

You've dedicated A TANGLED MERCY to the people of Charleston, South Carolina, particularly to all those connected to Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Can you explain why?

This novel has a strange history, to say the least, and from its beginnings more than twenty years ago, it grew out of the people of Charleston—their history and their courage—including the oldest and most storied African Methodist Episcopal Church in the South: Emanuel AME, often called Mother Emanuel.

In the mid-1990s when I first started this novel, I was a young PhD student at Tufts University just outside Boston. I was newly married and the two people who'd conducted our pre-marital counseling and mentored us on all manner of things were both African Methodist Episcopal ministers—and both medical doctors, as well as generally extraordinary people—and their daughters had been our bridesmaids. So my admiration for AME ministers and churches already ran deep. From the novel's earliest drafts even way back to 1996, Emanuel AME figured prominently into the 1822 storyline because of its centrality to the history of Charleston, and to the history of Civil Rights in this country.

But then, just as I thought I'd finally finished this novel, came June of 2015, and the tragedy at Mother Emanuel. We all watched as Emanuel responded as a church and as individuals and families...with different responses, certainly, but all with a refusal just to go after revenge, and instead to take the harder and longer path of justice and peace and strength—of love over hate. Honestly, even as much as I share the same faith commitments to the greater power of mercy and love, I still found it astounding—and humbling—to watch it lived out in the midst of such horrific circumstances. All over the world, people seemed to be riveted to and inspired by the story, even though most probably didn't know the full picture: that this response of ferocious, unbending strength in the face of violence and hate was nothing new for this congregation. This has been its story for two hundred years, since 1818.

So it's true that you'd been writing this novel prior to the tragedy in Charleston? In fact, it's the result of 20 years of research and writing that began when you were a young PhD student at Tufts? And what first inspired you to write this story?

For my doctoral work, I was reading stacks—small mountains, really— of nineteenth-century slave narratives and also the diaries, letters and novels of slaveholding women. I was supposed to be writing a dissertation, and I did begin limping along with that...some. My long-suffering dissertation advisor could testify how slowly that “some” came along. Because what took a ferocious hold of my imagination and would not let go was a novel that started forming itself in my head, a story woven around these events and these people I was researching and was enthralled by, people I'd never heard of before graduate school: Denmark Vesey, for example, and the Grimké sisters of Charleston.

Incredibly naïve about the publishing world—or let’s just go ahead and say incredibly stupid—I thought I could dash off a richly researched historical novel in a few months, land an A-list agent through a friend of a roommate of a cocktail party conversationalist, and within the year, be back hard at work on the dissertation—all before my dissertation advisor noticed I’d gone slightly AWOL.

Let’s just say it didn’t quite work out that way.

Over not only the next several weeks but the next several years, I hit wall after wall with all the first dozen drafts of the historical-only version of this novel. After each rejection letter or near-miss of a publishing Yes, I’d uncurl from my fetal position, plan another research trip to Charleston, go back to the library, tear up the timeline and try again—often against the desperate pleas from my husband to “Step away from the manuscript,” since this book was clearly going to be the undoing of me.

Over the course of the past twenty-plus years, I did do a few other things besides pounding away at this one story. I had some other books published, including that pesky dissertation (a shout out here to the longsuffering patience of dissertation advisors everywhere), started a family, worked alongside homeless families in Boston, taught some university classes... but I kept coming back to the Charleston story and the people behind the story that simply—I don’t know how else to describe it—would not let me go. This was the story I cared about more than all the others put together.

So here I was a white woman who’d grown up in the mountains of East Tennessee and who’d gotten a doctorate in New England—a long stretch of road from the perfect candidate to write this particular book set in South Carolina and having much to do with racial injustice. I understand I’m an odd fit. And I wouldn’t have picked myself, honestly.

