

METTE IVIE HARRISON



THE
BISHOP'S
WIFE

A NOVEL

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SOHO CRIME PRIORITY TITLE

THE BISHOP'S WIFE

Mette Ivie Harrison

In the predominantly Mormon city of Draper, Utah, some seemingly perfect families have deadly secrets.

Inspired by an actual crime and written by a practicing Mormon, *The Bishop's Wife* (Soho Crime | December 2014) is both a fascinating look at the lives of modern Mormons as well as a grim and cunningly twisted mystery.

A Mormon community in Utah is rocked when a young father named Jared Helm announces that his wife has run off on him. Marriage in the Church of Latter-Day Saints is an eternal affair, where families are sealed to each other for eternity, not just until death “parts” them. Carrie Helm, by all accounts, was not only a good wife and neighbor but a loving mother as well. She was also deeply troubled, according to Jared, and suffered from mental illness and profound mood swings.

Linda Wallheim, the wife of the ward's bishop and mother of five boys, doesn't think Jared's story adds up. Against the instructions of her husband, she begins to snoop into the Helms' affairs. Linda has long been wary of the secrecy and patriarchal structure of the church, not to mention more than a few of the rituals she believes have outlived their time. Now her doubts are too troubling to push aside: Is the patriarchy so powerful that a man is going to get away with murder? And if the ward was unable to protect Carrie Helm from an abusive husband, how can she keep other women in her ward safe?

While the police respect the need for discretion and privacy, Linda does not. But what her de facto investigation uncovers is a series of secrets, one stranger than the next, that threaten not just her own safety but the trust of the entire community.

Inspired in part by the strange, sad story of the real-life disappearance of Utah mother Susan Powell, Mette Ivie Harrison's mystery debut asks big questions about the nature of faith, the rights of women in a patriarchic religion, and what it means to be a wife and mother.

***The Bishop's Wife* is a rare insider's look at one of the US's most secretive religious groups and announces a fresh and fascinating new voice in mystery fiction.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mette Ivie Harrison grew up in a two-hundred-year-old farmhouse in central New Jersey in a family with eleven children, a dog, a pony, and lots of chickens. She moved to the more suburban Utah city of Provo at age ten, where her father taught computer science at Brigham Young University.

In 1985, when she was in high school, she spent a year abroad at a German gymnasium. As a result of that experience in Germany and other parts of Europe, Mette was able to graduate from Brigham Young University with a Master's Degree in German Literature in 1990, when she was nineteen.

She went on to receive a PhD from Princeton University in 1995 in Germanic Languages and Literatures with a dissertation on the female bildungsroman of the 18th century. Mette had struggled with the Mormon church's position on women when she was at BYU, but she was surprised to discover that the church's sexism was mild in comparison to what she experienced in academia once she left Utah.

Mette met her husband, Matt, on the high school swim team, and never dated anyone else seriously. Matt went on a mission to Haiti from 1988 to 1990, and shortly after he returned they were married. Matt trained in physics at Rutgers University and now works as a systems engineer with Moore Good Ideas.

In 1994, Mette gave birth to the first of the couple's five children. She quit her work as an adjunct professor at BYU in 1997 to spend more time with her children and work on her fiction writing career. Two years later, in 1999, she sold her first young adult novel, *The Monster in Me*, about a young teen girl who is fostered by a Mormon family in Heber, Utah. Mette has since published seven young adult novels, including *Mira*, *Mirror* and *The Princess and the Hound*. She has also published *Ironmom*, a memoir about the loss of her sixth child in 2005, and the subsequent training for an Ironman

competition, which brought her some semblance of sanity.

Since 2006, Mette has completed four full Ironman competitions, more than one hundred total races, and is ranked 144 for her age group nationally. She also trains her husband, Matt, and her children. All but the youngest have competed in at least half-marathon distance races, swim well, and volunteer at local races. Two have completed marathons, and two have completed Olympic distance races. Mette trains an average of three hours a day and her PR for a half-Ironman (1.2 mile swim, 56 mile bike, 13.1 mile run) is now 5:10.

