

Media Kit
Deep Down Things
by Tamara Linse

“Building off the exceptional promise of her short-story collection *How to Be a Man*, author Tamara Linse returns with a novel about three orphaned siblings in Loveland, Colorado and their struggles to find love, meaning, and the strength to care for each other. ... Linse makes each journey relatable and emotionally textured while occasionally injecting her signature literary observations.” ~ IndieReader (4.5 out of 5 stars)

This media kit includes the following:

- [a press release](#)
- [information about the book](#)
- [author bio and contact info](#)
- [Q&A with the author](#)
- [letter to the reader](#)
- [excerpt](#)

Attached with this package are high-resolution photos of the book cover and author.

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Novel Presents an Emotionally Harrowing Journey

An emotionally harrowing novel from author Tamara Linse released this week tells the story of three siblings whose lives are torn apart by a charismatic bullrider-turned-writer and the love that triumphs despite tragedy.

Set in Loveland, Colorado, *Deep Down Things* tells the story of Maggie Jordan. From the death of her parents at sixteen, Maggie yearns for lost family, while sister CJ drowns in alcohol and brother Tibs withdraws. When Maggie and an idealistic young writer named Jackdaw fall in love, she is certain that she's found what she's looking for. As she helps him write a novel, she gets pregnant, and they marry. But after Maggie gives birth to a darling boy, Jes, she struggles to cope with Jes's severe birth defect, while Jackdaw struggles to overcome writer's block brought on by memories of his abusive father.

Ambitious, but never seeming so, *Deep Down Things* may remind you of Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* and Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*.

Like the characters in *Deep Down Things*, the author Tamara Linse and her husband have lost babies. They had five miscarriages before their twins were born through the help of a wonderful woman who acted as a gestational carrier. Tamara is also the author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man* and earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for *Arts & Letters* and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at tamaralinse.com and on her blog *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl* at tamara-linse.blogspot.com.

The novel is available in paperback and ebook through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and other online retailers and can be ordered through a bookstore near you.

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If you'd like more information or to schedule an interview, media appearance, or book-signing, contact Tamara Linse at 307.761.6865 or via email at tamara@tamaralinse.com.

Book Information

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novel

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Logline

Deep Down Things is the emotionally riveting story of three siblings torn apart by a charismatic bullrider-turned-writer and the love that triumphs despite tragedy. Ambitious, but never seeming so, *Deep Down Things* may remind you of Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* and Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*.

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Synopsis

Deep Down Things, Tamara Linse's debut novel, is the emotionally riveting story of three siblings torn apart by a charismatic bullrider-turned-writer and the love that triumphs despite tragedy.

From the death of her parents at sixteen, Maggie Jordan yearns for lost family, while sister CJ drowns in alcohol and brother Tibs withdraws. When Maggie and an idealistic young writer named Jackdaw fall in love, she is certain that she's found what she's looking for. As she helps him write a novel, she gets pregnant, and they marry. But after Maggie gives birth to a darling boy, Jes, she struggles to cope with Jes's severe birth defect, while Jackdaw struggles to overcome writer's block brought on by memories of his abusive father.

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Highlights

- Born in 1969 and grew up on the Tillett Ranch north of Lovell, Wyoming.
- Graduated from Lovell High School in 1987.
- Earned a bachelor's (with honors, 2000) and master's (2002) in English from the University of Wyoming. Thesis on 1852–54 Overland Trail diaries, which received an Outstanding Thesis Award. Taught freshman composition and science and technical writing.
- Waitressed in high school and bartended and waitressed to put herself college.
- Worked for 16 years as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm (TRC Mariah Associates Inc.), as well as a freelance journalist, editor, and writer.
- Currently works as an editor for a foundation (the University of Wyoming Foundation) for 5 years.
- Married with 8-year-old twins (a boy and a girl). The twins are her and her husband's genetic children but they were carried by a gestational carrier. Prior to that, they had five miscarriages.
- A semifinalist for the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize, a finalist for the *Glimmer Train* Short-Story Award for New Writers and the *Arts & Letters* Fiction Prize, and an honorable mention for the Neltje Blanchen Award, among others.

- Published stories in the *South Dakota Review*, *New West*, *Talking River*, the *Georgetown Review*, and others.
- Author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man*.

Short Bio

Like the characters in *Deep Down Things*, the author Tamara Linse and her husband have lost babies. They had five miscarriages before their twins were born through the help of a wonderful woman who acted as a gestational carrier. Tamara is also the author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man* and earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for *Arts & Letters* and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at tamaralinse.com and on her blog *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl* at tamara-linse.blogspot.com.

Long Bio

Tamara Linse grew up on a ranch in northern Wyoming with her farmer/rancher rock-hound ex-GI father, her artistic musician mother from small-town middle America, and her four sisters and two brothers. The ranch was a partnership between her father and her uncle, and in the 80s and 90s the two families had a Hatfields and McCoys-style feud. She jokes that she was raised in the 1880s because they did things old-style—she learned how to bake bread, break horses, irrigate, change tires, and be alone, skills she's been thankful for ever since. In high school, she was rodeo queen, placed in a poetry contest, and waitressed.

She put herself through the University of Wyoming as a bartender, waitress, and editor. At UW, she was officially in almost every college on campus until she settled on English and after 15 years earned her bachelor's and master's in English. While there, she taught writing, including a course called *Literature and the Land*, where students read Wordsworth and Donner Party diaries during the week and hiked in the mountains on weekends. She also worked as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm.

She lives in Laramie, Wyoming, with her husband Steve and their twin son and daughter. They went through five miscarriages before the twins were born with the help of a wonderful woman who acted as a gestational carrier.

