



BEHIND THE SCENES

THE WRITING OF ENGRAVED ON THE HEART



TARA
JOHNSON

INSPIRATIONAL HISTORICAL NOVELIST

Behind the Scenes of *Engraved on the Heart*

By Tara Johnson

The spark of the idea for *Engraved on the Heart* began when our family visited Savannah, Georgia several years ago. I was entranced with the history and charm of the town. Secrets seemed to ooze out of every corner. Our family went on a city bus tour and I just knew I had to write a story based in this town teeming with so many courageous people and fascinating characters.

The first spark was ignited by a still unknown soul. My family had opted to take a historic riding tour of the city. I was especially intrigued by a fact rattled off by our tour guide. “Many of the older homes and buildings in and around the outskirts of Savannah were built by slaves. In fact, if you look closely, you can find some of their fingerprints in the bricks.”



Later that day, we walked down the cobblestone streets, admiring the elaborate iron fences guarding beautiful homes trimmed with colorful flowers. Weeping willows and moss hung from towering trees overhead. As I passed a home, a darkened impression molded into the crumbling brick snagged my attention. I sucked in a surprised breath over the precious detail. There it was, staring back at me. The fingerprint of a slave.

I ran my finger over the scarred impression, marveling that such a small mark could tell such an exquisite story. I wondered whose hands had formed the old brick. What was his name? What were his dreams? Running my fingers over that precious print linked me inextricably to the past, binding an invisible cord between the nameless slave and me.

The next day, we visited the Georgia State Railroad Museum where I found several books in the gift shop about famous women of the Civil War. Courageous heroes like Elizabeth Van Lew who fought against the norms of her culture to give freedom and hope to those trapped in darkness. I devoured their stories, many of whom I'd never heard of in school or otherwise.

God slowly unfurled a story in my heart...the tale of a girl who battled epilepsy as a child, just as I did, but grew to understand her worth in the eyes of a loving God.

The inspiration for Keziah Montgomery is a combination of three or four of these remarkable women who worked as spies and/or conductors in the Underground Railroad,



several of whom did so against their own families' knowledge. To consider such a pivotal role as conductor while carrying a burden as unpredictable as epilepsy was a fascinating prospect. Growing up with a seizure disorder, I often thanked God I was born in the era I was. In the 1800s and earlier, such conditions often relegated the bearer to asylums and institutions. Ignorance was rampant.

My personal writing technique is to figure out my characters' core wounds before I do anything else. I need to know what happened in their pasts to cripple them with the fears and misbeliefs they are clinging to when the story opens. I didn't have far to look to find Keziah's core wound. She has fallen for the same one I battled for many years:

that approval and love are the same thing. The two aren't the same at all, but are actually polar opposites. Keziah's struggle to realize her worth, especially in light of her physical disabilities, provided the spiritual foundation for this story.

Once I understood her emotional and spiritual makeup, I could move on to finding the template to describe the heroine forming in my mind. I found the perfect look-alike in *Downton Abbey* and *Cinderella* actress Lily James.



What would a good romance be without a handsome, heroic leading man? Enter Micah Greyson, childhood friend of Keziah who has returned to Savannah after attending medical school in Philadelphia. I had no particular person I drew from to inspire the character of Micah. I just knew he needed to compliment Keziah (or Kizzie as he calls her), yet also be her opposite on some levels.

Since she suffers from epilepsy, I thought it would be neat to make him a physician. What better way to ramp up the conflict than to have her old childhood chum return to Savannah no longer a good, Confederate boy but a devout abolitionist? Although Micah has secretly loved Kizzie for years, when she becomes involved with the Underground Railroad, Micah's fervor for the cause is suddenly eclipsed by a greater concern...fear for the woman he loves.

(For those who have read *Engraved on the Heart*, Micah's big secret took me totally surprise. So much so, I had to rewrite several sections of the book and layer pieces of his

story back in when I revised it a second time. For those who haven't read it, I'll keep my lips sealed so the secret will remain the surprise it should.)

