

Cover Story

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2017 Southwest Florida Reading Festival

By: Yohana de la Torre, Chief Editor

More than two dozen nationally acclaimed authors plan to meet their fans and talk about their books at the 18th Annual Southwest Florida Reading Festival on Saturday, March 18, at Centennial Park in the Fort Myers River District.

The festival is a free, day-long event filled with sensational author talks, the latest library technology, contests, booksellers, book signings, activities for teens and children, a free book for every child and teen and the Reading Rocks! Teen Battle of the Bands. The Festival draws an average of 18,000 people annually and delivers with big names.

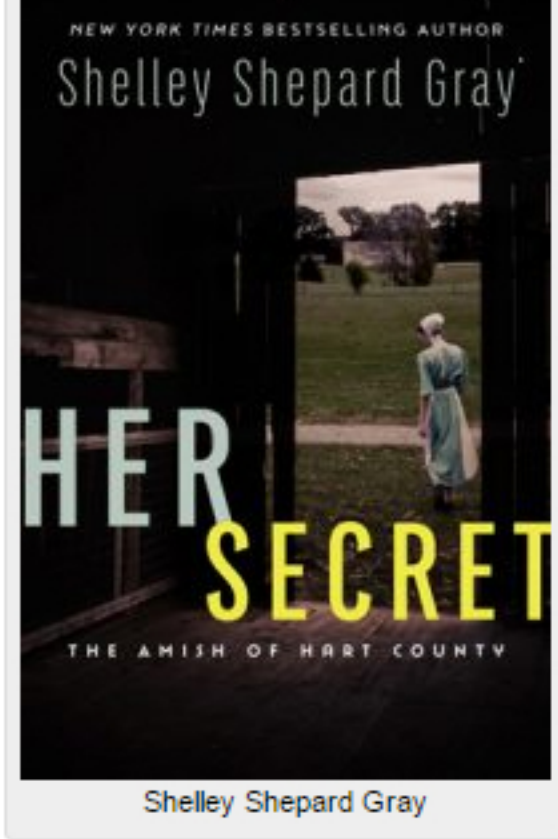
"Authors come from all over the country and many genres are represented," said Margie Byers, Festival Coordinator. "Most are award winners, a couple are coauthors with Tom Clancy and James Patterson and all are very popular with their readers. It is a pleasure to meet these creative and interesting people who write these amazing novels and keep track of all the details."

The festival starts Friday evening, March 17, at the Marina at Edison & Ford with the Evening with the Authors. The event provides the opportunity for fans to meet, mingle and dine with authors. Tickets to the dinner and reception can be purchased at www.readfest.org.

A few of the award-winning authors scheduled to attend both events include adult authors: Shelley Shepard Gray, James Grippando, Gregg Hurwitz, Mark Greaney, Susan Wiggs, Lori Wilde; teen authors include: Sara Shepard, Kami Garcia and S.J. Kincaid; and children's authors: Chris Grabenstein, Salina Yoon and Candace Fleming.

GCT caught up with some of the authors taking part in the Southwest Florida Reading Festival about their latest releases and here's what they had to say:

SHELLEY SHEPARD GRAY



New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Shelley Shepard Gray begins a new series—*The Amish of Hart County*—with this suspenseful tale of a young Amish woman who is forced to move to a new town to escape a threatening stalker.

In *Her Secret*, after a stalker went too far, Hannah Hilty and her family had no choice but to leave the bustling Amish community where she grew up. Now she's getting a fresh start in Hart County, Kentucky...if only she wasn't too scared to take it. Hannah has become afraid to trust anyone—even Isaac, the friendly Amish man who lives next door. She wonders if she'll ever return to the trusting, easy-going woman she once was.

For Isaac Troyer, the beautiful girl he teasingly called "The Recluse" confuses him like no other. When he learns of her past, he knows he's misjudged her. However, he also understands the importance of being grateful for God's gifts, and wonders if they will ever have anything in common. But as Hannah and Isaac slowly grow closer, they realize that there's always more to someone than meets the eye.

Just as Hannah is finally settling into her new life, and perhaps finding a new love, more secrets are revealed and tragedy strikes. Now Hannah must decide if she should run again or dare to fight for the future she has found in Hart County.

YD: Why did you choose to write Amish fiction?

SG: "I guess you could say the genre found me. After writing eight or nine books for the mainstream market, my agent encouraged me to write a novel with a spiritual slant. I wrote a lengthy historical western that I was very proud of. Unfortunately, it was rejected from about twenty houses! But it did attract the attention of an editor who liked the way I wrote. When she realized I lived in Southern Ohio near an Amish community, she asked me to write an Amish book. I ended up writing *HIDDEN*, my first Amish novel for Avon Inspire. When it went into a second printing almost immediately after being published, I knew it was a good fit for me. I've now written close to 40 Amish romances."

YD: How much of the Amish culture and way of life do you apply in your daily life?

