

Dysfunction Junction

a novel

Robin W. Pearson

A CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Praise for Robin W. Pearson

“The journey of these three sisters wrestling with childhood wounds and trauma is a fascinating and insightful story. Beautifully written, so visual—I felt immersed in the story from the first page. Robin W. Pearson’s writing has that rare mix of depth, raw honesty, while still maintaining an undertone of humor and hopefulness. The perfect book club book for an in-depth conversation. I think this book will be helpful to those on a road to healing from a difficult past. Bravo!”

CINDY MORGAN, award-winning singer/songwriter and author of *The Year of Jubilee*, on *Dysfunction Junction*

“There is healing for the broken, and Robin W. Pearson delivers a strong testament to that fact in her latest poetically written novel, *Dysfunction Junction*. Readers will be stirred and healed after reading this one.”

VANESSA MILLER, bestselling author of *The American Queen*

“You can’t help choosing favorites among the Winters sisters. Then again, you’ll change your mind again and again as author Robin W. Pearson brings together three finely drawn characters—Frankie, Annabelle, and Charlotte—who must reluctantly join forces to wrestle the ghosts of their troubled childhood, come to terms with memories of neglect, and envision a future that’s free of resentment and filled with grace.”

VALERIE FRASER LUESSE, bestselling author of *Under the Bayou Moon*, on *Dysfunction Junction*

“Southern charm flows like molasses through barbed conversations in *Dysfunction Junction* as three sisters strive to find healing from festering mother wounds. Secrets and guilt wrestle their way to redemption in this quirky family tapestry. Robin W. Pearson’s unique voice is complex and captivating.”

TESSA AFSHAR, award-winning author of *The Peasant King*

“With her distinctive voice and gorgeous insights, wordsmith Robin W. Pearson takes a brave and deep journey through the tall weeds of a family’s old pain, nagging fears, and challenging choices—painting a portrait of the path any willing family can take to finally walk into the promise of courageous, new life. Her invitation is beautiful, offered to our broken world at just the right time.”

PATRICIA RAYBON, award-winning author of *All That Is Secret* and *I Told the Mountain to Move: Learning to Pray So Things Change*, on *Walking in Tall Weeds*

“There’s a special kind of musicality to Southern fiction that delights my mind, and Robin W. Pearson’s novels never fail to sing directly to my heart. . . . She’s given us another gift in her newest, *Walking in Tall Weeds*. . . . Pearson invites us—a large family from different backgrounds, skin tones, experiences—to tune our ears to the song of unity and forgiveness that is only possible through the power of Christ. Robin W. Pearson’s voice is strong and powerful. Listen up! You don’t want to miss a note!”

SUSIE FINKBEINER, author of *The Nature of Small Birds* and *Stories That Bind Us*

“In her latest novel, *Walking in Tall Weeds*, Pearson weaves together a rich tapestry of Southern charm while exposing issues often hidden behind polite dialect. Where families will finally see the importance of looking at their past through a lens of awareness in order to do better, instead of allowing the past to rob them of the joy of the here and now.”

T. I. LOWE, bestselling author of *Under the Magnolias*

“When I read Robin W. Pearson’s latest, I saw my own heart. She mixes life’s pain with Duke’s mayonnaise and smoked sausages and fluffy drop biscuits. And in the tapestry she weaves with words, I find what I hold on to, what I need to set free, and the striving in between.”

CHRIS FABRY, bestselling author of *A Piece of the Moon*,
on *Walking in Tall Weeds*

“Robin W. Pearson has a gift for capturing the complexity and nuances of family relationships. She brings a remarkable tenderness and compassion to the struggle we all face to know and be known in a family. Prepare yourself for a rich and satisfying read!”

SARAH LOUDIN THOMAS, award-winning author of
The Right Kind of Fool, on *Walking in Tall Weeds*

“Pearson delivers a satisfying tale of one woman’s secrets returning to haunt her. . . . Pearson’s excellent characters and plotting capture the complexity and beauty of family, the difficulty of rectifying mistakes, and the healing that comes from honesty. Pearson rises to another level with this excellent story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *'Til I Want No More*

“With help from her community, Maxine learns that by confronting her tangled past, she can face her future and discover her true self. Uplifting faith-based messages are included throughout, and the story’s easy pace allows time to take in each lesson.”

BOOKPAGE on *'Til I Want No More*

“This novel’s slow pace allows readers to gain valuable insight into Maxine as she braves a great deal of soul-searching. A heartfelt tale about faith and family, readers can walk toward the altar with Maxine Owens as she tends to her past wounds.”

DEEP SOUTH MAGAZINE on *'Til I Want No More*

“*'Til I Want No More* feels like an extended afternoon at a family reunion barbecue, complete with mouthwatering food, spilled family secrets, and voices of faith that never lose hope. This brilliantly written story reminds us that God is bigger than the struggles that all families face, yet as a woman of color, I love that Robin’s courageous characters look and sound like me.”

