

The Lost Story of Via Belle Book Club Kit





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MELANIE DOBSON

Writing fiction is Melanie Dobson's excuse to explore abandoned houses, travel to unique places, and spend hours reading old books and dreaming up new stories. The award-winning author of thirty novels, Melanie enjoys researching and weaving together inspirational fiction including *The Lost Story of Via Belle*, *Catching the Wind*, and *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton*. Her novels have won five Carol Awards, the ForeWord Religious Novel of the Year, and an Audie Award.

While Melanie grew up in Ohio, she and her husband Jon now live near Portland, Oregon. She enjoys kayaking, teaching at Corban University, and reading stories with her two daughters and her little grand guy. More information about her journey is available at melaniedobson.com.

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Dear Readers,



Cottages tangled in ivy. Cemeteries hidden down back roads. Secret spaces in basements and attics. Abandoned churches and broken houses with a thousand stories woven into their walls.

Every forgotten place and hidden corridor. Every tombstone and ghost town and faded word spilled across vintage paper. All of it makes me wonder. About the people—their secrets and successes and the many challenges they faced. About who they loved and the legacy they left behind. How their choices inspired or wounded generations to come. And, most of all, how God might have worked their story together for good.

Capturing the echoes of these stories is my passion. They ring in my mind like a bell across time, captivating and stirring me to share their song. In the pages of my books, you will find secrets from the past and characters wrestling with life today. You'll find courage in the face of evil, beauty in hard places, and seemingly ordinary people who risk everything to love their neighbors.

I'm so thrilled you have decided to read *The Lost Story of Via Belle*! I hope you enjoy this journey across a 70-year span as my characters slowly unravel a terrible scheme in order to find the truth of what happened to Via Belle.

With joy,

Melanie Dobson

Q&A with the Author



What inspired this story?

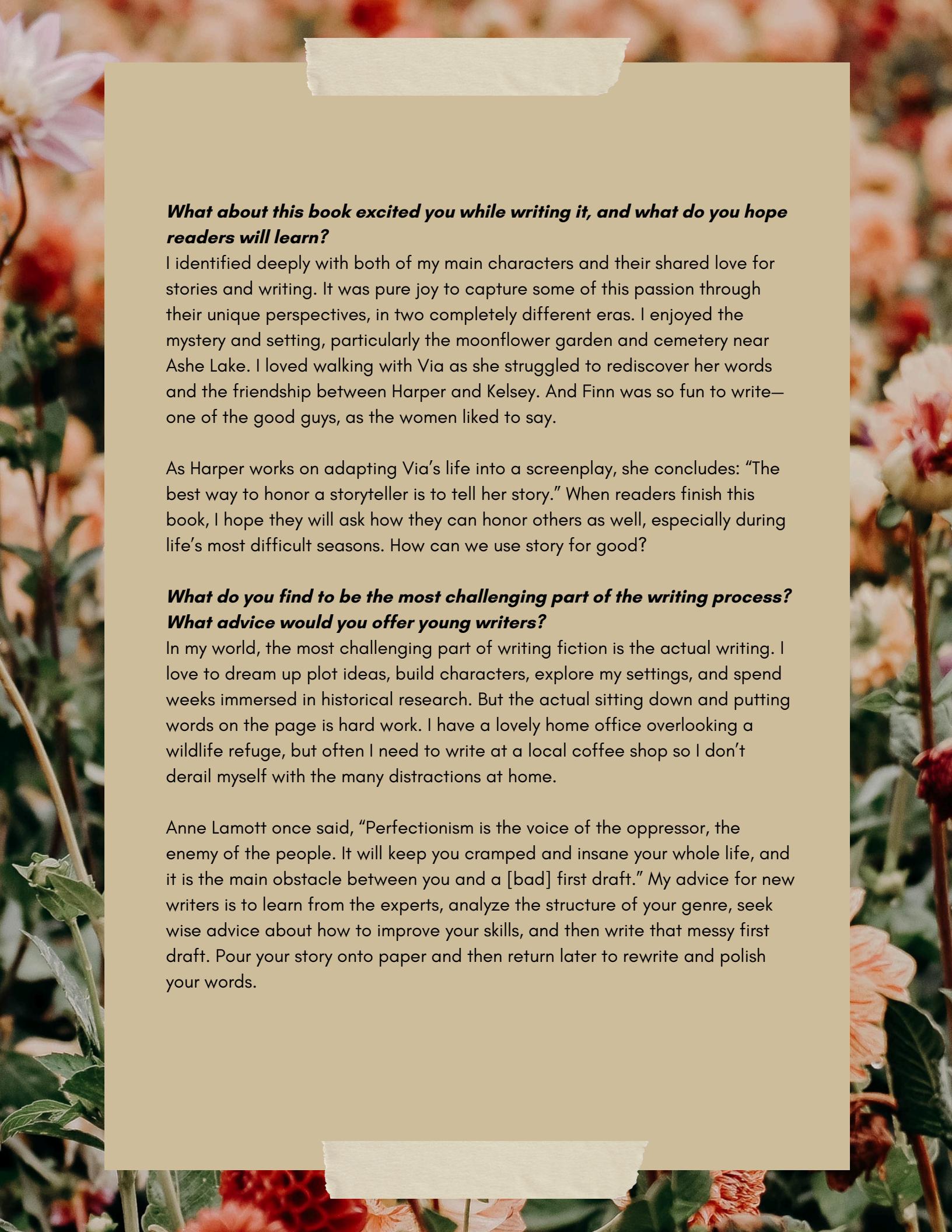
Via Belle was inspired by the life of Grace Livingston Hill, a Christian novelist I used to binge-read as a tween. Grace wrote mysterious, romantic, and often historical novels that always, always had a happy ending. I wanted to be just like her when I grew up until I discovered her real life wasn't nearly as romantic as her fiction. Grace experienced tremendous grief in marriage and was frequently criticized for writing inspirational stories during the rise of steamy pulp fiction, but she remained faithful to her calling, ultimately publishing more than a hundred novels. When she passed away in 1947, she was working on *Mary Arden*. Her daughter Ruth finished that final novel.