Tamara writes fiction around her job as an editor for a foundation. She is also a photographer, and when she can she posts a photo a day for a Project 365. Please stop by Tamara's website, www.tamaralinse.com, and her blog, *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl*, at tamara-linse.blogspot.com. You can find an extended bio there with lots of juicy details. Also friend her on Facebook and Google+ and follow her on Twitter, and if you see her in person, please say hi. She really means it.

Other Details

An even more-detailed bio is also available at http://www.tamaralinse.com/bio_bio.html.

Q&A

How do you pronounce your name?

tuh-MARE-uh LIN-zee. Don't worry—hardly anyone gets it right the first time.

What does the name of your blog, “writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl,” mean?

The real reason I tagged myself “writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl” was that I needed a tagline for my blog, something that helped me to stand out. “Writer” was obvious. I love old-timey words, and I had been finishing up a historical novel at the time, and so “cogitator” popped into my mind. I have friends who are “recovering alcoholics” (and “recovering Catholics”) and I thought that that fit me well—the idea that my childhood was something I needed to recover from. As Maile Meloy wrote in her story “Ranch Girl,” you can't have much worse luck than being born a girl on a ranch.

Why is it bad luck to be born a girl on a ranch?

Western culture is a very male culture. A lot of women I know, myself included, saw that phenomenon growing up and the only way they could see to have self-worth is to be a man, hence the title of my collection *How to Be a Man*. A lot of women in the West wear men's clothing and drink beer and hunt and watch football and generally be as masculine as they can be. They shun everything feminine, and they have no women friends—heaven forbid. They think of themselves as this third thing, this third gender. Not a woman definitely, and they can't be men, so they think of themselves as genderless almost. It's very destructive to the psyche.

Who did you read as a child?

I loved all things British—Pooh and *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*. I also loved Joan Aiken and Frank L. Baum. I was glad to go from grade school to middle school because I'd exhausted the library. In middle school, I discovered the Newberry Award books. Later, I read a lot of westerns and loved them, particularly Louis L'Amour. He doesn't stand the test of time well, though. I went through a scifi/specific phase as a teenager and still have a fondness for it. I haven't read much romance or mystery, and I'm not quite sure why. Literary fiction is and always has been my greatest love.

Who are your favorite writers?

My favorite writers. Well, it often feels like the writer of the last book I read because I fall in love almost every time. I fall in love with minds. But I'll take a run at it.

- My all-time favorites are Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf.
- For novels, Douglas Adams, Julian Barnes, Michael Cunningham, E. L. Doctorow,

William Faulkner, Charles Frasier, James Galvin, Kent Haruf, John Irving, Stephen King, Barbara Kingsolver, Cormac McCarthy, Ann Patchett, Jodi Picoult, Terry Pratchett, Anne Rice, J. K. Rowling, Anita Shreve, and Alexander McCall Smith.

- For short stories, Sherman Alexie, T. C. Boyle, Raymond Carver, Charles D'Ambrosio, Anthony Doerr, Aryn Kyle, Dennis Lehane, Maile Meloy, Alice Munro, Antonia Nelson, Tim O'Brien, Benjamin Percy, Donald Ray Pollock, Annie Proulx, Karen Russell, Jim Shepard, and Tobias Wolff.
- For nonfiction, Steve Almond, Judy Blunt, Augusten Burroughs, John D'Agata, James Herriot, and Mary Roach.
- There are lots of writers that I really want to like and I have their books but I haven't gotten around to reading them.

See what I mean? And this isn't all of them by a long stretch.

What's the earliest memory you have of writing a story? When did you first call yourself a writer?

I've always written. The first story I wrote a beginning, middle, and end to was called "The Silver Locket" and was the story of a girl who goes back in time to become her own great grandmother. It was inspired by a friend named Cami who was into a British YA mystery writer named Joan Aiken. Together we read everything of hers. Cami wrote a story that ended with a head rolling in a gutter. Prior to that, I had read all the time, but I hadn't realized that a person could actually BE a writer. When I actually called myself a writer is a different story. I think I was 30. I wrote all of my life, but no one I knew was a writer, and I thought of writers as someone who published a novel, and so when I began to imagine I might just be published is when I tentatively played around with the idea of calling myself one.

Why do you write?

That's a complicated question. Because it's my passion. Because as a child I felt I had no voice. Because I love to read, and writing is like reading only better. Because I have to stay sane—just ask my husband. Because I'm fascinated by people, and writing and reading is the closest you can get to another person's consciousness. But a deeper reason is that writing is all about desire. All people everywhere live in a constant state of desire. It is truly a human condition. Whether it's something as small as a snack or something materialistic or something as large as a mate for life, people want. People need. One reason that we are such good consumers and why advertising works so well is because we by our very nature have this endless hole within us that needs to be filled. Every religion is built on this. So, this is my deeper answer to why I write: Because I'm human. Because I desire. It's a way to take the world into myself and to make it part of me. It's a way to place myself into the world. It's a way to connect with the world and with other people and to imagine for one small moment that we are not alone and that we have the capacity to be full and content and meaningful.

Where do you get your ideas?

That's the wrong question. It should be: How do you recognize an idea when you see one? Ideas are all around you. Everything and anything can spark a story. Say, someone told you to write about *walls*. Thomas King, who's Native American, was given 24 hours' notice to write about walls, and he came up with a humdinger. (Sorry—I don't remember the name of it!) It's about a man wanting his walls painted white but the history of walls bleeds through, and then finally, when he has them torn out and new walls put in, the stark white walls makes him look brown. Virginia Woolf wrote a story about a blob on her bedroom wall, which turns out to be a snail or a slug, I think, but it's a great story. I'm sure there are more stories about walls. It's about what you put into the idea, what lights you up and interests you, and it can be as specific as something that happened to you as a child or as general as wanting to write about the color green. I also find that when my head is in my writing—in other words, I'm not blocked and avoiding—ideas come so fast and thick I can't keep up. Everything sparks an idea for a story. Then it's a problem of way too many ideas and feeling guilty about lost opportunity.