But here are some key moments in my life that must have set me up to be gripped by this story: I was born in Washington, D.C., and my first vivid memory from childhood was my mother, a white woman raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and Atlanta, kneeling before our black and white TV and sobbing as if her heart had burst and could not be healed. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been shot. I was too young at the time to understand who he was, precisely, or what his death meant: only that it must be worth your heart breaking over, no matter where you lived or what color your own skin happened to be.

And though we moved not long after to a small town in the East Tennessee foothills, a later childhood memory, even more vivid, involves the Ku Klux Klan, a group I’d read about in school but had never known existed in our sweet little close-knit community. Klan members in full bedsheet regalia blocked our road that day, aimed rifles through the windows of our car, and asked if we’d like to donate to their cause. At the wheel, my father declined, to which the bedsheets responded by rocking our old Impala so violently it seemed sure to flip over.

And then there was my friend during high school years who moved to our little town from Sri Lanka, where she and her family had been persecuted for being Muslim and of Moorish descent, so darker skinned. Her father had assured the family that America was the end of the rainbow, a place where all were welcome and all had equal opportunity. So when the Klan emerged again and burned a cross in my friend's yard and warned the family they had better move off our mountain, they did—moved hundreds of miles away. My friend's last question to me the last time I saw her, was what had gone wrong. Was American not the end of the rainbow, the land of the free they'd thought it to be? That question, to which I'd had no decent answer, and our brief friendship so haunted me for years that my first novel, *Blue Hole Back Home*, grew out of my trying to reconcile this kind, friendly town that I loved with a place that could also be home to a handful of people with a hate and a fear so deep it could drive a lovely, hardworking family right off our ridge.

I could go on, but those are some of the early seeds of why this particular random white woman seems to keep quietly writing about race.

How, if at all, did the storyline change following the tragic shooting at Mother Emanuel?

First of all, I should say that my agent and I nearly shelved the whole thing permanently the morning after the tragedy.

Here we were with this novel that had been started nearly twenty years earlier but that contained chapters set at Mother Emanuel and with a character who was a beloved pastor of that church (named Rev. Russell) and other characters named Pinckney (the last name of the actual beloved pastor killed in the shooting along with eight parishioners), so that it suddenly read now like its author had intentionally included all these elements of nineteenth-century tragedy connected with this church, and built up to the twenty-first-century tragedy on the same spot...and then sadistically neglected to mention anything about it. And worse, I'd ended the contemporary storyline with a sense of hope, despite the ugliness and injustice and horror of what had happened in the past, and now here we were with the same sort of vicious, paranoid hate that two hundred years ago had hanged so many Mother Emanuel members and burned the church to the ground. Suddenly, ending the novel with even the faintest hint of hope seemed nothing short of offensive and insulting.

In the days leading up to June 17, 2015, I'd been working in a frenzy to finish the edits before my agent would be sending the novel out on submission, but now I did not touch the manuscript. Instead, I devoured every item of news I could on the shooting, the hunt for the perpetrator, the analysis of his background, the description of who the victims were and the families they'd left behind. Like so many others, I wept over and over again as I read the papers and watched the news.

And then the families of the victims and the church and the city of Charleston responded in a way that riveted the attention of the whole world: a refusal to respond with violence but instead with demands for justice coupled with mind-blowing forgiveness, unity, desire to connect across all sorts of racial and economic divisions. Please understand: I'm well aware that not every family of every victim expressed forgiveness to the deranged shooter, and I found incredibly honest and powerful one of the tragedy's survivors who said, flatly, that, no, she'd not been able to reach forgiveness yet but that because of her faith, she knew she had to be on that journey. But the very fact that she would consider forgiveness part of her journey ahead sets her clearly apart from a natural human desire to return barbarity with even worse....