Once I became a novelist, I wanted to write a book inspired by the turmoil, loss, and redemption in Grace's personal story. After visiting her home and writing space in Pennsylvania, my idea grew into a dual-timeline mystery about a novelist named Via Belle who slowly realizes, after marrying her second husband, that she's been manipulated into a dangerous scheme. Sixty years after she disappears, a screenwriter named Harper determines to find out what happened to Via Belle and her last story.

What messages or themes do you focus on in this book?

As I wrote this book, I wrestled through the question of: What is truth and how is it manipulated today? With social media, photo editing, and the rise of generative AI, our culture has become masterful at creating illusion. Facades. It's easy to look perfect through a camera lens, but much of what we see online doesn't reflect the reality of what's happening off-screen.

The Lost Story of Via Belle is ultimately a novel about betrayal and reconciliation as the main characters try to unravel and escape the antagonist's conspiracy. In the end, I hope readers will be encouraged that none of us are alone in our struggles or failures, including those times we've been deceived. And that we all need a little grace.



What about this book excited you while writing it, and what do you hope readers will learn?

I identified deeply with both of my main characters and their shared love for stories and writing. It was pure joy to capture some of this passion through their unique perspectives, in two completely different eras. I enjoyed the mystery and setting, particularly the moonflower garden and cemetery near Ashe Lake. I loved walking with Via as she struggled to rediscover her words and the friendship between Harper and Kelsey. And Finn was so fun to write—one of the good guys, as the women liked to say.

As Harper works on adapting Via's life into a screenplay, she concludes: "The best way to honor a storyteller is to tell her story." When readers finish this book, I hope they will ask how they can honor others as well, especially during life's most difficult seasons. How can we use story for good?

What do you find to be the most challenging part of the writing process? What advice would you offer young writers?

In my world, the most challenging part of writing fiction is the actual writing. I love to dream up plot ideas, build characters, explore my settings, and spend weeks immersed in historical research. But the actual sitting down and putting words on the page is hard work. I have a lovely home office overlooking a wildlife refuge, but often I need to write at a local coffee shop so I don't derail myself with the many distractions at home.

Anne Lamott once said, "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a [bad] first draft." My advice for new writers is to learn from the experts, analyze the structure of your genre, seek wise advice about how to improve your skills, and then write that messy first draft. Pour your story onto paper and then return later to rewrite and polish your words.