An active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Mette has served as Gospel Doctrine teacher, as a member of the Primary Presidency, as an aid for an autistic child, as a Primary instructor, and as a leader for 8 to 11-year-old girls. Currently, Mette works in her ward nursery and her husband serves with the scouts. Mette's five children, now ages eleven to twenty, are a dynamic group with a wide range of talents and attitudes toward faith.

You can find Mette on the web at www.metteivieharrison.com. She is on Twitter at @metteharrison and has a Tumblr, metteivieharrison.tumblr.com. She also posts on Youtube with her "Ugly Ironman" vlogs.

An Interview with Mette Ivie Harrison by her Soho Editor Juliet Grames

***Note from Juliet:** For some background for readers, I should mention here that Mette and I first met several years ago at a conference called Sirens, which is devoted to female writers and female representation in science fiction and fantasy literature. I have to tell you, I never expected a crime novel to come to me out of that conference, which I was only attending as a sci-fi fan! Mette, who has published many young adult fantasy novels, was on numerous panels talking about themes that appealed to me a lot, and which are as relevant to the crime fiction genre as they are to sci-fi and fantasy: things like representation of women in genre fiction, gender roles, female heroes, and female villains.*

Juliet: Mette, I am so glad that we met at that conference and that I was the editor you thought of when you decided to submit this book to publishers. What made you want to write a crime novel?

Mette: It was more a case of me trying to find a format to fit my thoughts about Mormonism, motherhood, grief, being a woman, and just life in general. I had never written a crime novel before, but I had tried an alternate history fantasy version of Mormonism, with vampires and werewolves. When that didn't seem to be working, I switched to a more realistic contemporary voice, and the story started to come together around a female detective character.

Juliet: I know that the plot of *The Bishop's Wife* was partially inspired by the real-life disappearance of Susan Powell. Can you tell us a little about that case, and how it affected your community?

Mette: Susan Cox Powell was a Mormon wife and mother of two young boys who went missing mysteriously in December of 2009. Her husband, Josh, took the kids out in the minivan in the middle of the night far from home on a supposed campout. He claimed that she had left him while he and the boys were gone and that he had no idea where she was. Of course, everyone suspected that he had murdered her. Her parents were sure she hadn't simply gone off with another man, as Josh claimed. Then her journals were uncovered—they spoke about her fear of her husband, her desire for a divorce, the controlling aspects of her marriage, and on and on. But her body was never found, and so Josh, while suspected of her murder, was never charged. When his father was discovered to have illegal pornography on his computer, the children were

temporarily taken away and placed with Susan's parents, but they were allowed a visitation with Josh on February 5, 2012, when he blew up his house in an act of murder-suicide. A year later, Josh's brother Michael also committed suicide; police suspect he was an accomplice in the murder of Susan Powell.

Of course, this was a terrible tragedy, and I spoke to no one who thought that Powell was innocent at any time, or who was not disgusted at the eventual cowardly way he chose to end his life and take his innocent sons with him. That said, I personally wondered a lot about how Mormonism influenced the personalities of those behind the case, about how long Susan Powell might have stayed with a man she knew was dangerous in part because she believed she was bound to him eternally and that her sons were, as well. Of course, many women who are in abusive relationships are reluctant to end them for fear of retribution, but it seemed to me that Mormonism, with our belief in the eternal family, might have made it even more difficult.

I also wondered about the way that Josh Powell was treated within the church. He was never excommunicated or disfellowshipped, and though he did move out of his original ward and, I believe, stopped attending church, I imagined that the community might have been split on how such a man should be treated: with compassion as a sinner, or with disdain as an unrepentant murderer.

Juliet: Is the character of Linda Wallheim, the eponymous bishop's wife, inspired by anyone in particular? How autobiographical is her character?

Mette: Linda is autobiographical in some respects. Much of her iconoclasm as a Mormon woman is mine. However, there are plenty of ways in which I am not Linda and she is not me. Linda is a mother of only sons, and I have three daughters; though I share her discomfort with some social situations with women, I have wonderful, deeply connected relationships with my daughters.