Scores of leaders political and faith leaders across Charleston called for greater racial justice and equality; no one called for vengeance, however much that vengeance might have been deserved. Gifts and flowers and wreaths from all over mounded high on the sidewalks of Mother Emanuel as Charleston residents of all backgrounds and races held one another and cried. Thousands gathered in a multi-racial crowd for a unity chain across a Charleston Bridge named for a deceased white politician who'd been an outspoken supporter of the Confederate flag. And the Confederate flag itself, which had long hung outside the South Carolina statehouse, came down at long (far too long) last. And, no, none of that made the horror of the summer of 2015 or of 1822 go away—not at all. But it meant that love still conquers evil and blind, vicious hate. That even as far as our culture still has to go toward genuine, tangible racial equality and fairness, there seemed in the wake of the tragedy to be a new spirit of mourning together, of wanting to commit ourselves all over again to discussions and policies of racial justice, to push back together at bigoted hate.

It was the city of Charleston and the people of Mother Emanuel in particular that made me feel like maybe, just maybe, I could include this latest tragedy in this same spot as 1822 tragedies, this time to honor the Emanuel 9 as well as the victims two hundred years ago. And maybe the book could still end with not a phony triumph as if everything were already just fine and fair, but at least end with hope—that we're all in this together. That my freedoms, my desire to keep my family safe, all my pursuits of happiness are tied to yours, and yours to mine.

So sometime in late July of 2015, I asked my agent, whom I trust not just for her literary judgement but also for her kindness as a human being, what she thought of my trying to incorporate the Mother Emanuel tragedy in a way that honored the victims and survivors and their families, as well as the long history of the congregation? What if...? She agreed I should at least try.

By late summer of 2015, I'd begun working again on the manuscript again—this time in a kind of fevered intensity that must've frightened the poor souls next to me in Starbucks just trying to sip their lattes and relax for a moment—when the Senior Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination came to the university where I teach part time.

It was my husband, a university administrator, who'd invited him in the wake of the Emanuel tragedy. Over breakfast and lunch with Bishop John Bryant and during his speech to the students, we heard more of what had happened in Charleston the previous June, and what was happening now. After several hours, I finally screwed up my courage to tell Bishop Bryant briefly about this strange book of mine and its even stranger backstory so closely tied with the horror that had brought him to our campus. And to tell him that I was trying to rewrite it to include the tragedy there—all two hundred years of it. That I realized it could very well look like trying to capitalize on a tragedy, but here was my hope, and my intent... I asked him for honesty, and let him know I realized that a white woman with frizzy blonde hair did not look like the ideal person to write this story. Before I could say anything more, he put his hand on my arm in what felt then—and still at this moment—like a kind of blessing, and he spoke of the “Kairos moment”—a Greek word for a moment that is beyond strictly chronological time, but instead is a kind of divinely ordered timing. His words and his kindness were a great gift to whatever this novel has become.

The historical thread of the storyline changed almost not at all. And that's what a reader wouldn't suspect just picking up this book not knowing its background. There are huge chunks of the book that if you read them now, you'd assume were written in response to the 2015 tragedy but were actually written ten or twenty years ago: several chapters, for example, set at Mother Emanuel, or characters with the last name Pinckney. But all that was there in early drafts of the book, not because I'm so supernaturally sentient as an author—far from it—but simply because Mother Emanuel has always been at the heart of Charleston's history, as has the name Pinckney. You can't read about the Denmark Vesey slave revolt without wanting to visit the church where Vesey himself was a founding member, and where a number of his lieutenants were members—and where, I should add, key Civil Rights speeches were made and marches began. And you can't read much about the history of Charleston without the Pinckney name threaded all through the centuries—including Rev. Clemente Pinckney, the remarkable pastor of Emanuel and state legislator killed in the shooting along with eight parishioners.

The contemporary storyline changed a bit throughout—several secondary characters and subplots got chopped because they suddenly seemed so pointless and whiney relative to this horrible tragedy—and the end changed radically to incorporate not only the shooting but also the victim's families' and the city of Charleston's reaction to it.

What kind of research did you do for the book?