What books or authors have shaped you recently?

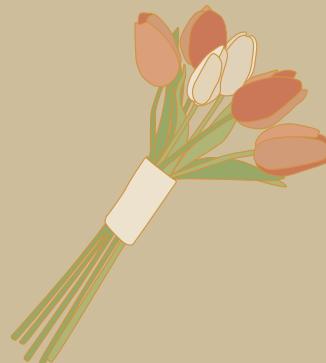
Reading is such a curious process in that every book influences and shapes me and my writing in some way. I really enjoy stories of redemption, particularly books with a compelling mystery that give value to different ages and stages of life. And books where seemingly ordinary people do something courageous to love and care for their neighbors.

Books that have impacted me recently include *Only the Beautiful* by Susan Meissner, *The Correspondent* by Virginia Evans, *84, Charing Cross Road* by Helene Hanff (the epistolary memoir that inspired Virginia's novel), and *The Collector of Burned Books* by Roseanna White. I'm in the midst of reading *Theo of Golden* by Allen Levi and have been so intrigued and inspired by Theo's generosity and hopeful outlook on a broken world.

How does faith play a role in this story?

Faith plays a significant role in both Via's and Harper's journeys. After losing her first husband, Olivia Belle is struggling in her faith and her writing. She needs to publish in order to maintain her home and support her beloved aunt, but her words have disappeared.

As the story progresses, Via ignores the warning signs of a toxic relationship that drive a wedge between her relationship with God and the people she loves. Yet in the midst of her frailty and pain, something remarkable begins to restore the broken pieces. A miracle, I like to think.



About the recipe:

In *The Lost Story of Via Belle*, Hattie enjoys making a variety of treats for Olivia and Eli. Desserts like caraway cookies borrowed from the life and novels of Grace Livingston Hill. When I was visiting Daena Creel, the author of *The Grace Livingston Hill Cookbook: Vintage Recipes from the Holiday Books*, she served me caraway cookies and hot tea. They were some of the best cookies that I've ever eaten! I hope you will enjoy them as well with a cup of coffee or tea.

Instructions:

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Measure flour into a bowl and sift in baking powder. Whisk to distribute it throughout. Add caraway seeds and whisk again. Set aside. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper.

Cream butter, then gradually beat in sugar. Add beaten egg and milk. Beat until thoroughly combined, scraping down the sides of the bowl as needed.

Give the flour mixture one last whisk and add gradually to the mixture. Mix to a firm dough. More flour may be added if dough is not firm.

Sprinkle flour on a silicone mat or pastry board. Using about one third of the dough at a time, roll into a thin, even sheet, about 1/4-inch thick. Cut out with cookie cutter and use a lifter to transfer cookies to the parchment-covered cookie sheet.

If desired, sprinkle each cookie with granulated sugar, making sure the top is evenly coated. Using colored sugar can give these gems a festive look.

Bake at 325 degrees for about 6-8 minutes until cookies are set. Watch the edges; they can burn quickly if left in the oven too long. Makes about 3 dozen cookies



Caraway Cookies

Recipe courtesy of: Daena Creel,
gracelivingstonhillcookbook.com

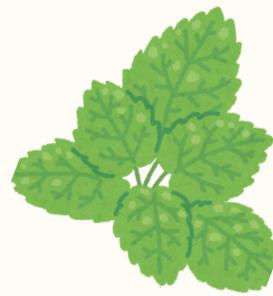
Ingredients:

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 4 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 tablespoon caraway seeds
- 1/2 cup butter, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 egg, beaten light
- 1/4 cup milk
- Granulated sugar for sprinkling, if desired.



Caraway cookies were featured in Grace Livingston Hill's novels *Cloudy Jewel*, *The Beloved Stranger*, *The Christmas Bride*, and *The Gold Shoe*.

Olivia's Mint Punch



About the recipe:

In *The Lost Story of Via Belle*, Olivia drinks pot after pot of hot tea as she writes, but she also talks about making mint punch for the children in her church. A tea party would be a delightful way to celebrate and discuss Olivia's story, but in the summer months, this raspberry mint punch recipe from 1931 would also be a fun addition.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups sugar
- 2 cups boiling water
- 1 cup red raspberries, washed
- 1 bunch of mint leaves, washed
- 2 cups lime juice
- Cracked ice

Directions:

- 1) Dissolve sugar in boiling water, then let it cool.
- 2) In the meantime, take the raspberries and crush them with the mint leaves.
- 3) Add this to the lime juice and the cooled sugar syrup, and let it stand in your ice box for several hours for the flavor to fully ripen.
- 4) When it is ice cold, strain and serve in tall glasses with cracked ice.

