

A woman's profile is shown in silhouette on the left side of the cover, looking towards the right. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a city, likely Rome, with a river and a bridge visible in the foreground. The title text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

From
SAND
and
ASH

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FROM SAND AND ASH

Italy, 1943—Germany occupies much of the country, placing the Jewish population in grave danger during World War II.

As children, Eva Rosselli and Angelo Bianco were raised like family but divided by circumstance and religion. As the years go by, the two find themselves falling in love. But the church calls to Angelo and, despite his deep feelings for Eva, he chooses the priesthood.

Now, more than a decade later, Angelo is a Catholic priest and Eva is a woman with nowhere to turn. With the Gestapo closing in, Angelo hides Eva within the walls of a convent, where Eva discovers she is just one of many Jews being sheltered by the Catholic Church.

But Eva can't quietly hide, waiting for deliverance, while Angelo risks everything to keep her safe. With the world at war and so many in need, Angelo and Eva face trial after trial, choice after agonizing choice, until fate and fortune finally collide, leaving them with the most difficult decision of all.



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Genre: Historical Fiction, Inspirational
Recommended for ages: +16



ATTENTION

**THIS DOCUMENT INCLUDES SPECIFICS YOU MIGHT WANT TO AVOID
UNTIL YOU HAVE FINISHED READING THE BOOK.**

CHARACTERS

The story is centered around Eva Rosselli and Angelo Bianco. Do you consider them the only main characters in this novel or do you think there are others who play a pivotal and influential role? If so, who and why?

Do you think the characters were realistically portrayed? Describe these character's personalities.

How does the way the characters see themselves, differ from how others see them? How do you see the various characters?

What did you think about Eva's attraction to Angelo? What drew her in?

What is motivating the actions of the characters in the story? What do the sub-characters want from the main character and what does the main character want with them?

Were there any moments where you disagreed with the choices of any of the characters? What would you have done differently?

What past influences are shaping the actions of the characters in the story?

Who did you like best? And who do you like the least? Why?

Has this book changed you, broadened your perspective?

What did you learn from, take away from, or get out of this book?

Do the main characters change by the end of this novel? Do they grow or mature? What events trigger such changes?

THEMES & DEFINITIONS

Hope

noun

1. a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen.
2. a feeling of trust.

“When you play, Eva, I feel hopeful. They can take our homes, our possessions. Our families. Our lives. They can drive us out, like they’ve driven us out before. They can humiliate us and dehumanize us. But they cannot take our thoughts. They cannot take our talents. They cannot take our knowledge, or our memories, or our minds. In music, there is no bondage. Music is a door, and the soul escapes through the melody. Even if it’s only for a few minutes. And everyone who listens is freed. Everyone who listens is elevated.”

Can you find other quotes or parts from the book that portray **hope**?

What is hope to you? How important is hope to one person’s health? Can hope be related to optimism?

Conscience

noun

1. The inner sense of what is right or wrong, viewed as acting as a guide to one's behavior

“We have to live in order to learn. And sometimes we have to fight in order to live.”

How much and in what way does conscience play a part in Eva and Angelo's story?

Rebellion

noun

1. An act of armed resistance to an established government or leader
2. Opposition to one in authority or dominance

“When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty.” ~ Unknown

“Rebellion was always my biggest ally, though sometimes I hated her. She looked like me and hurt like me, but she wouldn't let me give up. And when fear took my reasons for fighting, rebellion gave them back.”

How did both Eva and Angelo show rebellion? Are there different kinds of rebellion?

Sacrifice

noun

surrendering a possession as an offering to a deity

verb

something given up or lost

“I would take it away from you if I could. I would take it with me. I would take away your pain and bear it for you.” He would happily endure her sorrow if it meant she wouldn't have to.

Both Eva and Angelo had to make sacrifices. Not only to each other, but for others as well. Can you find the places that show this?

Courage

noun

mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” ~ Nelson Mandela

“God makes me strong. He gives me courage. He gives me peace. He gives me purpose.”

How important is having **courage**? Can you relate it to **hope**? How do you think the people in this story were still able to find courage, despite everything that was happening?

Were there other themes in this book? