

A silhouette of a cowboy wearing a hat, riding a horse. They are positioned on a dark, silhouetted landscape against a light, hazy background. The horse is facing left.

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Journey to Riverbend

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JOURNEY *to*
RIVERBEND

*To Linda,
the love of my life, whose patience,
support, encouragement, and love
made this book possible*

And to you who read this book:

May you find the shalom of our Father

in every area of your life:

Wholeness

Completeness

Nothing Missing

Nothing Broken



1

APRIL 10, 1878

THE CROWD WAS SMALL for a hanging. Quieter than usual, as if they all knew justice would not be served today.

Michael Archer found it hard to look at the young man before him. Ben Carstairs, only twenty-two, stood like a boy grown too tall, too soon. Each strand of his sandy hair grew as if it had a mind of its own. Handcuffs encircled his fine-boned wrists in loops of heavy iron. His lips quivered. Fear raged in his brown eyes.

“You believe I didn’t do it, don’t you?”

Michael’s throat tightened. He nodded. Many hours with the boy had convinced him of the young man’s innocence.

Ben gulped air and sighed. His shoulders sagged. He lifted his cuffed hands and opened a palm. “Give this to my father

when you see him. It was my ma's, and I wanted something of hers when he threw me out. Tell him I'm sorry."

It was the silver Celtic cross Ben had worn on a leather thong around his neck. Only slight traces of the delicate engravings remained. Michael rubbed the cross as he had seen Ben do hundreds of times and closed his fist over the treasured token. He slipped it into his shirt pocket, buttoned the flap, and patted the cross with his hand. "I will."

Sheriff Gideon Parsons spoke from behind Ben. "It's time, son."

Ben swallowed, then straightened. "Thank you, Michael."

Michael nodded, unable to speak.

Gideon stepped in front and slipped a black hood over Ben's head. The boy whimpered as Gideon put the noose in place and pulled it snug. He squeezed Ben's shoulder. "It'll be fast." His voice cracked.

The trapdoor sprang down. Michael couldn't look. A short, muffled sound from inside the hood ended in silence.

Michael opened his eyes. The body swayed in a gentle arc, the head at an unnatural angle.

Gideon stood on the other side of the trapdoor, his hand still on the release lever, knuckles white, eyes downcast. He shook his large head and slid his hand from the lever. Wiping his face with a red bandanna, he motioned to the undertakers, who stood like vultures beside the gallows. They moved with well-practiced efficiency to free the noose, lower the body into a plain pine casket, and load it onto the hearse.

Gideon walked over and stood next to Michael. "I feel rotten about this. It shouldn'ta happened."

“I know. Thanks for asking the judge to reconsider.” Michael gazed out past the town toward the fields and the low-lying hills in the distance. Heaviness enveloped his heart like a wet blanket.

Gideon snorted. “Fat lot of good it did. The judge wanted proof, and we didn’t have any.”

“But you tried. Thanks for believing me.”

“Well, the whole thing never added up. It was either a frame-up or bad timing on young Carstairs’s part, but I couldn’t prove his innocence.” He shook his head. “This is one of those times I hate this job.”

About the Author

HENRY McLAUGHLIN is the 2009 winner of the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild Operation First Novel Contest. He has a master's degree in social work and spent many years working in the public child welfare system. It was in this role that he first honed his writing skills in preparing concise and accurate court reports and petitions. He retired from that career in 1999 to work with Kenneth Copeland Ministries.

To improve his craft, Henry belongs to several Christian writers organizations; attends writers conferences, workshops, and retreats; and participates in online and local critique groups. He completed the Christian Writers Guild Craftsman course in April 2010.

Henry and his wife, Linda, have been married for over forty years and live in Saginaw, Texas. They have five children, the oldest of whom is in heaven, and one grandchild.

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Discussion Questions

1. When *Journey to Riverbend* begins, Michael sets out to reconcile a father and son. But at some point his mission seems to become about more than just fulfilling his promise to Ben. Do you agree or disagree? What else do you think is driving Michael?
2. Many of the townspeople in Riverbend judge Rachel because of her past, even though she's no longer a prostitute. Do you ever make snap judgments about people based on things you've heard about them? Other than gossip, what leads us to jump to conclusions about people before we get to know them? How can we stop ourselves from doing that?
3. Though Rachel has accepted Christ's forgiveness, she still has a difficult time trusting in that forgiveness and often allows her insecurities to overshadow the new person she's become. In chapter 16, she says, *That's me. Ever alert. Always waiting for something else bad to*

happen. That's partially why, in chapter 21, she mistakes Michael's act of kindness for something else. Have you ever experienced this yourself? Why do you think you reacted this way?

4. Michael is haunted by an event in his past that he never had the courage to face. Have you ever had a similar experience, one that was difficult to look back on?
5. In chapter 37, when Michael asks Jeremiah Turner how he became a gunslinger, Jeremiah replies that during the war, he saw such cruelty. Though it drove some men to disbelief, it had the opposite effect on Jeremiah and drew him closer to God. Why do you think people can have such opposite reactions to adversity or evil? Have you ever witnessed or experienced this yourself?
6. The townspeople of Riverbend risk a lot to save Sam's life—time, resources, even their own lives. Do you think that they were right to do so? Why or why not?
7. At the end of chapter 42, Rachel gets the sudden and inexplicable urge to pray for Michael and the rest of the posse. Have you ever experienced a call to prayer or action like that?
8. In chapter 45, Caleb tells Michael that he can't reconcile others' views of a good God with a God who would allow pain and sickness, like his wife experienced before she died. Would you have responded the same way Michael did? Why or why not?

9. Did you feel sympathy for Sam at any point in the story? Why or why not?
10. Romans 8:28 assures us that “God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” What are some examples of this throughout the story?