What is your writing process? What is your least favorite part? Your most favorite part?

I avoid. I feel awful. I inevitably read things and feel inspired, but still I avoid. Then I make myself sit at the computer and start. It's hard, really really hard. But then something magical happens. The real world goes away and the world I'm creating becomes more real than the real world. It's like the real world is in black and white, and the world I'm creating is in technicolor. Sure, sometimes it still comes slowly and painfully, but sometimes it comes like lightning from my brain. And then I'm in love. When I finish a story, revised and all, I'm in love with it. I can't see its flaws. I want to take it to dinner and then make out with it in the back seat. Then, like all affairs, after a while I start to see the story's strengths and weaknesses. Then I either revise some more or I write a new story or both. My least favorite part is the avoiding stage, and my most favorite part is when the writing is going well and the world I'm writing is more real than the real world.

Deep Down Things doesn't easily fit into a category. Why is that?

I think it has to do with my interests as a reader and a writer. I don't read much genre, and I haven't written it. There's nothing wrong with genre ~ it's just a different animal. Genre seeks to affirm preconceived notions. It takes a received form and plays with it, but the arc must remain essentially the same. There's value and entertainment in that. However, what I love to read and write is the complicated messy parts of life, the genre of literary. I want my fiction to challenge and expand what I know, and I want to challenge my readers to do a little more of the work. Above all else, I want fiction that tries to express the subtleties and nuances of lived experience, yet be in some way satisfying. So that's why *Deep Down Things* doesn't fit into a category.

Why four points of view?

Because I'm a masochist? Seriously, the book was initially conceived as having a structure similar to the movie *Love Actually*. I was exploring the question: how can you have a bunch of different story lines going yet make them come together as a unified whole? I initially conceived more story lines than just the four ~ for example, there was going to be a high school student who tried to seduce Tibs. The thing about point of view, though, is that whenever you give someone the narrative spotlight, they have to have an arc. It has to be their story and they have to change, or refuse to change, in their own arc. And therefore if you have four stories you have four arcs, and then it all has to hold together into an arc of its own. Another initial model for *Deep Down Things* is Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. That novel is not only my favorite Faulkner but one of my all-time favorite books. Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* was a model late in the process, but I actually didn't read the book till after I had written the first draft of *Deep Down Things*.

Maggie and Jes's medical journey is harrowing. Does this reflect something in your life?

Their story reflects many things in my life. First and most directly, when I was a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm, I worked with a wonderful woman who had two boys. She is my same age and is one of those ideal mothers. If I were able to choose my mother, she'd be at the top of the list. But then she had her third child and he had severe spina bifida, just like Jes. He died when he was 6 years old, and he would have been 18 this year. I hope this book in some small way honors what they went through. There are a few other things that contribute to the story. My husband and I lost five babies to miscarriage, the first at six months. In past times, we would have been childless, but with the miracle of modern science we were able to have our twin boy and girl. They are our genetic material carried by a saint of a woman who acted as our gestational carrier. She is amazing and I would trust her almost more than I trust myself. A third thing that contributes is that our son was born with a severe cleft lip and palate. He's perfectly fine, but he's had to have a number of surgeries throughout his life. I am so thankful to all the medical professionals who have made so many things possible.

Deep Down Things is a tragedy. Why don't you write happy endings?

My mom asks me that all the time, as do a couple of my sisters. I fear I was born with a broken funny bone. I find things funny, but they're usually English geek kinds-of-things—Monty Python, Terry Pratchett. The things that most people find funny, I usually find incredibly sad or incredibly angry. One of the reasons why, I think, is because the basis of a lot of humor is stereotyping, reducing someone to one dimension, and my goal in writing is to find the complexity of life, to express lived reality. That's why I'm drawn to the genre of literary. (Not at all to insinuate that the other genres are anything less!) I don't think of my endings as dark—what I often try for is closure without resolution, which is the way life is. There's always a tension when I write between the messiness and meaninglessness of life and the creation of a satisfying piece of art.

Deep Down Things is self-published. Why did you choose that route?

I have to admit that I crave the legitimization that comes from traditional publishing, and that's why I resisted self-publishing for so long. It took me 11 years and almost 200 queries to get an agent. (Read more about [my journey to get an agent here](#).) I've written and rewritten two novels that have gone out to publishers ~ one of which is *Deep Down Things*. Though I've gotten some very nice notes from editors, neither was picked up. Some might call me a slow study ~ I call myself pig-headed, and that's a good thing. I don't know if you've been reading much about this, but the squeeze that is being put on traditional publishing by disintermediation has brought about the rise of a new type of author: the hybrid author. (The great Chuck Wendig [has been talking a lot about this](#).) There's no longer just two tracks ~ traditional publishing and self-publishing. The tracks are becoming melded and diversified, and much more of the power is back in the hands of the author. Also much more of the responsibility for getting a book out and connecting with readers. That's where the hybrid author comes in. She or he is someone who, with the help of her agent, chooses the best route for the work at hand and then has to make it so. This is wonderful and terrifying ~ for everyone involved. Also, traditional publishers now consider the success of a self-published title in their decision to take book on. In other words, they will take on a book that's doing well under self-publishing (and I suspect that this will become the norm, rather than the exception). I'm also made for it. It's like all my various backgrounds come together in this one endeavor. Of course the writing part ~ I've been writing and improving my craft my whole life. But then also editing ~ I've been an editor in all different capacities. I've also been an artist and taken art classes for years, not to mention jobs as a document designer. I took classes in electrical engineering and computers for a number of years, and all that experience goes into making a website and working with digital publishing. And I'm in marketing and have done freelance marketing for years, which prepares me to be a promo-sapiens. And I love social media and tend to be a bit of an early adopter. Not to mention I'm a bit obsessive.

