



Author C.H. Armstrong on her novel, *The Edge of Nowhere*

COB: How long has it been since you've lived in Oklahoma?

ARMSTRONG: Twenty-three years. My husband is from Bartlesville, and we met in college at OU. On the day we got married in October of 1992, he was offered a “three-year” position at IBM in Rochester, MN. It was only supposed to be three years, so I said yes. I could do three years, right? Well, three years turned into five, which turned into ten, then twenty, and here I am 23 years later (still married to Troy) with two children who both have Minnesota accents and no real plans in place to move back home.

COB: Where in Oklahoma are you from and/or have you lived in the past?

ARMSTRONG: I was born and raised in El Reno, which is about thirty minutes West of Oklahoma City.

COB: Where do you reside now?

ARMSTRONG: Rochester, Minn.

COB: Do you still visit Oklahoma/Bartlesville, and what are some things you plan to do while you're here on your book tour?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, as often as possible. My husband's parents still live in Bartlesville, and most of my extended family still live in the Tulsa and OKC areas. So, until the last few years, I've made it home for 1-2 weeks every July. These last ten years have been at about two-year intervals.

I wish I had time to do all the things I want to do while I'm back in Oklahoma because I miss it so much it hurts. The biggest thing I want to do is spend some time with my extended family — my aunts, uncles and cousins — who still live here. Growing up, my family was very tight-knit and there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't see somebody from my family. So being so far away has been really difficult, and I want to spend any extra time I have available with my family. Beyond that, and if I have any extra time, I'd like to go back and walk around the OU campus. It's changed so much since my husband and I graduated in '92.

COB: Can you tell us a little about your husband and his family members who still live in Bartlesville?

ARMSTRONG: Sure. My husband is Troy D. Armstrong, a 1987 graduate of Bartlesville High School. His parents are T. Doyle and Nancy Armstrong, who are nearly 50-year residents of Bartlesville. Funny enough, my middle brother also married a girl from Bartlesville. My former sister-in-law (we still claim each other as sisters) is Kathy Berg, and she graduated in 1979 from Sooner High School. Her mother, and two siblings still live in Bartlesville.

COB: What inspired you to write *The Edge of Nowhere*?

ARMSTRONG: The idea for the novel came as a result of trying to understand who my grandmother was before her death. She passed away when I was in my early 20s, so I knew her well and grew up with her as a very big part of my life; but we were never close. I never really knew who she was, she never talked about her past experiences, and we didn't really have that close grandmother-granddaughter relationship that I'd always longed for. When she died, I had this need to understand who she was and why our relationship wasn't as fulfilling as I'd hoped.

While my grandmother never talked about her history, her children — my aunts and uncles, and their cousins — sometimes did, so my generation grew up on the stories of the many hardships our family endured during the 1930s Dust Bowl. I've always thought those stories were so interesting and said a lot about who my grandmother probably was.

A friend of mine (another published author) suggested that these stories would make a compelling novel and might also help me to understand my grandmother better. She encouraged me to put myself in my grandmother's shoes, so to speak, and try to discover who she was by imagining how I would handle the situations she found herself in. She encouraged me to look at the "stack of cards" she'd been dealt and ask myself, "Okay, then ... what do you do? How do you survive?"

I couldn't get the thought out of my head, so I sat down with a series of stories and facts I knew to be true, and then let my imagination take over. The result is not only *The Edge of Nowhere*, but a better understanding of who my grandmother might've been.

So, it began more as an exercise in understanding and healing, rather than with the active intention to publish a book. I went into the writing frustrated and maybe a little bit angry, and I finished the process with a better understanding of what may've motivated my grandmother. More than that, I walked away with a deep respect for the hardships she endured and the decisions she made. She raised 14 children mostly by herself during one

of the most horrific eras in our state's history, and those 14 children grew into wonderful adults who worked hard to keep their children and grandchildren close to the family. So now — 80 years later — I'm part of this big extended family that is as close to the second and third cousins as we are to the first cousins. We're all cousins regardless of how many times removed.

