

***Compromise With Sin* Interview with Leanna Englert**

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Q: What is *Compromise With Sin* about?

A: I wrote the novel for two different readers. One will say it's a story about Louise Morrissey, a Victorian-era woman who seeks redemption after her "compromise with sin" has tragic consequences. The other reader will say it's the fictionalized account of how Helen Keller, Louise, and others violated social taboos to bring about one of the greatest public health triumphs of the 20th century, one that continues to have an impact on our lives today.

Q: What moved you to write the story?

A: I stumbled into writing *Compromise With Sin* when life handed me something I couldn't resist, and from that this novel and my novel-writing career were launched. It began when I was serving on the board of the Nebraska chapter of the National Society To Prevent Blindness, I was intrigued to learn that the organization was founded in 1908 to promote passage of legislation to prevent the blinding condition known as "babies' sore eyes." That term grabbed me. I had to know more. It took a great deal of research to understand this disease, responsible for one-fourth to one-third of all admissions to asylums for the blind, and the grassroots campaign for legislation. And if I hadn't been hooked before, discovering that Helen Keller played an important role clinched it.

Originally I had planned to write a non-fiction book about the "babies' sore eyes" campaign for legislation. Two things caused me to abandon that notion. First, there were too many holes in my research results—either because the events weren't chronicled or because of my mediocre research skills. Second, I kept imagining what it would be like as a family to have a child blinded by "babies' sore eyes." My imagination won out.

Q: What is Helen Keller's role in the novel?

A: Early in my research I was surprised to find that Helen Keller championed the controversial cause to end blindness from a condition called "babies' sore eyes." She was just 29 years old when she wrote her first essay on the subject for *The Ladies' Home Journal*. She appealed to women to demand drops in their newborn babies' eyes, warning them that they might have gonorrhea without knowing it, infected by husbands who had visited brothels, perhaps before marriage.

I've made Keller the friend of my fictional protagonist, Louise Morrissey, while remaining true to who she was. I can tell you that the reader who knows her only as the deaf-blind girl whose first word was "water" will find the adult to be gutsy and fascinating.

Q: You've called the movement to get legislation requiring prophylactic drops in babies' eyes a "grassroots" movement. Can you explain?

A: It took from about 1910 to 1940 for all states to enact laws mandating drops in newborn babies' eyes to prevent possible blinding from gonorrhea. My research yielded fragments of information regarding how doctors, nurses, social workers, and concerned citizens brought this about. I invented the campaign in Nebraska, and I can't tell you when that state's legislation was first enacted.

Q: You called the movement "one of the greatest public health triumphs of the 20th century, one that continues to have an impact on our lives today." In what way?

A: When you were born, and if you have children, when they were born, it's almost certain that by law prophylactic drops or ointment were instilled in your eyes to prevent possible infection from gonorrhea. Most often the agent is erythromycin, which is administered before the infant leaves the delivery room.

Q: Can you describe the sexual taboos that prevailed at the time of this story?

A: This was the end of the Victorian period. Ignorance and injustice flourished in this time of strict taboos regarding sex. Some examples:

- The wedding night came as a shock to many an unsuspecting bride.
- Topics considered improper included sex, pregnancy, and venereal disease. *The Ladies' Home Journal* lost 25,000 subscribers after printing an editorial about venereal disease.
- Many people believed women were responsible for a man's lust and/or impotence.
- A proper woman went into her "confinement" once her pregnant condition showed.
- An unmarried woman who got pregnant could expect that she and her "bastard" child would be shunned by the community and even her own family.

Q: Was there one character you especially enjoyed writing about?

A: Louise challenged me, being a woman who was deeply flawed but nevertheless someone I wanted to root for. She surprised me sometimes. Frank was fun to write. I think he was much like the birth father I never knew: creative, impulsive, funny, irresponsible. His loving but sometimes reckless approach to parenting Marie provided a balance to Louise's over-protectiveness. Sober, he had an infectious zest for life; drunk, he could be a disaster.

Q: What did you find most challenging in writing the story?

A: Portraying Louise when she's in the moribund grips of depression. You know how an actor's yawn on stage can make audience members yawn? Well writing about fatigue, inertia, and the need to isolate—all characteristics of a depressed state—can drag the story and the reader down, not something a writer wants to achieve. I think I figured out a way around it.

Q: You've received a Readers' Favorite 5-Star review and a Kirkus Reviews Star, which makes you a nominee for the 2017 Kirkus Prize. How does that feel?

A: I suppose you want me to respond honestly. I'm delighted, of course, and grateful. I put this book out there with humble, even altruistic, expectations. I imagined it in the hands of readers who were gripped by the story and moved to talk about it. Especially appealing to me was the idea that discussions about who we were and who we are now would take place across generations or between people who were blind and sighted. I also hoped to raise awareness about parts of the world where "babies' sore eyes" continues to cause blindness. That was then.

This is now. I'm surprised by the response I'm getting. It's kicked me into a fantasy realm, where my novel becomes a best-seller and a movie, and Oprah asks if I'll work her into my schedule. The accolades have made me greedy.

Q: You're writing another story based on a minor character in *Compromise With Sin*. What can you say about her?

A: Irina Taylor is a nurse with enchanting blue-violet eyes, a silver-bells laugh, and a secret. After causing a horrific accident, she disappears from Riverbend. What if she left not because of the accident but because she's the subject of her twin sister's scandalous novel?

Q: As a reader, do you have any pet peeves?

A: Oh, yes. Names that cause confusion or put speed bumps in my reading zone. In my critique group, Novel in Progress, I'm the self-appointed name sheriff.

Q: Who are your favorite authors and books?

A: There are so many. Some I read to escape, some to emulate. *Ragtime*, by E. L. Doctorow, *Water for Elephants*, by Sara Gruen, *Ordinary Grace*, by William Kent Krueger, *The Chicken Hanger*, by Ben Rehder, *White Oleander*, by Janet Fitch. I collect snippets of writing from anywhere and everywhere—even song lyrics—which I keep in a file called "Brief Writing Lessons." I use them in two ways. First, before I begin writing or revising, I pick an example to excite my writing muscles. Second, I often use these in my blog, "NovelWords.Cafe."