CJ discovers new facets of her sexuality in Deep Down Things. Are you gay?

No, I'm not lesbian. I am a happily married heterosexual. However, like so many things, sexuality rests on a spectrum. People's real sexuality, not simply what they profess to be. On the spectrum of homosexual to heterosexual, I'd say I'm not out on the end. I'm attracted to minds, and that's why I fall in love with books and authors, no matter who they are. Haven't you had that experience? The one where you read a book and you become obsessed with the author and read everything you can about them and fantasize about running into them somewhere and you make this deep connection and are friends for life? Very stalkerish? I write gay characters for the same reason that I write characters of all different stripes. I'm trying to figure out and portray the human condition, and sexuality is all wrapped up in gender, which is something I'm very interested in too.

Are you Christian?

I am not. I would say I'm spiritual without a particular affiliation. My family didn't go to church when I was growing up, though I visited with friends, and I'm deeply ambivalent about the institution. As a feminist and humanist, I strongly object to all the horrible things that have

been done in the name of religion, and since I was not raised immersed in its metaphors and traditions I find them hollow and constructed. However, I whole-heartedly believe in the function that religion plays in our society: community, the ten commandments, do unto others, be a good person. You do not have to be part of an organized institution, however, to be a good person and know right from wrong and try your best to make the world a better place. All that said, the stories of the bible are timeless and have had an immense impact on our culture, and I often have an underlying story or metaphor that I'm riffing on when I write something. Having that structure to reference prompts my creativity. And so the story of Jes is the story of Jesus in a ways large and small. Can you spot them?

The characters in Deep Down Things are all white. Do you see that as a problem?

Yes, I do. I thought a lot about this. Because three of my point of view characters are siblings, they needed to be of the same race, which of course would be my race. I thought about making either Jackdaw or Bo African American or Hispanic, but I couldn't make Jackdaw because he was the bad guy. How could I make my bad a guy a different race than I? Unless I was specifically exploring the racial aspect of it, that seemed lazy and unethical and so many things. A veritable mine field. I seriously considered making Bo part African American, but then she seemed to play into the stereotype of the good-but-sharp-tongued black person who's motherly and a nurse. Also, what would be the ramifications of having my lesbian character be black? That's exoticizing the other. Maybe it was a lack of courage on my part, but with so many things going on already, I didn't want to throw that into the mix. In general, just know that I think a lot about this, and I'm always trying to have a more diverse cast of characters.

What are you reading?

Boy, you ask difficult questions. The thing is, I could honestly say that I'm reading hundreds of books at one time. That's because I tend to "taste" books before I read them from beginning to end. I'll buy a new book and then read it for a half hour or hour before bed. Then I'll put the book aside and not pick it up again for years. Lately, I've been reading the books of my fellow Wyoming writers who are also great friends. Nina McConigley is out with a fabulous book of short stories called [*Cowboys and East Indians*](#). Pembroke Sinclair is out with a YA horror novel called [*The Appeal of Evil*](#). Mary Beth Baptiste is out with a great memoir about coming West called [*Altitude Adjustment*](#). You should check them out.

Do you have an MFA?

No—my master's is in literary studies and my thesis was on 1852–54 pioneer diaries. I've taken a lot of workshops, however, in the classroom and online and at writers conferences. I highly recommend them. Be it an MFA or a local writers group, any time you can get others to look at your work and give you solid feedback is helpful. Solid feedback does not mean only "oh, you are so wonderful"—but you do need some of this for your ego or you won't have the strength to go on. Neither does it mean brutal comments like "This isn't working" with no further explanation or direction. It means detailed criticism of one reader's reaction to what's

working and what's not working—the more detailed and specific and articulate, the better. Still more important, volunteer to read your writer friends' work. You'll learn more from commenting on theirs than you will reading comments on your own. I am thinking about getting a low residency MFA, however, as I'm always trying to improve my writing.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Read a lot. Write a lot. Write in the style of what you like to read. The best writing often comes from what obsesses you and makes you uncomfortable. Be brave. Persevere. Make a lot of writer friends.

What's next for you?

Oh, so many things! First, I imagine there'll be a lot of procrastination and a few times in the depths of despair, but then there'll be those moments of glory when the writing is flowing and characters are running across the page. That's not what you meant? Seriously, thank you for asking. I'll be coming out with a historical novel in January 2015, the first book in a trilogy tentatively called the Round Earth Series. Set in 1885 Iowa and Kansas City, [*Earth's Imagined Corners*](#) is about Sara, whose father tries to force her to marry his younger partner. Instead, she elopes to Kansas City with a kind man who she just met named James. Little does she know, he has a troubled past. Finally, I'm also working on a young adult series called the Wyoming Chronicles, which are re-imaginings of classics set in contemporary Wyoming. The first, called *Pride*, is Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* set in present-day Jackson Hole.

Letter to the Reader

Oh, what I wouldn't have given to be able to give Maggie a happy ending, to have Jes grow into a happy and healthy young man whose only scars are those left by his troubled father. It wasn't to be, however. The logic of the story inexorably pulled me to where it ended.

That's not entirely true. The first ending actually had Jackdaw successfully shooting Jes and then killing himself. So maybe I did pull back a little—at the behest of an editor friend. The conversation went something like this. “The ending is too unremittingly dark.” “But Jes has to die. Otherwise no one will buy it.” “Yes, but does his father have to kill him? AND THEN commit suicide?” Point taken. That same friend said she bawled in public in NYC at least four times while reading it. Now THAT is a compliment. I think.

