

## **Q & A with Melanie Dobson**

### **Author of LOVE FINDS YOU IN AMANA, IOWA**

- 1. LOVE FINDS YOU IN AMANA, IOWA is the second book that you have set in the Amana Colonies. What is your fascination with the area and era?**

There is no place else in the world quite like the picturesque and peaceful colonies known as the Amanas. In the 1800s, the Amana lifestyle was modeled after the church in the book of Acts—they worked together, worshipped together, and they shared all of their belongings. Even though the Amana people no longer live as a communal society, the area is still rich in both history and the Amana heritage. During my time in the Colonies, I realized that I often sacrifice my relationships and community for the busyness of life. The heart of this book—and a good reminder for me personally—is the importance of community. The Amana people cared for each other during the communal era and they still take time to care for each other today.

- 2. How much research into the Amana Society did you do to be able to write your books? How did you research it?**

Before I visited the Amana Colonies, I read a number of books about the Amana people and their heritage. Then I spent five wonderful days exploring the Colonies and visiting both descendants of those who lived during the communal era and a man who was born while the Amanas were still a commune. I spent hours in the historical society and library as I read interviews and articles about past years, and then I took long walks through villages and a bike ride along the millrace as I imagined what life would have been like there a hundred years ago.

- 3. You have written about the fact that “bonnet novels” are popular. Can you explain what they are and why you think they are so popular?**

Many readers want to escape to a simpler time and place and they seem to find that simplicity among the Amish and similar religious groups. But I believe readers are fascinated with these groups for more than just an escape. Many readers are also intrigued by the devout faith of Amish and other religious communities and the freedom they have from the worries of this world, along with the value they place on their family, friendships, and the fire God has put into their hearts. The Amana people, for example, are passionate about their friendships and the inspired testimonies they've received from

God. And they find meaning in these passions instead of searching for it in things that never seem to satisfy.

**4. The people from the Amana Colonies seem similar to the Amish. Are they similar? What are their differences?**

An Amana friend told me that the only similarity between the Amish and Amana people is that their names both begin with the letter A. Beside this first letter, there are a few other similarities between the two groups. In the past, the Amana women wore head coverings like the Amish, and both groups came to the United States to escape persecution. The Amana people, however, lived and worked in community while the Amish typically live and work as families. The Amana people embraced innovation and technology and were both artists and inventors (Amana Appliances began in the Colonies). The Amana people also believe that God continues to speak to people today through the Holy Spirit.

**5. Do the Amana Colonies still exist? What is the status of the people of the Colonies?**

The Amanas lived as a communal society until 1932 when members voted to reorganize. The Amana Church was separated from the corporation known as the Amana Society, but both the Amana Society and the Amana Church continue to thrive today. Amana Appliances, now owned by Whirlpool Corporation, is located in Middle Amana, and visitors from around the world continue to escape to the seven quaint villages that make up these colonies.

**6. Where do you get your story lines?**

My storylines are usually sparked by a simple “what if?” question. For this novel, I read that the Amana people were pacifists and their elders paid commutation fees to keep their men from being drafted for the Civil War. But, I wondered as I researched, what would happen if an Amana man felt compelled to fight for freedom? I began writing this novel to answer that basic question. Later I found out that eight men left the Amana Society to fight in the Civil War. Most of them came back after the war and rejoined the Society.

**7. You have written nine novels and the story lines run from one extreme to the other—from the Amish to the Mafia. Explain the diversity in your writing.**

In *The Silent Order*, I wrote about both the Mafia and Amish. ☺ I’m intrigued by different people groups and new places, and my wandering imagination enjoys creating storylines about places and people and time periods that I need to research to understand.

I love to learn, and I hope my novels reflect this passion. Even though my subject matter is different in every novel, there is always an element of romance and suspense in each book and all of my novels have a common thread of freedom laced through them. My hope is that each story, even though they are different in topic, will stir a reader's heart and her soul.

**8. Do you always visit the places where your books are set? Do you find that helpful?**

Whenever I write a book for the *Love Finds You* series, I visit the town where the book is set before I begin to write. I enjoy traveling and meeting new people and researching the history of these towns so not only is this fun for me, it gives me the opportunity to experience the setting so I can communicate the sights and the sounds and even the smells to my readers. For my books set in the Amana Colonies, this meant I had the tough job of tasting pastries fresh from a hearth oven, strolling the starlit village pathways late at night, and sleeping in a bedroom reminiscent of the rooms where the Amana people would have lived more than a century ago.

**9. What are you working on now?**

*Love Finds You in Nazareth, Pennsylvania*. It releases this November and the novel is about a Moravian man and women who were married by "lot" in Germany in 1754 and immediately sent to Pennsylvania as missionaries. Christian and Susanna had never met before they married, and they struggle as they learn not only how to befriend the Indians in the wilderness, but also how to love each other.

**10. You have a journalism background, what made you start writing books?**

I have always loved the process of creating stories. When I was a child, I would fill notebooks with stories (or at least, the beginnings of stories), and this passion reignited in me when I was in my late twenties. I pursued a career in public relations and journalism for many years, and I now use what I learned as a journalist to research and write fiction. Before I begin to write a historical novel, I take about a month to interview experts and read books both old and new about the era.