BARB ROOSE, speaker and author of *Surrendered: Letting Go and Living like Jesus* and *Joshua: Winning the Worry Battle*

“Robin W. Pearson has done it again—she truly knows how to captivate her readers and have them eagerly turning each page, anticipating what is going to happen next. *'Til I Want No More* is no exception. Maxine’s journey of love, longing, and finding her identity and worth is relatable to so many women, all of whom will be able to resonate with the many emotions of this bride-to-be as she seeks to find the joy and sense of belonging she’s been missing.”

ANGELIA WHITE STONE, CEO and editor of *Hope for Women* magazine

“Pearson writes strong characters who wrap their arms around you and pull you into the family circle, a hubbub of loyalty, secrets, faith, and yes, forgiveness. Nobody’s perfect—but maybe that’s the best theme woven through this book.”

BETH K. VOGT, award-winning author of the Thatcher Sisters series, on *'Til I Want No More*

“Pearson’s excellent debut explores forgiveness and the burden of secrets. . . . Pearson’s saga is enjoyable and uncomfortable, but also funny and persistent in the way that only family can be.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review of *A Long Time Comin'*

“Pearson delivers a poignant debut that explores the faith of one African American family. . . . The writing is strong, and the story is engaging, and readers will be pleased to discover a new voice in Southern inspirational fiction.”

BOOKLIST on *A Long Time Comin'*

“Robin W. Pearson’s debut novel is a contemporary fiction masterpiece. . . . Set in North Carolina, readers will feel the heat, smell the food, and hear the bees buzzing in the background. . . . Pearson has created a story that makes you feel like you’re in the same room as the characters. Do not miss this one.”

CHRISTIAN FICTION ADVISOR on *A Long Time Comin’*

“Readers will cry, laugh, sigh wistfully, and even rage a little at this moving story. *A Long Time Comin’* is a wonderful tale of love, family, secrets, relationships, and forgiveness that will teach us all how to live well in the midst of real life.”

THE BANNER MAGAZINE

“Robin W. Pearson delivers a fresh new voice for Southern fiction, treating readers to an inspiring journey through the complex matters of the heart.”

JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author, on *A Long Time Comin’*

“Robin W. Pearson’s authentic faith and abundant talent shine through in this wholehearted novel. Bee and Evelyn will stir your heart and stay with you long after the last page of *A Long Time Comin’* is turned.”

MARYBETH MAYHEW WHALEN, author of *Only Ever Her*

“Robin W. Pearson’s singular style and fully realized cast of characters ring proudly throughout this novel. Her masterful voice is a welcome addition to the genre of family sagas rooted in hope and faith.”

LIZ JOHNSON, bestselling author of *The Red Door Inn*, on *A Long Time Comin’*

“*A Long Time Comin’* is a tender and sweet story of a cantankerous grandmother and her dear family members. . . . Her characters are charming, endearing, and flawed. I hope we have many years to come of reading Pearson’s work.”

KATARA PATTON, author

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Dysfunction Junction

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Dysfunction Junction is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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To my family

*You have always been my helper.
Don't leave me now; don't abandon me,
O God of my salvation!
Even if my father and mother abandon me,
the LORD will hold me close . . .
Yet I am confident I will see the LORD's goodness
while I am here in the land of the living.*

Psalm 27: 9-10, 13

*There are three sides to every story:
your side, my side, and the truth.*

Robert Evans

Chapter One

Then

“WHAT TIME IS IT?” Annabelle’s voice quavered as she studied the shadows huddling under the sliding board in Lincoln Park. She expected the streetlight at the corner to come on at any minute, and she didn’t think her four-year-old legs could outrun those misshapen silhouettes if they had a mind to chase her. They were in spitting distance of home, but her fear made it feel much farther.

Apparently unperturbed, Frances Mae peeled off the paper from her second block of Hubba Bubba and popped it onto her tongue. Her teeth worked at the gum until she could chew more easily. When she opened her mouth to speak, she wiped a bit of spit from the edge of her lip. “Mama’s not expectin’ us any time soon. She likes time to herself after she closes the store.”

They both knew their mama wasn’t going to be alone for long.

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But at that moment, all Annabelle could think about was that *she* didn't like being outside at this time of day. On top of that, she was hungry, and the overpowering scent of strawberries wafting from Frankie's mouth wasn't helping a bit.

Their mama had shooed them out of the house two hours ago with strict instructions not to come back until not one, but all the lamps standing guard around the playground were brightly lit. Annabelle peered up at the sky that had started out a pale blue but had transitioned to streaks of purple and gray. Birds flapped across the horizon and disappeared, as if they, too, knew it was time to go somewhere cozy and settle down for the night. Her eyes welled. "It's gonna be dawd soon."