The inspiration for this story is a friend and coworker who is one of those ideal mothers. If I could have chosen to have any mother in the world, she would have been at the top of my list. She had two boys, and then her third boy was born with severe spina bifida. Watching what she went through was heart-wrenching. When I decided to write this book, a few years after the darling boy had died at age six, we sat and talked through what had happened. She said that most people act as if it never happened and so it was good to talk about it. I hope so, and I hope I've in some small way been able to honor what she went through.

Another inspiration for this story is my history of infertility. My mother had seven kids including me, and one of my sisters had seven, and so I never considered that I would have problems having children. Then, my husband and I had five miscarriages, the first at six months. Medical rigmarole ensued. I'm so glad for it, though, because we were able to have our happy ending. A wonderful amazing woman—whom I'd trust almost more than I'd trust myself—acted as gestational carrier for us, and our twins were born. Our son was also born with a severe cleft lip and palate, and so more medical procedures. As much as we've been through, though, I can't express how thankful I am to medical science and the wonderful doctors who made it all possible.

The first scene of *Deep Down Things* that I wrote, I was actually staying in a residential hotel in Denver undergoing IVF procedure for the twins. All those shots. That was August 2005. The first scene I wrote was where Maggie walks into the room and Jes just lights up. He makes her feel wonderful, despite everything, just by the way he beams at her. I finished a first draft by June 2009. I remember because I completed it for a Tin House writers conference mentorship with the legendary Little, Brown editor Judy Clain. The manuscript was an unqualified mess—four points of view with two timelines going concurrently. Bless Judy's heart for first of all agreeing to do the mentorship and second of all giving me such great advice. Help your reader out. Chronological, chronological! More reflection to let the reader know what to take away from a scene. Her talking with me was simply the best encouragement I could have had.

So I went back and majorly rewrote it. Because of how I'd written it—two timelines—the beginning and the end were basically written and I had to write through the middle. An odd

experience, to say the least, but a good one. It shaped up nicely, although I distinctly remember having writer's block and thinking, this is the most horrible thing I've ever read. I do that when I write—I go through periods of loving the work and then hating it. Especially when I'm not writing, I think about all the flaws.

Having four points of view presented its own challenges. If you have a point of view, you must have a character arc. Something has to happen to that person. They have to change. And therefore all the stories have to be coherent in their own right, yet they have to meld together into this unified whole. "Ambitious," someone called it, and at the time I don't think they meant it as a compliment. My initial inspiration for form was the movie *Love Actually*. I was fascinated with how that movie was able to have all those different story lines yet work. I still love that movie. It strayed pretty far from that, though, didn't it? Another big inspiration was William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, one of my favorite books. All those points of view tied together in a country setting. Believe it or not, I didn't actually read Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* till late in the writing process. Without knowing it, I had mirrored a lot of that wonderful book, and so when I did finally read it I was a bit thunderstruck.

I deliberately try to have all kinds of people in my books. I regret that I don't have more diversity in this one, but I am glad I was able to have CJ work through her sexuality. Race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality are not binaries—they exist much more on a spectrum—and I find myself continually fascinated with the complexities of these subjects.

Finally, I often have an extended metaphor or theme that I'm thinking of when I write a story or a novel. In the case of *Deep Down Things*, it's the story of Jesus. Many readers would not pick up on it, I think, but Jesus's story riffs on it with details large and small. I'm a spiritual person—though I'm not a religious one—and the ideas underlying the story of Jesus are complicated and compelling and timeless. Self-sacrifice, family relationships, being a good person—these all are just as relevant today as they ever were. And I find by using something like this as a framework, an extended metaphor, I can explore these subjects more deeply. I don't think of this as a religious book or a Christian book, but I am very invested in the ideas that Christianity presents to us. I am happy, however, if this book helps someone affirm his or her faith or think more deeply about the issues presented. We all need help sometimes in being good people.

My final confession is that the ending still makes me bawl like a baby. I don't think writers are supposed to admit that.

Excerpt

Maggie

Jackdaw isn't going to make it. I can tell by the way the first jump unseats him. The big white bull lands and then tucks and gathers underneath. Jackdaw curls forward and whips the air with his left hand, but his butt slides off-center. Thirty yards away on the metal bleachers, I involuntarily scoot sideways—as if it would do any good. The bull springs out from under Jackdaw and then arches its back, flipping its hind end.

Jackdaw is tossed wide off the bull's back. In the air he is all red-satin arms and shaggy-chapped legs but then somehow he grabs his black felt hat. He lands squarely on both feet, knees bent to catch his weight. Then he straightens with a grand sweep of his hat. Even from here you can see his smile burst out. There's something about the way he opens his body to the crowd, like a dog rolling over to show its belly, that makes me feel sorry for him but drawn to him too. With him standing there, holding himself halfway between a relaxed slouch and head-high pride, I can see why my brother Tibs admires him.

I haven't actually met Jackdaw before, but he and Tibs hang out together a lot, and they have some English classes together. I haven't run across him on campus.

The crowd on the bleachers goes wild. It doesn't matter that Jackdaw didn't stay on the full eight seconds. They holler and wolf-whistle and shake their programs. Their metallic stomping vibrates my body and brings up dust and the smell of old manure.

With Jackdaw off its back, the bull leaps into the air. It gyrates its hips and flips its head, a long ribbon of snot curling off its nostril and arcing over its back. Then it stops and turns and looks at Jackdaw. It hangs its head low. It shifts its weight onto its front hooves, butt in the air, and pauses. The clown with the black face paint and the big white circles around his eyes runs in front of the bull to distract it, but it shakes its head like it's saying no to dessert.

The crowd hushes.

Then, I can't believe it, Jackdaw takes a step toward the bull. The crowd yells, but not like a crowd, like a bunch of kids on a playground. Some holler encouragement. Others laugh. Some try to warn him. Some egg him on. My heart beats wild in my chest like when my sister CJ and I watch those slasher movies and Freddy's coming after the guy and you know because he's the best friend that he's going to get killed and you want to warn him. "Bastard deserved it," CJ always says, "for being stupid."

