eventually my boss said, well, you think of us as a backup plan. And I said, okay. And when some other things didn't work out, I'm like, okay, well, let's just see how this works. And it's worked really, really well.

There are some really great benefits of publishing with the person you work with, mainly because, you know what's going on. A lot of people, I know, especially other debut authors, are anxious all the time because they never knew what was going on with their book. And I'm like, I can check databases. I can email people or I can see him in the hall and be like, hey, author hat, can we talk about this? I've had a really great experience. We're doing a couple more books together and we'll see what the future holds.

It's definitely an odd space to be in because you don't please everyone, and you can't. People have certain expectations, good or bad, of what Christian fiction is and what I like is having people with certain expectations read my work, and then having them say, Oh, that was unexpected. And having them say, that's not what I thought it was going to be, but I liked it anyway.

Ginny: Well, it's neat because you can attract a wide audience. And that's not what we are always taught to do, but even with *All That We Carried*, there was a definite spiritual message or theme to it. But as I mentioned, it was very subtle in the way that you did it. And by that I mean, it was all show and no tell. You nailed the showing versus telling, that deep POV, which I call showing on steroids. There was no author intrusion. There was no preaching. It was really well done.

Erin: I really appreciate those words because I think that's the difficulty when you're talking about, um, especially when you're talking about spiritual beliefs or

anything that you believe strongly in, because it doesn't matter what the book's about, you can feel the author intrude sometimes. And my aim was to write a story about people dealing with things, not to write an apologetic. And so if at the end people are upset by the fact, and I'm not going to give anything away, I don't think, that a character doesn't grow in the way they want them to all the way, or that it's not made explicit, that's intentional because it's not, it's not an apologetic. This is a story.

Ginny: And for those Christians who are acquainted with theology, you tackled some deep theological questions.

Erin: I don't know that any of them are solved, but they're definitely talked about.

Ginny: I don't know that they're meant to be solved this side of heaven. You were brave, I felt, in going in and tackling some of the questions that keep people from God, and that we allow to be barriers in our relationship with God. But this could easily also appeal to a general market audience. I was just fascinated by your ability to serve both readers, at least in this book.

Erin: And I think that a large part of being able to show and not tell it just has to do with, for me at least, with revision, because there's a lot of telling in a first draft. And I think that some people want to stick right there with their first draft. They feel this is as good as I can do, or this is really what I wanted to say. But for me, it's always in deletion that I find good writing, it's removing things. I don't know if that's because I'm a copywriter by trade and I have to remove a lot of things. Things have to be tight. They have to be short. They have to be to the point. I just love deleting things. When I edit other people's work, I'm like, do you really need this? Do you need this here? You can probably get rid of all this. This was for you as the writer when you first wrote it, and now you have to trust a reader to get it without you telling them straight out what they're supposed to get.

Ginny: Absolutely. Good words. Okay. So, one question to close on, we are still in 2020, and it has been a year of untold challenge for so many people. What is your takeaway as a writer, and for writers, from what we have experienced this year? Or do you have one?

Erin: I saw this as one of your questions that you said you were going to ask me and I'm like, I should really think about this before, because it's a tough question. I know so many writers who found it extremely difficult to write this year. I had big plans for this year, I think we all did. I turned 40 on January 2nd, 2020, and I

thought, I'm going to live a very intentional year. I had all these plans. I had two manuscripts that I had planned on drafting. I am halfway through one. It's been a hard year to write, not only because your mind is so full of things, all of the stuff that's going on, and you are spending a lot more time with your family, perhaps because you're home or they're home. I praise God that my son is in in-person school this year. I have been so thankful for that. He goes to a very small private school and they were able to make it work. And I was ready for two weeks in for them to be like, Oh, sorry, we made a mistake. But he's still there. I've worked from home for more than 15 years, so I was very used to working from home, but I don't like having a coworker in the next room, listening to music that I can't stand. So, summer, well, spring and summer, were hard and I just didn't get a lot of writing done.

I tend to be somebody who doesn't have a great routine. I don't get up at 5:00 AM to write every morning, even though I wish I did. I fit it in where it fits and in a year like this, sometimes it doesn't fit. But I think people have to give themselves a little grace and allow themselves to go through something. It takes a while to process the kind of stress that I think people have been under in so many ways this year. And it might be halfway into next year before you feel like you can really get over it and start getting your life back on track. And when it comes to writing, when you're stressed out and you're just full of angst, it can be really difficult to write. For some people, that's when they need to write. But for other people, it's hard to be creative when you are so stressed out. So, I think giving yourself a little bit of leeway and not holding yourself to impossible standards during an impossible year is probably not too bad of advice.

Ginny: It's actually very good advice. Very good advice. Well, thank you. So tell us, what does, what do you think 2021 looks like for you? The book releases on January 5th.

Erin: My year is actually starting to fill up with virtual events. You know, when we had to cancel all sorts of things this year, people weren't quite ready to figure things out, or they didn't know when they could do it again. But, this coming year, I feel like people have a pretty good handle on it. I'm doing library events, I'm doing book clubs, I'm doing store events, all online for the first few months. And my first in-person event is scheduled for mid-April. And we are rescheduling things that we were supposed to do last year. I fully believe and hope and anticipate being in person for things by the summer. Certainly, by the fall. I'm planning my next retreat in Albuquerque as if it's going to happen. And I'm hoping that it will. And I think that by this time next year, we'll all be doing a lot better.

Ginny: Good. Well, we will look forward to seeing you in the virtual events. The beauty of that is you reach a wider audience.

Erin: That's good. People can find those on my website if they want to. It's erinbartels.com/events.