You name it—from the scholar-nerd approach of wading through archival papers like diaries, letters, household lists and musty old Interlibrary Loan books that no one had checked out for literally decades to the totally tourist approach of taking carriage tours and walking the entire historic district of Charleston over and over again. The Gullah Tours van ride run by Alphonso Brown was one helpful turning point since it focused on African-American history that, at least 20 years ago, wasn't included in the other historical tours—and some of it still isn't.

My family was often along for these research trips, and they are a plucky bunch. On one scorching July afternoon in probably 100% humidity as my three kids and my husband and I, all of us pouring with sweat, trudged through the historic district back alleys, a sweet older woman in a black BMW pulled over and, in a thick Low Country accent, offered us a ride. Imagine inviting a sopping, smelly, heat-muddled family of five you've never met to climb into your pristine Beamer. We've laughed about that for years, that this was so far from a normal family outing that a complete stranger would feel the need to intervene. Probably a wonder she didn't call Child Protective Services.

But we'd walk miles together, then end up stopping for bottled Cokes and pralines at the Candy Kitchen and eating them on the bench swings at Waterfront Park, or for dinner at the nicest East Bay restaurant we could find that wouldn't scowl at us when we split two plates five ways—so it wasn't complete drudgery. Just oddball research. Time at the beach, though, always got worked in there somewhere, so no need to cry for my kids. My oldest, in fact, once painted a lovely oil rendition of Charleston's Rainbow Row, and the caption underneath commemorates our "25th Research Trip to Charleston," her way of chuckling with me that the family often suspected there really was no actual novel I was still writing—that it was simply my perpetual excuse to cart us all back to the lovely Low Country once again.

But even the parts of research I did alone, the days of reading and digging and library-haunting, even those became collaborations with the most fabulous archivists and historians and docents. I've listed many of them in the Acknowledgments. These people were willing to answer the most obscure questions through email or phone, and some of them rifled through library stacks along with me. One especially determined historian, Nic Butler, took it as a personal quest when I asked if there would have been any Quakers remaining in Charleston in 1822. I'd impulsively written two Quaker characters into the story, probably because of my long fascination with the Quakers, and a small part of the plot would have collapsed without them—but I'd neglected to verify yet that at least a couple of Quakers would have remained by 1822, despite most having relocated because as a denomination they were actively opposed to slavery by then. When we discovered evidence that the Quaker Meeting House was still operational in 1822 according to that year's census, meaning that at least a handful of congregants remained, I think he was as elated as I was.

Little moments like that were important in trying to build a world that was as historically accurate as I could make it, and so many people came alongside to help.

I should mention my dissertation advisor here, too, Dr. Elizabeth Ammons at Tufts University, since so much of my dissertation research ended up being relevant for this book—and, in fact, was the place this book started out. Liz Ammons is the type of scholar who doesn't stand for mediocrity, which I completely admire. But during the years when I supposed to be conducting my doctoral research, I had two little children and was in deep discussions with my husband about our both hoping to adopt a child in addition, and I was teaching and he was a university administrator with lots of stress—and we also relocated a number of times—from New England to North Carolina and then Texas. So life was nuts

and I would have been so totally fine with slacker scholarship, I assure you. But Liz kept pushing me for deeper research, and I could not be more grateful for that now—though at the time I think I responded to her gracious but firm here's what's yet to be done kind of emails and Fed Ex envelopes by reaching for Kleenex and more Diet Coke.

Were you surprised by anything you learned during the course of your research?

I think I was hoping to find a few more white women in the Deep South who spoke out against slavery. I wish I could tell you I'd found them. I'd learned about Angelina and Sarah Grimké, and I guess I assumed there surely must be more who simply weren't as well known. But here's the tragic thing I had to admit after reading so many mounds of white women's journals and letters—and I'm not the first to see this: as young women, they often do privately express serious questions or at least uneasiness about the institution of slavery. They are not blind to the sexual licentiousness of white men who assume they can march down to the slave quarters whenever they please. Some of their private writings express grief over the separations of slave families. But economically, they were recipients of the system. Granted, these women also had no legal right at the time to their own money or even their own children, and speaking out publicly was not an early nineteenth-century woman's place, but they also seem to sort of subconsciously decide not to let the outrages they see bother them as much as they get older. It's as if they decide just not to see or hear anymore all these travesties that once disturbed them. And the ones that remained bothered like the Englishwoman Fanny Kemble, who married slaveholder Pierce Butler, ended up divorced and separated from her children. Far from feeling morally superior, I found it heartbreaking to watch the process, and to realize how easy that is for any of us to do as pragmatic humans, to just decide that if we're not being personally hurt financially or physically, and especially if we're directly benefiting from someone else's pain, to just choose not to see it, not to think about it.