It's like Jackdaw doesn't know the bull's right there. He starts walking, not directly to the fence but at a slant toward the loudest of the cheers, which takes him right past the bull.

I turn to Tibs. "What's he doing?"

"He knows his stuff," Tibs says, his voice lower than normal. The look on his face makes me want to give him a hug, but we're not a hugging family, so I nod, even though Tibs isn't looking at me.

Tibs is leaning forward, his eyes focused on Jackdaw, his elbows on his knees, and his shoulders hunched. Tibs is tall and thin, and he always looks a little fragile, a couple of sticks propped together. His face is our dad's, big eyes and not much of a chin, sort of like an alien or an overgrown boy. He has the habit of playing with his fingers, which he's doing now. It's like he wants to reach out and grab something but he can't quite bring himself to. It's the same when

he talks—he'll cover his mouth with his hand like he's holding back his words.

Tibs is the tallest of us three kids—CJ, he, and I. CJ's the oldest. I'm the youngest and the shortest. Grandma Rose, Dad's mom, always said I got left with the leftovers. Growing up, it seemed like CJ and Tibs got things and were told things that I was too young to have or to know. It was good though, too, because when Dad and Mom got killed when I was sixteen, I didn't know enough to worry much about money or things. They had saved up some so we could get by. But poor CJ. She in particular had to be the parent, but she was used to babysitting us and she was older anyway—twenty-two, I think.

Like that time when we were kids when CJ was babysitting and I got so sick. Turned out to be pneumonia. I don't know where our parents were. Most likely, they were away on business, but it could have been something else. Grandma Rose had cracked her hip—I remember that—so she couldn't take care of us, but it was only for a couple of days and CJ was thirteen at the time. In general, CJ had started ignoring us, claiming she was a teenager now and didn't want to play with babies any more, like kids do, which really got Tibs, though he didn't do much besides sulk about it. But that day she was playing with us like she was a little kid too.

We had been playing in an irrigation ditch making a dam. I pretended to be a beaver, and Tibs pretended to be an engineer on the Hoover Dam. I don't remember CJ pretending to be anything, just helping us arrange sticks and slop mud and then flopping in the water to cool down. I started feeling pretty bad. Over the course of the day, I had a cough that got worse and then I got really hot and then really cold and my body ached. My lungs started wheezing when I breathed. I remember thinking someone had punched a hole in me, like a balloon, and all my air was leaking out. CJ felt my head and then felt it again and then grabbed my arm and dragged me to the house, Tibs trailing behind. All I wanted to do was lie down, but she bundled me in a blanket and put me in a wagon, and between them she and Tibs pulled me down the driveway and out onto the highway. We lived twelve miles from town, in the house where I live now. I don't know why CJ didn't just call 911. But here we were, rattling down the middle of the highway. A woman in a truck stopped and gave us a ride to the hospital here in Loveland. Can you imagine it? A skinny muddy thirteen-year-old girl in her brown bikini and her skinny nine-year-old brother, taller than her but no bigger around than a stick and wearing red, white, and blue swim trunks, hauling their six-year-old sister through the sliding doors of the emergency room in a little red wagon. What those nurses must've thought.

On the bleachers, I glance from Tibs back out to Jackdaw. The bull doesn't know what's going on either. It shakes its lowered head and snorts, blowing up dust from the ground. Jackdaw bows his head and slips on his hat. Then the bull decides and launches itself at Jackdaw. Just as the bull charges down on Jackdaw, the white-eyed clown runs between him and the bull and slaps the bull's nose. Jackdaw turns toward them just as the bull plants its front feet, turns, and charges after the running clown.

Pure foolishness and bravery. My hands are shaking. I want to go down and take Jackdaw's hand and lead him out of the arena. A thought like a little alarm bell—who'd want to care about somebody who'd walk a nose-length from an angry bull? But something about the awkward hang of his arms and the flip of his chaps and the way his hat sets cockeyed on his head makes me want to be with him.

The clown runs toward a padded barrel in the center of the arena, his white-stockinged calves flipping the split legs of his suspended oversized jeans. He jumps into the barrel

feet-first and ducks his head below the rim. The crowd gasps and murmurs as the charging bull hooks the barrel over onto its side and bats it this way and that for twenty yards. The bull stops and turns and faces the crowd, head high, tail cocked and twitching. He tips his snout up once, twice, and snorts.

While the bull chases the clown, Jackdaw walks to the fence and climbs the boards.

The clown pops his head out of the sideways barrel where he can see the bull from the rear. He pushes himself out and then scrambles crabwise around behind. He turns to face the bull, his hands braced on the barrel. The bull's anger still bubbling, it turns back toward the clown and charges. As the bull hooks at the barrel and butts it forward, the clown scoots backwards, keeping the barrel between him and the bull, something I'm sure he's done many times. He keeps scooting as the bull bats at the barrel. But then something happens—the clown trips and falls over backwards. The barrel rolls half over him as he turns sideways and tries to push himself up. The bull stops for a split second, as if to gloat, and then stomps on the clown's frantically scrambling body and hooks the horns on its tilted head into the clown's side, flipping the clown over onto his back.

Why do rodeo clowns do it? Put their lives on the line for other people? I don't understand it.

The pickup men on the horses are there, but a second too late. They charge the bull, their horses shouldering into it. They yell and whip with quirts and kick with stirrups. Tail still cocked, the reluctant bull is hazed away and into the gathering pen at the end of the arena. The metal gate clangs shut behind it.