SG: "My first instinct is to say that I don't really live an Amish lifestyle. I like my electricity! I enjoy shopping. I wear makeup and jewelry. But actually, my Amish friends have taught me something that I've taken to heart: Do my best to appreciate every day and to give thanks often. I've found that I try to live my faith each day now, and for that I am grateful."

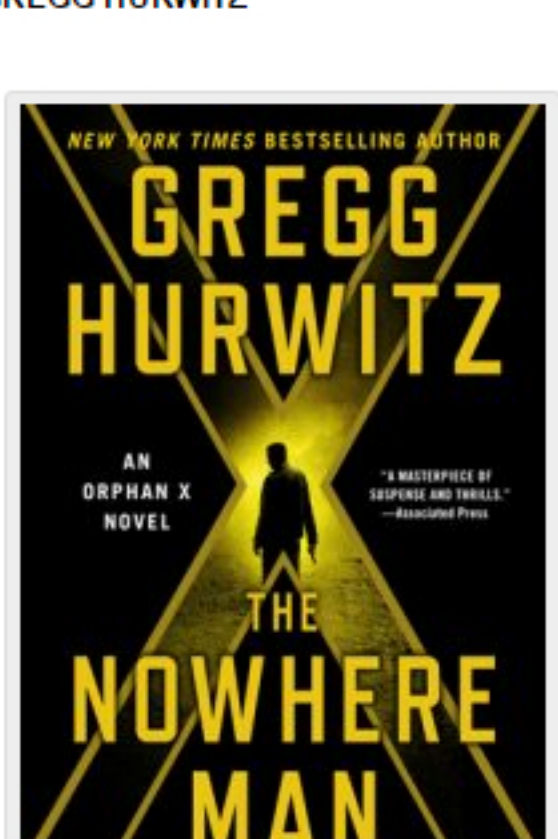
YD: What are some of the spiritual themes you like to write about?

SG: "One of my favorite themes to incorporate in my novels is God's Grace. Having my characters discover this feels so hopeful and positive. I also focus a lot on forgiveness, because I think everyone makes mistakes. So, I try to have characters who must forgive themselves or forgive someone they love."

YD: What is the one thing you wish you had known before you started writing novels?

SG: "That I would be able to make a career out of it. I had so many rejections and so many books that didn't sell well when I first started, I got very discouraged. If I had known that my hard work would one day pay off, I think I would have slept better at night! I used to spend many nights wishing I was a better writer."

GREGG HURWITZ



Evan Smoak, introduced in Gregg Hurwitz's phenomenal bestselling thriller *Orphan X*, is a man with many identities, and more than a few deeply buried secrets. Having been raised in a covert government program to create assassins, Evan spent years traveling the globe and dispatching targets under the code name Orphan X; but in his current life, he's a vigilante offering help to anyone who reaches him, a figure more rumor than reality, known as the Nowhere Man.

For all of the care Evan has spent burying his past and atoning for his earlier life, history comes hunting for him in *The Nowhere Man*, and even his lethal abilities might not be enough to save him. And the greatest mystery of it is that Evan can't tell which of his past lives have brought on this retribution.

Caught unaware while trying to rescue an abducted girl, Evan is drugged and spirited off to a remote location, heavily guarded from all approaches. His captors think they have him trapped and helpless in a virtual cage but they don't know who they're dealing with—or what will happen when they push him too far.

YD: Evan Smoak—the hero of *The Nowhere Man* and *Orphan X*—has been favorably compared to James Bond, Jason Bourne, and other iconic series characters. In what ways do you feel he is the same – and how will readers find him different?

GH: "The hero story is as old as human consciousness and I wanted to honor the storytelling tradition and great storytellers who came before me, who made me—as a young kid reading under the covers at night with a flashlight—want to do what I do.

"What differentiates Evan Smoak is that he is a character not just capable of—but who has done—terrible things. But he chooses to do the right thing. And that choice costs him everything."

"There's a conflict here. Because everybody, no matter how tough, no matter what training they've received, has a need for human contact, for family. And one thing we never get to see? Is James Bond go home. Or Jason Bourne have an awkward moment with an attractive single mom in the elevator of his condo."

"As bad-ass as Evan is, he exists in the real world. He might come home from knife fight in a truck stop and get dragged into a torturous HOA meeting where he has to cover up his cut. So, what would that really be like? Here's a guy who spends his existence protecting people living ordinary lives that he himself could never have. There's a longing there—and a tragic shading. What if the code you live by is also a curse that keeps you from having what you most want?"

YD: You're known for immersive research into your books—sneaking onto demolition ranges with Navy SEALs, swimming with sharks in the Galápagos, going undercover in a mind-control cult. Why is experiencing these things a priority for you and what type of research did you do when creating the character of Evan Smoak?

GH: "My goal is to give the reader a front-row seat to the action. I never want to recycle tropes culled from TV shows, so I think it's important to get out there, to engage all five senses. Smart readers know when something feels genuine rather than recycled.

