

# On Inspiration: Interview with Joy Jordan-Lake

March 5, 2018 By [Elisabeth Storrs](#)



Today I welcome Joy Jordan-Lake to Triclinium. She is a very accomplished lady! Joy is the author of the bestselling novel *A Tangled Mercy*, a dual timeline story set in 1822 and 2015 Charleston, South Carolina, and six other books, including *Blue Hole Back Home*, winner of the 2009 Christy Award for Best First Novel.

Chosen by both Amarillo College and Baylor University as the Common Book in 2014 and 2009, respectively, *Blue Hole Back Home* has become required reading in a number of diverse educational settings, and, like *A Tangled Mercy*, is also a frequent book club selection. Recently, Joy has ventured into the writing of children's picture books, and *A Crazy-Much Love*, her first book in this genre will be published in September 2019.

Joy's five other books include a collection of short stories and reflections, an academic text, and three other nonfiction works. Joy holds a Ph.D. and masters in English and American Literature, as well as a Masters from a theological seminary. While living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she led initiatives targeting low-income and homeless families. She and her husband have three children and live just south of Nashville,

where she writes and, some semesters, teaches as an adjunct professor for Belmont University. When not spending time hiking or hanging out with her kids, she loves reading, traveling and sequestering herself (for writing and more reading) in her attic office with a sweet, needy Golden Retriever and the new addition, a rescued Maltipoo pup.

You can connect with Joy via her website, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. You can buy *A Tangled Mercy* and *Blue Hole Back Home* on Amazon.

## What or who inspired you to first write?

I read voraciously as a kid, partly because I was sick a lot, and partly because I was painfully shy, and partly because I loved being able to enter another world through books—maybe one where I wasn't so sickly or shy and instead could be sassy and confident, sword-wielding and fierce.

## Which authors have influenced you?

As a child, I loved L.M. Montgomery and Louisa May Alcott, and then, still early on, the 19th-century British novelists like Jane Austen and then Charles Dickens and others. This would all be great—and it certainly helped me expand my vocabulary, except that I still have a kind of 19th-century rhythm about my writing, so that it feels normal to me to describe a tree for five pages. You think I'm kidding. This is NOT, I have found, a good thing. Thank goodness for editors who keep me moving the action along at a more 21st-century pace!

## What is the inspiration for your current book?

*A Tangled Mercy* is my most recent book to be published. I wrote about its inspiration fairly extensively in the novel's Note from the Author, but the short-ish version is that

the historical story of the dual timeline plot originally came from research for my doctoral dissertation that began—brace yourself—20 years ago. I became so much more interested in the historical characters—Denmark Vesey, for example, and the Grimké sisters and a blacksmith named Tom Russell— and then the stories I imagined swirling around them, I could barely keep slogging away on the dissertation—and it ended up taking me ridiculously long to finish because I began spending more time on the novel it inspired.

The present-day storyline was originally purely imagination, based loosely on a floundering graduate student that I could totally relate to from my own floundering grad student days. I added the contemporary storyline to the novel about 4 years ago so that I include some lighter bits, including some humor, and some present-day perspectives on Charleston, SC, a fascinating city where you always feel haunted by the past—in both charming and deeply disturbing ways.

And then there was the horrific massacre in Charleston in 2015, quite literally the week I'd finished completely re-writing and putting what I thought were the finishing touches on the novel. Since so many of the settings and events at the center of the story already involved places and people connected with the tragedy, I knew I either had to shelve the book permanently or go back and incorporate it as part of the story.

My agent and I agreed that I would try, and that if in any way the new version seemed to smack of trying to profit from someone else's pain, she would tell me, and we'd simply scrap the book. My goal has been not just to try and tell a riveting story, but to honor the people of Charleston who'd shown such extraordinary courage and grace 200 years ago in 1822 and later in 2015. The real lives behind this story are truly extraordinary, and at the heart of its inspiration.

A portion of the proceeds from *A Tangled Mercy* go to the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the scene of the 2015 racially motivated shooting, and to the

permanent memorial to the victims being created by the designer of the 9/11 memorial. [Here's the link](#) to the planned memorial.

## Is there a particular theme you wished to explore?

Courage. Redemption. Forgiveness.

## What period of history particularly inspires or interests you? Why?

I love the 19th-century, but any time-period is potentially fascinating to me once I begin learning more that I didn't know. It's always startling to find issues that the people of 1822 or 1895 (my current work in progress) or 1946 were struggling with that are struggles again today. In the 1890s for example, part of the political debate was over white supremacy, and which ethnic groups were most despised, and from which countries. It's really chilling to read, and to know we're still having this debate well over a century later—only some of the despised countries have changed. The debate, though, rages on.

## What resources do you use to research your book?

Everything I can find. Libraries, local experts, guided tours, Internet... And if it's a fun location, mandatory research trips!