Raspberry Mint Crush Is a Delicious Drink

The raspberry season is so comparatively short, you should take advantage of it in as many ways as possible, and serve the luscious berry in drinks as well as in many summer dishes. To make this refreshing crush, take two cups of sugar and dissolve it in two cups of boiling water, then let it cool. In the meantime take a cup of washed and picked-over red raspberries and crush them with a bunch of washed mint leaves. Add this to two cups of lime juice and the cooled sugar syrup and let it stand in your ice box for several hours for the flavor to fully ripen. When it is ice cold, strain and serve in tall glasses with cracked ice.

Source: blog.newspapers.com/15-prohibition-drink-recipes-to-beat-the-heat/

Discussion Questions

To start your group's conversation about *The Lost Story of Via Belle*, read through these questions with your book club and share your responses together.

1. The image of moonflowers is woven throughout the story. What did they represent to you at the beginning of the book and what was their significance at the end?
2. Olivia wants to be faithful to her writing, but it seems like this gift has been taken from her. Did you ever have a season where you felt incapable of using one of your talents? How was it restored, or did you pursue something new?
3. Olivia worries that if she isn't careful, she could become the villain in her own story. Have you ever felt like you were working against your own good? What was stopping you and how did you overcome it?
4. If you could pull any character aside midway through the novel to chat, which character would you choose and what would you tell them?
5. Olivia wants to believe that Simon is a good man who loves her. What signs did she ignore or miss along the way that he might not be the man she imagined? Why did Olivia choose to overlook Hattie's and Reverend Donahue's concerns and justify some of Simon's bewildering actions?
6. Izzy also has big plans for her future as Mrs. Simon Farrow. In the beginning, she and Simon deceive each other to get what they want, but as the story progresses, Izzy begins to change. How does this transformation impact her and her family?
7. As Olivia plants her moonflowers, she reflects: "The seeds only needed a scratch, the smallest of wounds, to... prompt them to grow. Then they'd bloom boldly in the moonlight." Has a wound in your life ever prompted you to grow?



8. After Harper loses her mother, she remembers their time together by reading some of her mom's favorite books. Do you have a unique way of honoring or remembering a loved one?

9. Kelsey and Sissie both encourage Harper to write a story from her heart. Has a book or movie ever moved you deeply? If so, which one and why? If you ever wrote a story from your heart, what would you write?

10. Finn and Harper have opposing goals when they first meet, but over time, their goals slowly merge. How do they ultimately compromise in order to encourage each other?

11. While Olivia never confronts Simon directly about the many layers of his deceit, her words ultimately contribute to his demise. How did the end of this novel mirror the end of Harper's original story for Miles and Via Belle's Moonflower Lake?

12. In the last chapter, Harper hopes that God will allow her mom to peek between the curtain separating their worlds to see all that He has mended. Can you think of a time in your life when a difficult situation was transformed into something good?

Your book group questions: ↗

Jot down some questions you want to ask in your book club.



More about Grace Livingston Hill

I hope you enjoyed this novel inspired by the life and writing of romance novelist Grace Livingston Hill. I first discovered Grace's books in my younger years when I would pedal my red Huffy down our country road in Central Ohio to meet up with the bookmobile. I'd fill up my white wicker basket with a trove of treasure and travel all sorts of places for the next week through story.

Happiness Hill. Spice Box. The Enchanted Barn. Grace swept me away through her compelling history, vibrant descriptions, and authentic dialogue about faith.

Often, there was a mystery. Always a chaste romance. Best of all, while many of the popular novels weren't the best choice for a preteen, I was allowed to read all of Grace's work. And I wanted to be just like her when I grew up.

Now here I am—(mostly) grown. Looking back, I've realized that Grace's stories not only inspired me to write, but they also encouraged an entire generation of young women to tell stories, many of them now best-selling novelists. Grace's life, however, was not always the proverbial peaches and cream. After the sudden death of her first husband, Reverend Franklin Hill, her writing income became vital in providing for her two daughters and her mother. Grace wed again in 1904, but sadly, her second marriage ended in a thirty-year separation.