"No, it's not. Besides, Mama's friend said if we listen, he'll get her to give us some more candy next time he comes over." Frances Mae used her index finger and thumb to pinch the end of her gum. She extended her arm as far as it could go while her teeth clamped onto the other end of the sticky treat their new friend had given her.

Annabelle scratched the inside of her elbow and watched her sister twirl and stretch her gum this way and that with her dirt-smudged fingers, mindless of the mosquitoes and gnats flying about.

Annabelle didn't want another piece of Hubba Bubba or a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, even though she loved licking at the chocolate until she worked her way to the middle. Besides, wrapped or not, those miniature bricks Frankie had stuffed into her cheeks looked like they'd been gathering dust by the register in Mama's store more days than Annabelle could count with both her small hands.

All the treats from McNair's were either leftovers or stale. Her sister should know that as well as Annabelle did. But no, Frances Mae scarfed down all those soft crackers and chewy potato

chips like they tasted better than the hamburgers and fries from McDonald's. Mama smiled and carried on like her new man had done something, making them shake his hand and say thank you.

Shoot, Annabelle didn't want any part of that gum.

Dry leaves skittered in a crackly circle near the swings. Fall was definitely on the way, shortening the days and lengthening the nights. Sure enough, the tall lamps began flickering on, one after another, along the sidewalk that encircled the park. The changing light redirected the movements and shapes of the shadows Annabelle's eyes had been glued to for the last ten minutes. She jumped and clutched at her sister's arm. "What's that?"

"Dang it! You made me drop it." Frances Mae squatted and reached for the gum that had plopped into the sandy space between her jelly shoes. She must have thought better of it because she stopped an inch or two before picking it up. Hands balled on her small hips, she glared at her younger sister. "You're just like a monkey, all over the place. Just can't be still. The monkey in the middle, that's what you are!"

Too agitated to be insulted, Annabelle spun, and her sneaker came down on the gum. When she lifted it, elastic threads connected her foot to the ground. Frances Mae's glob of Hubba Bubba was squished between the ridges on the bottom and plastered to the side of her left sneaker.

"Ugh, look what you did! Why can't you stop for once? Nothin's gonna get you out here! Haven't we been in this park a thousand times? Now I've gotta get this gum off your shoe or Mama's gon' have my head when we get home. Come on now, be still, Anna. Stop all that fussin' and movin' around. You heard what I said. Don't move a muscle, and let me go find a stick or somethin' so I can clean your shoe."

Tears streaming down her dusty cheeks, shoulders heaving,

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Annabelle ran in place, her feet pummeling the dirt. Too frightened without her sister to stand still, and too afraid of her sister to leave that spot, she peered through the growing darkness as Frances Mae's outline trudged toward the grassy area near the edge of the park where a few spindly trees grew. Those pines provided meager shade when the sun was at its peak, but their cluster of thin trunks shielded her from Annabelle's view.

Wait. There! Another light buzzed, then clicked on. Something rattled across the trees as the wind picked up in force. *What's that creaking? The swings? What's that shadow?* Unable to contain her fear any longer, she let it fly. "Fwanna Mae!"

The girl crunched across the leaves toward Annabelle, holding a sturdy stick that the Lord must have pointed out to her in the faint evening light. Frances Mae squatted and studied Annabelle's feet. "You're makin' a mess of yourself!"

Sure enough, both Annabelle's shoes were speckled with bits of gum and clumps of dirt.

"Hush, and sit down." Frances Mae none too gently pushed her sister, whose bottom kicked up dust upon landing on the sandy ground at the base of the sliding board. When her aggressive action elicited more screeching, Frances Mae reached into the pocket of her denim shorts and withdrew a smushed orange packet. "Here, pretend this is your banana. Eat it and be quiet. Go on, eat your banana. Oo-oo-aa-aa." She shoved the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup into Annabelle's hand. Then she knelt, lifted the girl's foot, and started digging gum from between the treads of the shoe.

Annabelle's cries ebbed and then petered out altogether once she accepted that crying out and speaking up weren't helping. She hiccuped and blinked, her chest hitching, as she clutched the candy. Snot drizzled from her nose and mingled with the tears on her lip.

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Frances Mae looked across and ran her free hand along her little sister's shoulder. "See? There's only the two of us, and your Frankie wouldn't ever let anything happen to you. Okay? Now, eat your banana, little monkey." She nodded at Annabelle's hand. "Go ahead, Anna Banana."

Annabelle looked down. She could barely make out the words on the orange wrapper as the last of the streetlights buzzed to life behind them. "Oo-oo-aa-aa," she whispered.