Head thrown back and arms splayed, the clown isn't moving. Men jump off the rails and run toward him, and the huge doors at the end of the arena open and an ambulance comes in. It stops beside the clown. The EMTs jump out, pull out a gurney, and then huddle around the prone body. One goes back to the vehicle and brings some equipment. There's frantic activity, and with the help of the other men, they place him on the gurney and slide him into the ambulance. It pulls out the doors and disappears, and the siren wails and recedes.

Tibs stands up, looks at me, and jerks his head, saying *come on, let's go*. I stand and follow him.

Tibs

The clown. Such athleticism and courage. I hope he'll be all right.

But before that grim scene, my man Jackdaw. Spectacular, the manner with which he flourished his hat, James Bond-esque. His second ride ever, his second. He didn't best Father Time, *id est* stay mounted for eight seconds, but who cares?

Maggie and I connect with him behind the stalls. It's frigid outside, with burgeoning gunbarrel-gray clouds over the mountains to the west. Now, beyond the reach of the crowd, Jackdaw's glasses rest on his nose, ruining the film-star cowboy effect. It's humorous, really: only Jackdaw would place himself near-sightless in a ring with a thousand pounds of murderous Charlais in order to look the part.

Sure, Jackdaw isn't the clown, but nonetheless, he was in there, just as fearless. He'll do anything for the crowd. He's always the epicenter of things. If there's a group, his charisma pulls everyone into a vortex. He has this ideal of perfection, of what the world should become, and he must embody that and shape the world. This is why he started riding bulls, I think. He likes the black-and-white cut-and-dried nature of it. You win, you lose; perfection or death.

Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not gay—I'm attracted to girls. He's just cool, that's all.

Jackdaw's life, his goals, his quest, is much like Hemingway's. Hemingway did everything and went everywhere. He volunteered as an ambulance driver for the war in Spain; he lived, loved, and wrote in Paris; he hunted—for big game, but also for himself—in Africa; he tried his hand at bullfighting in Spain; he fished and adopted the war effort off Cuba; he lived—and died—in Idaho. But no matter his physical location, there was always a group with Hemingway at its vortex. Hemingway was courageous, though he was also a bit of a bumbler. Courage fascinated him. Most of all, he was brave to lay bare the warts and pimples of his life for all the world to see. He had the courage of brutal honesty. He put himself out there, made a decision, affected the world—I want to be more like them, like Jackdaw, like Hemingway.

Face serious, Jackdaw converses with this old guy near the corrals and flips his bull rope as Maggie and I approach. He says, "See you later, Dick," to the gentleman, and then all three of us walk to his gear bag.

"Jackdaw, my man," I say, "you were looking good."

"Two seconds worth of good," Jackdaw says.

"No, man. You didn't stay on for the required eight seconds, but I bet your style points exceeded everyone else's."

"I don't know. All the style in the world, but if you can't get the job done."

We're all quiet for a long minute. I don't know about Jackdaw and Maggie, but the fate of the clown leaps to my mind. The way he didn't move, not even to curl in pain. It did not bode well for him. I wonder briefly if Jackdaw feels any responsibility, but then I am pulled back into the present by the silence.

"Jackdaw. I would like to introduce my sister Maggie," I say and glance at her. She's pretty—not beautiful, not handsome, but pretty—standing there with her gold-red locks glowing in the sunlight, her frame so small and slight. She's curvaceous, though, and her pale skin is dotted with freckles. Her iridescent green eyes appear tinted by contacts, but they are genuine. One thing you can say about Maggie—she's genuine. Naively so. Not that she hasn't dated. I imagine it's because she's so intent on pleasing everyone. She's just got the freshness

and gleaming health of a Mormon girl—except, I don't know, purer.

“Maggie, I would like to introduce Jackdaw.”

“Hi,” Maggie says.

“Hey,” Jackdaw says. A change comes over him. His face smooths out and opens up. “Maggie,” he says, as if he's tasting the word.

Maggie looks at him, though I cannot read her expression. Her eyes are on him but she has this thoughtfulness too.

I turn to Maggie. “Did I tell you, Jackdaw attends my nineteenth century lit class?”

“Do you do cowboy poetry, like Baxter Black?” she says.

Jackdaw is about to say something, but I cut in, “Maggie. Have you ever heard of a literature professor addressing cowboy poetry?” I turn to Jackdaw. “East coast and mid-Fifties is as close as they come to Colorado.” I hear my own tone and immediately regret saying it. I force myself to laugh.

Maggie starts to say something and then stops and presses her lips together.

“Do you mean do I write cowboy poetry?” Jackdaw says.

Maggie glances at me as she says, “Yeah.”

“I've written cowboy poetry. But mostly I write political poetry, poetry that makes a statement, protest poetry, right Tibs?” Leaning toward her, he glances sideways at me.

I'm not sure what he's talking about.

He smiles and continues. “I'm all about justice and freedom. Taking it to the man. Fighting for the little guy—or gal. Yeah, that's me.”

“Like songs?” Maggie says.

“No, limericks.” He stands up straight, puffs out his chest, and recites, “There once was a man from Colorado, who was scared of his own shadow, he went when he came, each time just the same, to the relief of the women he'd had, though.” He tilts his head in my direction, and looks at me over his glasses. “Eh, Tibs, ol' boy?”

Maggie laughs quietly under her breath. I shake my head but have to laugh too.

“So Maggie,” Jackdaw says as he coils his bull rope, “how'd you turn out so pretty, having a brother with such an ugly mug?” He ties the rope with a scrap of leather.

She smiles broadly and looks at me.

He continues, “You must've had a very pretty mailman.” He purses his lips and rolls his eyes.

“You must've had a butt-ugly mailman,” I say, “either that or your old man looks like Peter Boyle.”

“Good one,” he says and holds out his fist. I bump it with mine.

“Hey, how about some lunch?” I say. “We could go to the concessions stand for a hotdog.”

Maggie nods.