Even though her journey was hard, Grace found joy through her faith in a saving God, and this passion poured out in her writing. Near the end of her life, she said: "I feel that there is enough sadness and sorrow in the world. So I try to end all my books as beautifully as possible, since that is God's way and the best way."



Continued on next page

Grace received a lot of criticism for her sanguine plots, but she wrote courageously and consistently until her death in 1947, a partially written manuscript awaiting its end on her desk. Her daughter Ruth finished *Mary Arden*.

What a legacy Grace left! Not only in the lives she impacted but also in the world of inspirational fiction, writing more than a hundred books as Grace Livingston Hill, Grace Livingston Hill Lutz, and Marcia Macdonald. Although she didn't win the esteemed awards of her era, five of her stories were adapted into silent films, and young writers like James Michener would stop by her home in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania to talk books.

I do hope that Grace has caught a glimpse of the many lives changed as a result of her work along with the many writing careers launched after she paved the way.

Thank you for reading this novel inspired by one of my literary heroes! I hope you are inspired by Grace's story as well. If you want to read more about her, check out gracelivingstonhill.com.

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With the warm nostalgia, charm, and intrigue of a Grace Livingston Hill novel but infused with a voice and a twist all her own, Melanie Dobson invites us into a world of broken dreams and safe landings. An enrapturing story of courage, *The Lost Story of Via Belle* is a hope-filled haven for the weary heart.

Amanda Dykes, winner of a Christy Book of the Year award

The Lost Story of Via Belle has everything a compelling dual-timeline needs: mystery, suspense, and strong heroines who stand up for themselves and those they love. The present and past slowly weave together to form a satisfying conclusion, one I'm still thinking about well past the last page. Don't miss this one.

T.I. Lowe, award-winning author of *Lowcountry Lost*

Melanie Dobson delivers again with a haunting and redemptive tale that lingers long after the final page. With graceful prose and a stirring dual-timeline narrative, *The Lost Story of Via Belle* shines light on buried family secrets, deep wounds, and the enduring hope that rises from the ashes of betrayal. A powerful novel of resilience, perfect for fans of Lisa Wingate and Susan Meissner.