Linda is also not a woman who has a career outside the home. She is self-conscious of her body in ways I hope feel authentic to many women. She is about ten years older than I am; she married later in life than I did and feels out of place in Mormonism because of that. I feel out of place, on the other hand because I hold a PhD from Princeton University, am a nationally ranked triathlete, and have a career as an author that keeps me away from home.

When I wrote Linda, I imagined two women I know quite well. One is in some ways a very typical Mormon mother and grandmother. But she also rides a motorcycle, has a pilot's license, and went back to school to get her PhD in her 50s. She teaches college now and holds her own in any argument. The second woman died several years ago, at quite a young age, of breast cancer. She and her husband invited us to dinner when we moved into their ward, and we had a long conversation afterward. Her husband was encouraging her to get a job now that her children were nearly all in school and she had more time. She was rather pointed in her response to this: She had spent all her life becoming a very good mother, and now that she was one, why should she train to be something else, as well? I have thought often of that response, which I think resonates with many women who are stay-at-home moms in the church. It isn't precisely what I think about motherhood, but it's a way for me to get out of my own views and deal with more traditional Mormon womanhood.

The book is dedicated to my dear friend Sue Gong, whom I met in Princeton as part of a book club. Sue is a thoroughly devout member of the church who manages to talk and think about women's issues and about doubt and faith in an intellectual way that is thoughtful and believing. I admire her enormously, and I think the best part of Linda is when I make her more like Sue than like myself.

Juliet: One of Linda Wallheim's greatest struggles throughout the novel is her crushing, sometimes paralyzing, grief over a baby who died at birth twenty-five years before the story starts. As a mother who has lost a child, you must have been very brave, it seems to me, to create this fictional scenario. Did you struggle writing this aspect of your character? How much of your own experience did you incorporate in Linda's?

Mette: I have borrowed some of my own experiences with the tragic loss of my sixth child in 2012, my daughter Mary Mercy, rather directly for part of Linda's backstory. Mercy was almost two full weeks late, and I simply woke one morning to find she was gone. Like Linda, I have never had any answers about why Mercy died. We chose not to have an autopsy done, largely because we did not feel it would yield any answers. She might have died because of placental malfunction or there might have been a genetic defect. The midwife and the doctor disagreed on this point, though I suspect their disagreement had at root an attempt to convince my husband

and me as parents that we were not at fault and that there was nothing we could have done.

Unlike the Wallheims, we Harrisons have treated her as a member of the family. My husband and I buried her and bought our own plots at the same time, our first real touch with death as a family. Our other children spoke at the funeral and still talk about missing their little sister. We are fairly open about this aspect of our lives, again unlike Linda and Kurt.

I have found it to be therapeutic to write about the experience of losing a child, but I still find it difficult to speak about it in public or even in private. The early drafts of the book had much less of Linda's experience losing a child, but the more I wrote about her, the more I connected with her as someone who had experienced what I had.

Juliet: I know Linda Wallheim is going to come back in at least one more book, since I've already contracted it from you! Can you tell us a little bit about issues you're thinking about exploring in future "bishop's wife" books?

Mette: I have some ideas for books about sister missionaries in the church, about the use of midwives in Utah, about black people and the Mormon priesthood, about the legacy of polygamy, and about LGBTQ Mormon youth, who have the highest rate of suicide in the country, and who are being kicked out of supposedly loving church homes. Of course, I can't have every murder happen in Linda's home ward, so her grown children are going to be a useful resource for exporting her talents to other parts of Utah, and to other areas of the Mormon world.

Read an Excerpt

The police served a warrant on the Helms' home Friday morning. I got a panicked call from Jared and rushed over. There were a dozen policemen in uniforms already moving through the house. Jared was in the kitchen, holding Kelly in his arms. He was weeping again, and she looked like a scared rabbit.

"You can both come to our house. There's no reason you have to be here while the police search," I said. I looked around and found a plainclothes policeman who looked like he might be in charge. "Can he leave? Does he have to watch this?"