I actually changed the young, white, wealthy Emily Pinckney's character over time so that she's significantly less heroic—especially compared to Dinah, who is based on a number of women whose slave narratives and escape attempts I'd studied, including Harriet Jacobs and Ellen Craft. Because Emily is only seventeen, and because she's friends with Angelina Grimké, who along with her older sister is a notable exception to the rule, I figured it was historically feasible for Emily to be disturbed by the ugliness of slavery, but also be struggling not to be bothered by it—to be horribly conflicted—and to decide to live in this awful, morally compromised place where she would probably never speak out or act out as Angelina Grimké went on to do, but she also might never be able to simply accept slavery as the positive good that political leaders were trying to frame it as at the time—and she might be quietly subversive. But she'd never be at peace again.

Honestly, it's a constant reminder to look around and think about what in my world I'm choosing not to see, not to think about, simply because it doesn't hurt me or my family directly.

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

I'm pretty heartbroken over how fractured our culture is these days, and how little listening seems to go on. My biggest hope for this book would be that it might provide one more small way for readers to talk and listen, really listen to each other—with respect and kindness and honesty—about hard issues that often divide us. Stories, whether in books or theater or film, have the potential for taking us beyond all that separates us and allowing us to talk about big, difficult, complex themes in a way that, at least potentially, doesn't have to involve labels or insults or assumptions, because we're talking about the story—we're hurting with the mother who is terrified for the safety of her child; we're enraged along with the father who sees his son nearly shot because someone jumped to conclusions based on how the child looks; we're awed by someone who responds to violence with an extraordinary strength that refuses to respond with more violence.

If we're talking about the story in the book or on the stage or the screen, and then bringing alongside our own personal experiences and why they've helped form how we see that story and the wider world, then maybe at least for those moments, we're understanding each other. Our different perspectives don't poof, magically become all the same, but we can empathize; we can see through the other person's eyes for a moment just as we do with characters in a story.

In this terribly polarized time, I feel like so often we're either shouting past each other or ignoring each other—reading our separate news sources, trading tirades and jokes and statistics with the people who already agree with us. But watching a play or a film or reading a novel lets us put ourselves in the shoes—inside the life—of that character: suddenly we're feeling that person's pain or terror or rage, suddenly we're falling in love, or suddenly we're running for our lives. I know it sounds naïve, but I feel like we could make a bit of progress in being able to understand one another in this country and on this planet with the kind of imagination and empathy we bring to novels and drama and film—that willingness to walk around inside someone's life that is radically different from our own. How would I feel if this happened to me or my child—or if it happened to my ancestors? And if this happened to me or someone close to me, what sort of reaction would seem genuinely fair, genuinely just?

I don't expect this novel to be any sort of big important answer to our culture's enormously complex struggles, but if it could be a tiny part of the conversation about how we keep listening, and caring, and working toward a lasting peace and justice for all, then it would have been well worth the effort, and I'd be grateful for that tiny part. My own extended family and nuclear family are both multi-racial, so the conversation for me—for so many of us—is more than a theoretical one. Conversations about race can be incredibly uncomfortable—we all know that. But to not have those conversations means we don't learn to walk inside each other's stories; we don't learn what we might be doing or saying that is hurtful or harmful or downright offensive; we don't learn to listen to our neighbors, our coworkers, our family members, our friends...and we're all the poorer for it.