## How long did it take to finish the novel?

I've written one of my past books in as little as a few months, but most of them take a year or several years, depending on how much research and rewriting is involved. This latest novel was the mother of all rewrites for lots of different reasons, but it was actually the first book I started more than 20 years ago. In the interim, I published

several other books and taught university classes and had two babies and adopted one...all while *A Tangled Mercy* kept not being quite right in the way I was telling the story. So, yeah, 20 years is the answer on that, which I hope doesn't discourage new writers. Instead of the very depressing 20 year answer, I'd hope aspiring writers could focus on this: First, you can take heart that you will never fail more times than I did on any single book. And second, all writers learn we must be enormously tenacious if we want to write as a career, and that book was the acid test for me. I could just never walk away from the story for some reason, and finally, thanks to some remarkable very real people at the heart of the novel, it finally came together and was published last November.

## What do you do if stuck for a word or a phrase?

Sometimes use the online Thesaurus. Sometimes get up for another cup of coffee, which seems to work even better.

Is there anything unusual or even quirky that you would like to share about your writing?

I like to write in my attic office or on my screened porch with my two dogs, one on either side. But if I'm feeling especially easily distracted, it helps to go to a public place like a coffee shop or restaurant and write there—preferably a place with no Internet access for my laptop. It's worth leaving a big tip in order to have the privilege of hanging out in a place where there is no laundry waiting to be done.

## Do you use a program like Scrivener to create your novel?

## Do you ever write in long hand?

I mostly use Microsoft Word BUT I've found that sometimes when I'm terribly stuck or uninspired or feeling like I'm just grinding out words to reach my day's page goal, switching to write long hand can knock me out of my slump. Also, it can be really helpful if I keep being sucked into social media or answering email to go back to an old-

fashioned form of writing that unhooks me from the creativity-killing dangers of technology.

## Is there a particular photo or piece of art that strikes a chord with you? Why?

I love to look at photos or daguerreotypes from the era I'm writing about. Right now, I'm watching lots of documentaries from the Gilded Age and loving seeing the old film clips and photos. This early photo was taken in 1863, so later than my 1822 storyline, but it depicts the back of a slave named Gordon who escaped from bondage. The photo was used in abolitionist circles to depict the horrific beatings of the sale system.

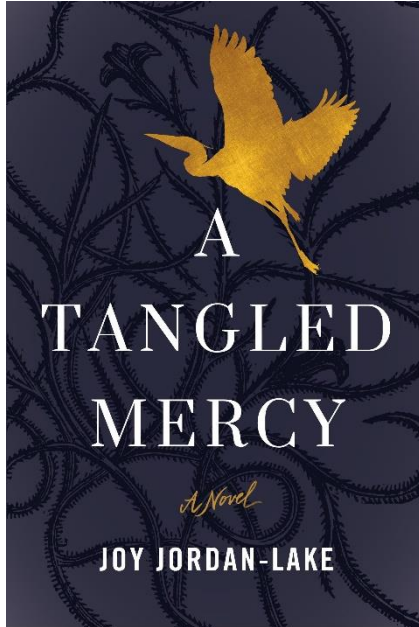
## What advice would you give an aspiring author?

NEVER GIVE UP. And learn from every rejection or critique that comes your way. They may be wrong in precisely what they are saying about your writing (especially if they tell you to give up and go back to waiting tables), but there's usually something you can take and learn from to improve. And make friends who are also writers, since they will understand your manias and loose screws in ways no one else ever can entirely, no matter how much they love you.

## Tell us about your next book.

This next book takes place at the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina in 1895/96, a kind of American "Downton Abbey." Like *A Tangled Mercy*, (and like "Downton Abbey," come to think of it) this novel involves lots of huge social questions and struggles, as well as individual character's searches for a lost family member, another hiding from his past—and from someone who wants him dead, and others longing for love or power or change.

Thank you so much for joining me, Joy. And well done for donating proceeds from your book to such a worthy cause.



## About *A Tangled Mercy*

Told in alternating tales at once haunting and redemptive, *A Tangled Mercy* is a quintessentially American epic rooted in heartbreaking true events examining the harrowing depths of human brutality and betrayal, and our enduring hope for freedom and forgiveness.

After the sudden death of her troubled mother, struggling Harvard grad student Kate Drayton walks out on her lecture—and her entire New England life. Haunted by unanswered questions and her own uncertain future, she flees to Charleston, South Carolina, the place where her parents met, convinced it holds the key to understanding her fractured family and saving her career in academia. Kate is determined to unearth groundbreaking information on a failed 1822 slave revolt—the subject of her mother’s own research.

Nearly two centuries earlier, Tom Russell, a gifted blacksmith and slave, grappled with a terrible choice: arm the uprising spearheaded by members of the fiercely independent African Methodist Episcopal Church or keep his own neck out of the noose and protect the woman he loves.

Kate's attempts to discover what drove her mother's dangerous obsession with Charleston's tumultuous history are derailed by a horrific massacre in the very same landmark church. In the unimaginable aftermath, Kate discovers a family she never knew existed as the city unites with a powerful message of hope and forgiveness for the world.