“I could down a dog,” Jackdaw says, kneeling to tuck his rope into his green canvas gear bag.

Jackdaw

Well, ain't she as pretty as a picture?

Maggie. Have you seen those paintings of pioneer women? Standing beside their man, their faces tilted upwards like they can see heaven. The winds whipping the women's skirts. A fat baby on a hip and a boy in shortpants and girl with braids nearby. A Conestoga wagon and cows and horses so muscled they could've been painted by an old master. They're what women are supposed to be. That's what I think of when I see Maggie.

Tibs, Maggie, and I go back inside the arena and stand in line at the concessions stand. Luckily it's not a long line—I pulled something in my ankle with that landing out in the dirt. Tibs orders a polish sausage with mustard and sauerkraut, Maggie orders a corn dog, and I order a foot-long with jalapenos and nacho cheese, and then I pay for it with my last ten dollars. We sit around a folding table and eat. I make a show of opening my mouth as big as Dallas and shoving in as much dog as I can. Maggie, shaking her head, watches me and nibbles her corn dog. Tibs tells a story about the time I got everyone in a literature class to vote to read Louis L'Amour. The teacher nixed it, though.

"Tell Maggie about the time your dad had you wrestle a pig," Tibs says.

I lick my fingers and swallow the last of the dog. "Well, okay. My dad was a hard ass." I pause. "Still is, I imagine." They're both focused on me, which makes me feel good.

"You imagine?" Maggie says.

"Haven't seen him in a while. He'd say things like, 'Toughen up, boy. No place in this world for a pansy ass.'" As I say it, I can hear his voice in my head, and my stomach knots.

I get an image of him standing over me, his voice surrounding us, a thing all its own. I'm on the ground, and I can feel the cold dirt clods digging into my back as I try to sink into the ruts in the road to the barn. My skull is ringing where he rapped me upside the head because—I don't know because. If I thought I had a reason one time, it didn't work to try to avoid it the next time. It was almost like he didn't want me to guess, so he could keep at it. But there I am, seeing stars too. Some people think it's just a saying—seeing stars—but you really do when you get your clock cleaned. They're little blue twinkle lights that flit mosquito-like around your face. There's something wet on my chin. Later, I'll figure out it's blood from where I lit on my nose when he punched me. I'm hoping he won't stomp on me, and in my mind I see myself like a cur dog, rolling over and fawning because it's afraid of its master. And then I hate myself and push up to standing, even though I know what he's going to do. He's going to hit me again. Which he does.

Maggie and Tibs are looking at me, so, to cover, I say, "He'd do things like have me run along behind the car on the way home and yell at me, 'Keep up, boy.'" I laugh. Tibs chuckles.

"That's awful," Maggie says, all serious.

"Aw, it was all right. Made me the Clint Eastwood you see before you." I hold my hands up like a pistol. "Go ahead, punk—"

Tibs chimes in, "Make my day." We're laughing.

"Oh," Tibs says, "'I tried being reasonable, I didn't like it.'"

I say, "How about, 'There's two kinds of people in this world. Those with loaded guns, and those who dig. You dig.'"

Tibs is way into it, but I'm losing Maggie. She's shaking her head and staring down at the

remains of her lunch. I reach over and push her shoulder. She smiles. “Clint doesn’t light your fire?” I push her shoulder harder this time, so that she almost tips over. I make my voice high, ““Oh, Clint, you’re such a strapping hunk of a man,’ admit it.”

She laughs. “Tibs went on a Clint Eastwood kick when he was in high school,” she says. “We must’ve watched *Pale Rider* a thousand times.”

“At least once too few,” Tibs says.

“So you watch chick flicks?” I say. ““Oh, Rhet, please come and sa-a-ave meh.””

Tibs laughs.

Maggie says, “It’s better than blowing people away left and right. They’re about things that matter, like love and family.”

I lean forward, and I can smell Maggie’s perfume—it’s something flowery but deeper. “Come on, admit it. There’s days when you’d like to take somebody out. Everybody run, Maggie’s got a gun.”

“No, not really,” Maggie says.

“Sorry, Jackdaw,” Tibs says, “I’ll have to back her up on this one. I’ve done my share of tormenting her over the years, and she’s always turned proverbial cheek. Even to CJ, our sister, who can be quite trying.”

“So we have a saint in our midst,” I say. “I’m going to have to hang around you more often. Maybe some of it will rub off on me.” And as I say it, I really mean it.

As we get up to leave, gathering our paper plates, Tibs says, “You never told the pig story.”

“That’s all right,” I say. “Somehow I don’t think it’s Maggie’s kind of story.”

CJ

I should've brought Maggie with me, then maybe I wouldn't feel quite so shitty. But she was going to something today, a rodeo I think, with Tibs. Besides, I haven't told her anything about this crap.

I sit on the exam table in the small examination room, still in the awkward drafty gown, and my butt sticks to the vinyl. The room is chilly and smells like abrasive cleaning fluid.

"Are you okay?" the doctor asks me. He's a nice guy, and over the past couple of months I've gotten to know him way too well. He looks like an aging football player—a few pounds overweight but still carrying himself well. His breath always smells like spearmint and cigarettes.

"Fuck you," I say.

He snorts and then catches himself. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have laughed."

"No. Laughing's about right," I say. "God's one twisted motherfucker. Good thing I don't believe in Him." I push off the table with a scraping sound as my skin separates from the plastic. Cool air whispers through the slit in the back of the gown and makes me aware of how naked I am.

His voice deepens as he shifts into support mode. "Would you like to talk with one of our grief counselors? We have an infertility support group that meets every other Thursday. Would you like that contact number?"

My turn to snort. "I don't need a dozen other poor bastards like me sniveling in their cups. That's what the bar's for. Besides, they're just infertile. I'm fucking sterile." I shrug. "Naw. I'm all right."