A variety of other characters fill the pages of this story. The flamboyant antics of cousin Jenny was inspired by real life Confederate spy and siren Belle Boyd. (Yes, Belle Boyd



really was rumored to have ridden a horse into her family's house when her mother refused to let her attend a party.) Characters like sweet Hiriam, Polly, Mrs. Ward, Benjamin Montgomery, Nathaniel and Lyman Hill were completely spun from my imagination.

There is one colorful woman to whom I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude. Her name is Betty Hoff. I called her Aunt Betty and she was the complete inspiration for Ma Linnie.

Aunt Betty really wasn't my aunt at all, but watched my brother and I often when we were little and our parents had to work. She was a hard-working, no nonsense, buxom woman who loved passionately, laughed loud and could blister someone's hide when she got riled. The thing I remember most about Aunt Betty was how much she loved people...and how hilarious she could be without even realizing it.

A good story is stream of conflict keeping the protagonists from their goals and this story has it in abundance. Anytime you write a story set during the Civil War, the possibilities for strife are endless. Poor Keziah is trapped, not only in a Confederate family, but in a town pulsing with Confederate fervor. Add to that her battle with epilepsy, and her parents ignorance of the illness itself, and plenty of conflict creeps up within the first few



pages. Of course, I wasn't satisfied with that. I needed to throw in an uptight fiancé, a meddling cousin, a blood-thirsty Vigilance Committee, a brother suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, not to mention the internal fear that drive both Kizzie and Micah to takes the risks they do. Conflict and drama at every turn.

The amount of research it took to craft this story was staggering but the payoff was well worth it, especially considering some of the wild, and sometimes humorous, tidbits I gleaned as a result. Some of the most bizarre discoveries I encountered were oddities like Secesh goods. Those were bowls and goblets made from Yankee skulls. Confederate tradesmen actually sold them on the streets of Southern towns.

I learned quite a bit of amusing research in regards to Union commander General Benjamin Butler as well. He was one of the most despised generals of all time for a variety of reasons. Southern women would encourage their children to "make like General Butler". This was a call for the children to cross their eyes. Poor General Butler was not a comely man. In fact, he was so despised by Southerners, Confederates began making chamber pots with his likeness printed inside the bowl. Talk about insulting!

Growing up, my Mom and I enjoyed our yearly tradition of watching "Gone with the Wind" together. I have loved learning about the Civil War ever since. When I was young, the drama and potential romance of the period drew me in, but as I've gotten older, I've fallen in love with the stories of heroism from brave men and women on both sides of the conflict. The Civil War was a turning point for our nation on so many levels...politically, socially, emotionally, not to mention the amazing inventions and reformations that occurred as a result. It completely changed the landscape of our society.

Both the Union and Confederacy thought God was on their side. Even among the slaves, the idea of freedom was mixed. (Some craved it with all they had and others who had experienced the kindness of a good master, were overwhelmed and fearful at the idea of a life completely different from anything they've ever known.) Freedom can be a terrifying thing for some. Before writing *Engraved on the Heart*, I read a book called *Slave Narratives of Georgia*. It was filled with interviews from men and women in the 1920s and 30s who were once slaves. I was surprised by how diverse their own opinions of the matter were. For each of them, their view of slavery entirely depended on what kind of master they had. It was that understanding that led me to craft the character of sweet Hiram.

If you haven't yet read this story, I'll not give away any more, but thought you might enjoy a small peek behind the curtain.

If there is one thing I want you to take away from Kizzie and Micah's story, it's this: you have tremendous worth in the eyes of God.

Keziah struggles with the lie "I am worthless" through the entire story. This lie seems to be an arrow flung with far too much frequency by the enemy and one believed by far too many of God's children.