"As long as we know where he is, in case there are questions," was the answer. I wondered if he meant in case they found evidence enough to arrest Jared on the spot.

"You take her," said Jared, standing up and pushing Kelly toward me. He let go of her hand and put it into mine. "I'll stay here."

I hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"I need to be here," he said. "This is our home. I'll stay here to watch over it. But Kelly shouldn't have to worry. Take good care of her?"

I nodded. "Of course I will. We'll have fun together, right, Kelly?"

She nodded at me, then tucked her head into my pant leg.

As we walked back across and up the street, I noticed more than one curious neighbor poking a head out, taking in the police vehicles in the Helms' driveway and along the sidewalk. I felt a pang for Jared Helm. No matter what he had done, he was still a scared young man trying to do what was right for his daughter.

When I turned back at the front door of my own house, I could see several white-gloved policemen in the Helms' garage lifting the trunk of the family car. Kelly caught a glimpse of this, too. "What are they doing? Are they going to take our car away?" she asked.

"No," I assured her. "They're just looking for your mother."

"But she's not there," said Kelly insistently. "She's gone away."

"Yes, sweetheart. But she didn't say goodbye to anyone, so they're worried about her. They want to talk to her and make sure she's all right."

"She said goodbye to me," said Kelly.

My heart nearly stopped at that. I pushed the door open and pulled Kelly inside. "Come on inside to the kitchen," I said. What did Kelly know about all of this? No one had ever thought to ask her, it seemed. Or Kelly hadn't felt comfortable enough to answer.

"Why don't you tell me about your mommy?" I said, trying to move to the larger questions cautiously.

"Mommy used to make brownies with me when she was feeling sad," said Kelly.

"Oh?" I asked. I set her on the bar to watch me. Then I got out all the ingredients to make brownies, hoping it would make Kelly feel more comfortable, and possibly jostle loose some memories. I felt like I was no better than the policemen who were even now poking into her underwear drawer, and her mother's, as well. Prying out secrets from a child—how low did that make me? But I wanted to know the truth.

“She loveded me,” said Kelly.

“Of course she did.” I hugged the little girl hard and set the butter I’d softened in the microwave in front of her, along with the sugar and cocoa, and asked her to stir it. I figured I would have a mess to clean up afterward, but Kelly had been trained well. She dug in with the wooden spoon and stood on the chair I pulled up for her, using the full weight of her body to cream the ingredients.

“So,” I said. “You said your mommy said goodbye to you before she left?” I was treading on dangerous ground here. What if Jared realized what Kelly might say and came rushing over to take her back with him?

“She came into my bedroom and kissed me goodnight. She said to be a good girl for Daddy,” said Kelly.

But that could mean anything. “Well, I’m sure you are a good girl,” I said, hoping for more.

Kelly looked up at me, her messy, curly hair now also dusted in flour and cocoa. “I’m not going to run away like Mommy. Daddy says I have to promise not to run away.”

“Your daddy is right about that, Kelly. You shouldn’t run away. Did you see your mom packing anything before she left? Are you sure she ran away?”

“Daddy said she ran away,” said Kelly. “But I only saw when she got out of the car.”

“She got out of the car?” I echoed.

“Daddy thought I was asleep. He told me to go back to sleep in the car, but when it stopped, I wokeded up,” said Kelly.

“And what happened then?” I said, stirring the brownie batter far past what it needed. This was not what Jared Helm had told me and Kurt that morning weeks ago, but I couldn’t react angrily. I didn’t want to lose the sense of ease that Kelly felt in this familiar rhythm.

“Mommy got out of the car. I heard her thump on the ground.”

I went cold at the childish description. “Then what?” I asked.

“Then Daddy said goodbye to her, too, and he got back in the car,” she said simply. I felt terrible pumping information from a five-year-old child, especially this very vulnerable one. If the police had done it, someone would have cried foul. But I wasn’t hurting her, was I? And I needed to know what she had heard exactly. “Where were you? Do you remember anything about the place where she got out of the car?”

“It was dark,” said Kelly helpfully. “And cold.”

“But were there any lights outside?”