COB: Is this your first book?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. It is not only my first book, but my first attempt at fiction. I've always written non-fiction (magazine articles, technical writing, process documentation, press releases), but I'd never had the desire to write fiction. Since then, however, I've found a true love for fiction writing and have written my second novel — a young adult realistic fiction title about a homeless girl and her family — and I'm working on a third manuscript at the moment. The (young adult) novel, *In My Shoes*, is currently on submission through my agent, Tina Schwartz at The Purcell Agency, and I'm hopeful that this next one will be soon as well.

COB: How long did it take you to write *The Edge of Nowhere*?

ARMSTRONG: Five weeks, which is crazy-fast. But I had all of the stories in my head and knew exactly where they went chronologically. I just needed to write them down.

COB: What else have you done professionally?

ARMSTRONG: I'm a columnist for Rochester Women magazine in Rochester, Minn., but have spent most of the last 23 years using my journalism degree writing for various non profits.

COB: Describe the main character in your book and what inspired her.

ARMSTRONG: Victoria Hastings Harrison Greene was inspired by my own re-imagining of who my grandmother may've been. The story begins when she's only eight and extends until her mid-30s. She's a young woman who's seen too much in too short of a time. She's watched those she loves die too soon, and then she finds herself in the position of raising nine children entirely alone in the midst of the one-two punch that was the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Times are hard for everyone, but they were especially hard for a young woman alone ... not to mention one alone with so many mouths to feed, and virtually no support or resources to help. To see her children fed and sheltered, she makes very difficult decisions that will haunt her the remainder of her life and leave her both revered and feared by her grandchildren.

COB: What is your favorite thing about *The Edge of Nowhere*?

ARMSTRONG: I think my favorite thing(s) was being able to retell true family stories. In a way, it sort of immortalizes the experiences of my grandmother and her children. I

loved being able to reimagine my dad and his siblings as children, and watch the personalities that I know today as they emerged from the page. And I love that some of the true stories are so unbelievable that I had to tame them down some to be believable. Some of the true events are so jaw-dropping that I get great enjoyment out of revealing the fact from fiction to readers when asked.

COB: What was the most difficult part to write?

ARMSTRONG: Three paragraphs from the end of the book, the main character talks about her legacy. I felt gutted when I wrote that passage, and I feel raw every time I read it now. For the reader, that one paragraph reflects everything about me as a person and my relationship with my extended family. And it reveals how I ended up feeling about my grandmother after writing this book. The book isn't about me at all, but that one paragraph is a glimpse deep into my soul.

COB: Do you have a structured writing routine/schedule, or do you write when inspired or as ideas come?

ARMSTRONG: I really wish I had any structure at all, but I don't. Some writers have scheduled writing time where they pound out 1500 or more words every day. For me, that feels grueling and stunts my creativity. When I have an idea, I just sit down and write. Sometimes that means that I write all day, every day, and even into the wee hours of the morning until I feel drained and the idea is all recorded. And then I might not write anything more creative than a magazine article for another month.

I think that's why both of my books were written so quickly — because I try not to force the creativity, but also don't staunch its flow when it's ready to come out. With both books, the ideas just kept coming so fast that I had difficulty keeping up with them. I'd take a short break, but then had to go back to writing because the ideas wouldn't stop.

COB: Is your book tour just starting or has it been ongoing for a while? If you've been touring, what has that been like? How are people responding to the book?

ARMSTRONG: While I've done a dozen or more presentations and book signings in Minnesota since its release in January, I really feel like Oklahoma is my actual "tour." Oklahoma is the setting for the book. It's where people understand the background and "know" the characters. And it's also where at least half of my readers have come from. So I'm really excited to begin the Oklahoma tour because it's where I consider "home."

COB: What do you plan to do next, or what would you like to focus on in the future?

ARMSTRONG: Just keep on writing as the ideas come to me. As I mentioned, I've finished a second novel and am working on a third. And then I have at least three more

strong ideas just dying to be committed to a manuscript. So creating the lives of new characters will likely be my focus for at least a little while.

Helpful links

Publisher: Penner Publishing (www.pennerpublishing.com)

Publication date: January 19, 2016

Synopsis and the people who inspired the characters:

<http://charmstrongbooks.com/coming-january-2016/>

Official video trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFLjvDyuVf0>