Whenever I'm teaching at retreats about the enemy's lies and I come to this one, I ask the ladies to raise their hands if they have believed the lie, "I am worthless" at some point in their lives. Without fail, every hand in the room has gone up. Why?

After listening to story after story, one common denominator seems to resonate through most of these women's issues...someone, at some point, gave them a label that stuck.

Names have power. Nicknames can be fun but when nicknames turn into labels, it can be a problem. Let me explain.

I recently conducted a Facebook and Twitter poll asking my friends what their nicknames were growing up. Some of my favorites were Snicklefritz, Squeaky, Casper, Noodle, Idgit, and Sassafras. Cute. Sweet. Then things took a twist.

Soon people started sharing their, uh, less flattering nicknames...monikers like Tubby, Fatso or Motor Mouth to name a few.

Names can turn into labels. Labels stick. Soon we begin to believe the lie that we are what the label advertises.



To put it another way, labels usually tell us what's inside, right? If I walk into my pantry and grab a can that bears a label of plump, juicy peaches, I don't expect to open the can and find black eyed peas inside. The label system works great for canned foods and organizing closets, but not for defining our own worth.

Some of us are slapped with a label just once, maybe twice by some cruel person and we believe the lie. We mistakenly believe we are what the label advertises.

“That boy said I’m ugly. So therefore I must be...

*"unattractive to everyone”

*"I’ll always be unattractive.”

*"I’m unattractive on the inside too.”

*"No one will ever want me.”

On and on the lies go.

A dear friend of mine was told from the time she was young that she was unwanted and it wreaked havoc in her life. Why? Because she believed it. *A lie is only detrimental if we believe it.*

Maybe you have a label stuck to you that refuses to come off. Maybe it’s “Unwanted”. “Unlovable”. “Black Sheep”. “Depressed”. “Divorced”. “Loser”. “Mess up.” “Victim”. “Condemned.” “Never Good Enough”.

You are more than the label someone has given you.



This lie of feeling worthless is based in rejection. Sometimes it may be more than words or feelings. You might have lived through the slicing pain of divorce. A nasty break-up. Perhaps you've been rejected by your family, mistreated by your coworkers, or fired from your job. For some, the most devastating blow of all is being forgotten by your children. For others, you might be dealing with the mess from your own consequences and poor decisions

and you just need a little grace from people unwilling to give it.

Here's the thing...your worth does not change based on someone's ability to see it.

Consider a priceless work of art. A Van Gogh painting. Pretend you are walking down the street and are stunned to see an original, authentic Van Gogh painting carelessly



tossed into a dumpster. Why would anyone do such a thing? Clearly the owner had no idea of its worth.

Did the painting's worth change based on its location or who owned it? No. Its value remained the same. This scenario only shows us the ignorance of the person who discarded it.

Don't let someone who doesn't understand your value define your worth.

As always, we need look no farther than Jesus. The Prince of Peace knows exactly what it's like to be labeled worthless and rejected. 1 Peter 2:4 says this:

*"Come to Him [the risen Lord] as to a living Stone which men **rejected** and threw away, but which is choice and precious in the sight of God."*

Did you catch that? Men rejected and threw away Jesus...the Creator, Redeemer, Savior, their Hope and King. There aren't enough books in the world to contain all the words to describe the worth of Christ, yet men still rejected Him and threw Him away. It said nothing of His worth, only the inability of the people to understand that God Himself had come down to them. They didn't understand the treasure they'd been given.

You are precious to God. He loved you so much He would have rather died than leave you in the dark. If you're battling feelings of worth, you need look no further than the cross.

My main purpose in writing *Engraved on the Heart* was a spiritual one. Just like Keziah,

all of us face hardships of some kind or another, whether physical or emotional, but if we aren't on guard, the enemy will tell us we have no worth.

The truth is Jesus thought we were so valuable, He died to keep us. I want you to know you are loved. You are wanted. You are cherished by the God of the universe. The scars in His hands prove it.