“I don’t think so,” said Kelly.

“And your mother didn’t kiss you goodbye in the car?” I asked.

Kelly shook her head. “I was trying to be asleep. Daddy said to sleep.”

“Did you hear her say anything to your dad?”

“She was mad at him. She didn’t talk to him when she was mad.”

Yes, that would be a useful survival strategy for a woman who had been abused by her husband. Or maybe Carrie didn’t say anything to Kelly because she couldn’t. I wondered if Carrie Helm had been alive during this car ride Jared hadn’t mentioned to the police.

READING GROUP GUIDE QUESTIONS

- Linda tells us that Kurt believes “any marriage can be saved with enough work and help from God” (page 7). Linda, meanwhile, believes that not every marriage should last forever. We see many different kinds of marriages in this book: Linda and Kurt’s; Carrie and Jared Helm’s; Anna and Tobias Torstensen’s; Gwen and Brad Ferris’s; Aaron and Judy Weston’s; the somewhat controversial new marriage of Cheri Tate’s daughter, Perdita, who was not allowed to marry in the temple. Which of the marriages we see in the book seem like strong ones, which seem flawed, and which seem unsalvageable? How does the Mormon concept of marriage for eternity—as opposed to “till death do us part”—affect the characters in the story?
- Kurt asks Linda not to get involved in the Helms’ private affairs, but she refuses to stop snooping and asking questions. Do you believe she overstepped? Do you believe, in the end, she helped or hurt the Helms? What about her snooping into the Torstensen’s’ past? Did Linda’s involvement change the course of any events? To be a responsible bishop’s wife, is it a de facto part of her job to go to these kinds of measures to try to protect her ward?
- Although Linda is a pillar of her religious community, behind closed doors she has a complicated relationship with her faith. What do you think about that relationship?
- Linda says, “We say that mothering is ‘natural,’ but it isn’t really. Animals in the wild feed their children and carry them around—most of the time. They also sometimes eat them. That is just as natural, as far as I could see” (page 223). We see many different kinds of mothers in this book: Linda Wallheim, with her five sons and her deceased baby daughter, who haunts her more than two decades after her death; Anna Torstensen, stepmother of two boys, who never feels like she quite has maternal rights to them; Carrie Helm, a mother who chooses to leave her young daughter; Judy Weston, who prioritizes loyalty to her husband over loyalty to her children. How do their parenting styles and philosophies compare? Which of their choices are unpalatable or unforgivable? Do you believe that mothering comes naturally, or do you agree with Linda that there is no such guarantee? Are there any hard rules to parenting that should be universally applied to all families?

- Linda says, “Mormons have to have absurdly high standards. [For example,] other people try not to drink to excess. Mormons refuse to drink at all” (15). What do you think about the social and religious standards Linda holds herself to? Or the standards her community holds? Do any of them seem absurdly high to you? Do any of them seem to be not high enough?

- What are some of the specific social pressures on women in Linda’s ward and community? What are some of the specific social pressures on men? What do you think about the gender roles we see represented in the book? Do they seem more diverse, or less, or about the same as in mainstream American culture?

- Over the course of the book, Linda begins to see all the men around her, even her own sons, as potentially dangerous because of the surprising things she has learned about families she thought she understood. At certain points, she even jumps to conclusions about people that turn out to be far from true. Do you think it is wiser for a woman in her position to a) assume everyone is dangerous, so she can be vigilant and protective, or b) assume the best of people and not let her relationships be colored by a constant stream of accusatory thoughts? Is it possible to balance a protective nature with a welcoming, generous one?

- What do you think is the true story of Helena Torstensen’s murder? What do you think of Anna’s reactions to the unfolding drama over the course of the book? What do you think of Linda’s?

- Linda has spent the last 25 years being a full-time mom. She says, “I was good at what I did as a mother. It was what I had spent my whole life doing. I suppose that was the real reason that I hadn’t gone back to school or found a job yet. It felt like it would be saying that being a mother wasn’t enough.” What do you think about this statement? Do we give the job of motherhood the dignity it deserves?



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