Jenelle Hovde, author of *No Stone Unturned*

Research Trip

Grace Livingston Hill's House



Hasn't changed
in 100 years



Research Trip Pictures
from Pennsylvania

melaniedobson.com/research/the-lost-story-of-via-belle/

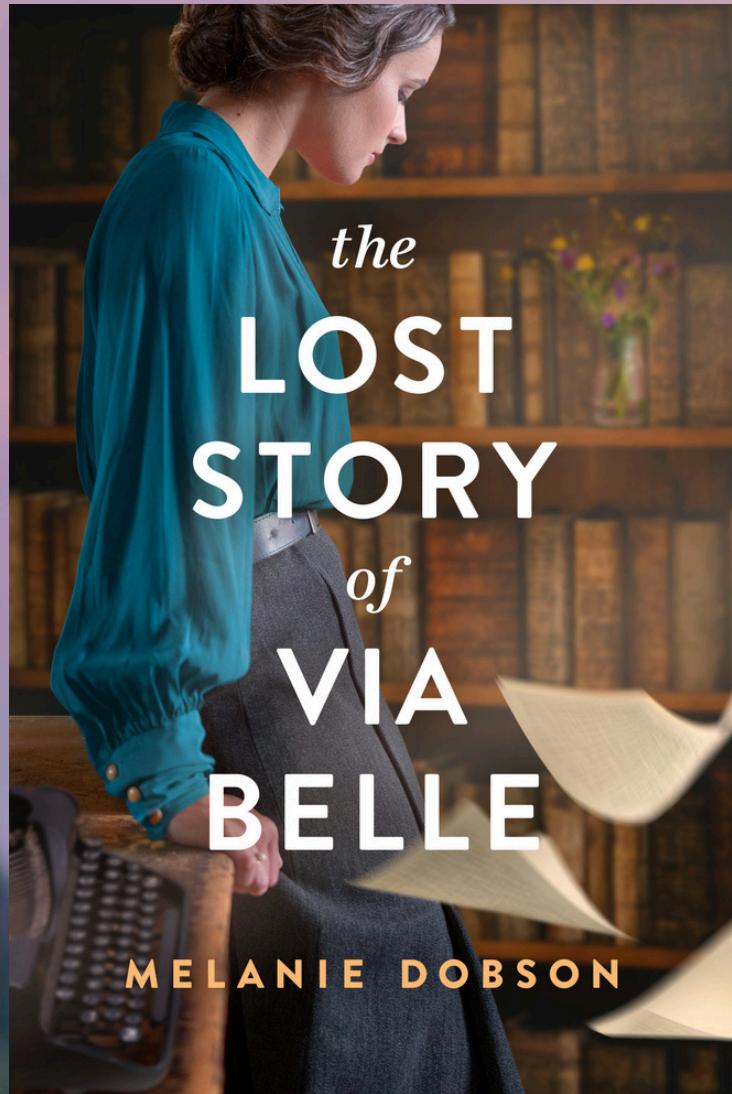
Book Barn →



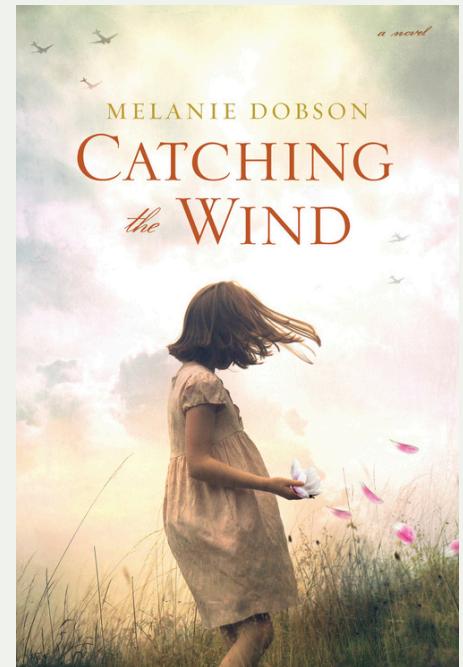
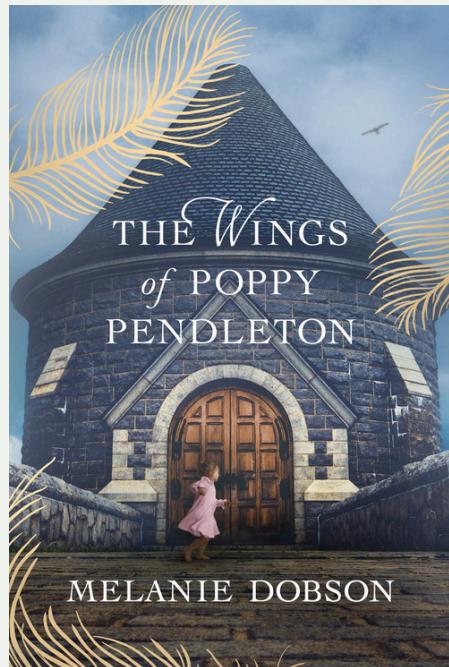
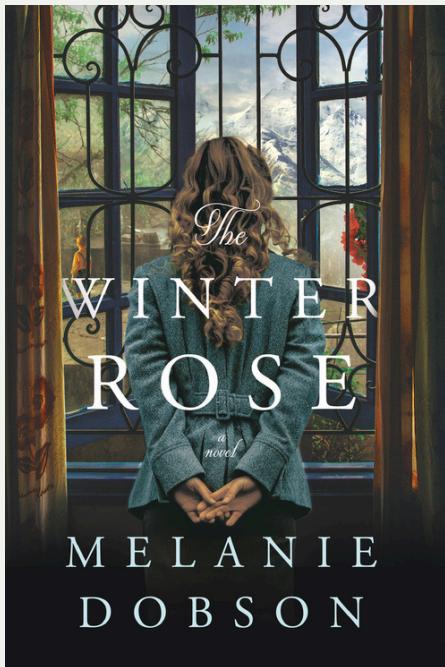
MY BOOK CLUB NOTES

DATE

Thanks for choosing



for your book club!



Other Books by Melanie Dobson
melaniedobson.com



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