"I didn't want Evan's training to feel like bullshit, you know, where he's catching flies with chopsticks and so on. For *Orphan X*, I spent months doing research. One of my consultants, a world-renowned sniper and armorer, got me onto every gun Evan uses, from Benelli shotguns to sub-machine guns. I trained extensively in mixed martial arts, familiarizing my face with the training mat. I have a number of friends/contacts who have led operations that you've seen the aftermath of on CNN News and I spent hours talking to them, picking up the telling details that could show the process by which a skinny, scared kid from an East Baltimore boy's home could plausibly transform into Orphan X, a legendary figure in the shadow service."

YD: In *Orphan X*, you established Evan Smoak as an unforgettable action hero who comes to the rescue of the truly desperate. But in *The Nowhere Man*, he quickly finds himself in a situation of vulnerability. Why did you decide to build the story around this complication?

GH: "One aim I set for myself when I embarked on this series was that I wanted every book to feel different. I have enormous admiration for thriller writers—like Lee Child, Robert Crais, Chelsea Cain, and David Baldacci—who manage to do that, who keep their fifth book in a series as fresh as the first. So, when I started *The Nowhere Man*, I knew I wanted a different setup. In a way, I wanted to turn reader expectations on their head. I wanted to turn *my own* expectations on their head.

"But how do I do that? That's the question I found myself contemplating as I sat before my computer, staring at the intimidating blank screen. A few painful hours later, it came to me. What if instead of writing a book where the Nowhere Man rescues someone, I wrote a book where the Nowhere Man is the one who needs rescuing? What if he found himself in precisely the kind of awful predicament that people called *him* for?"

YD: What's next for the series?

GH: "I've already re-upped for another three-book deal with Minotaur that takes me through 2020. There's going to be a lot of typing to come."

CHRIS GRABENSTEIN



New York Times bestselling author, Chris Grabenstein's *Home Sweet Motel* is a highly illustrated, hilarious middle-grade paper-over-board series filled with madcap escapades is unputdownable fun.

There's always something wacky happening when you live at a motel, and 12-year-old P.T. Wilkie has grown up at the world's wackiest one: the Wonderland—a down-at-heel Florida beach motel his granddad Walt opened the year before that *other* Walt opened his famous resort just a half hour away...

When the motel is in trouble, P.T. joins forces with his friend Gloria Ortega, and they launch into one wild venture after another in hopes of making enough money to save the Wonderland—all while trying to uncover the identities of a pair of strange new guests. Could they really be the infamous jewel thieves P.T. saw on TV? And, come to think of it, where did those guys hide their loot, anyway?

YD: What was your inspiration for *Home Sweet Motel*?

CG: "I started thinking about this story when I was nine or ten years old, riding in the backseat of my family's air-conditioned station wagon on our annual trek from Buffalo, New York, to St. Petersburg, Florida, where my grandparents lived. On the way, we'd stop off at all sorts of wacky roadside attractions, like South of the Border or Weeki Wachee Springs. I always thought motels and tourist traps were the coolest places on earth when I was a kid. Especially the fun and funky ones in Florida. So I wondered, "What if I was a kid who lived in a motel?"

YD: Please describe the greatest challenge you faced in writing this book, why it was difficult, and how you resolved it.

CG: "The greatest challenge was getting the fun-in-the-sun feel down on paper. That required some serious research. On the beach. In Florida. It's a tough job, but someone has to do it."

YD: Do you relate to any of the characters in *Welcome to Wonderland: Home Sweet Motel*?

CG: "In every book I write, there is a little slice of me in the main character. P.T. is an incredible storyteller. He can take nothing and turn it into something just by using his imagination."

YD: What important lesson do you want the reader to take away from this book?

CG: "I hope that readers will realize the power of story. I also think the book says some nice things about family and looking out for those you love...no matter what."

YD: What can we look forward to in your next book?

CG: "The next book in the Welcome to Wonderland series will be titled *Beach Party Surf Monkey*. The motel has a chance to be selected as the location for a Hollywood beach party movie. P.T. and Gloria have to use their savvy and storytelling to pitch the producers...and the Hollywood stars."

YD: Which books and authors do you feel have influenced your writing?

CG: "I think I have been influenced by the most, and James Patterson, who I coauthor some books with. He was my first boss in advertising, was back in 1984, and taught me how to grab a reader's attention. How to keep that attention with short, punchy chapters that end with a cliffhanger. Elmore Leonard, the fabulous mystery author, also taught me a lot. Especially to leave out the parts nobody wants to read anyway."

YD: Any words of wisdom or advice for aspiring writers?

CG: "Read, read, read. Write, write, write. And remember what they say in the *Goosebumps* movie: Every story has a beginning, a middle, and a twist!"

– The 18th Annual Southwest Florida Reading Festival will take place March 17 & 18 at Centennial Park in Fort Myers, FL. For more information or to view the complete list of authors, call (239) 479-4636 or visit www.readfest.org

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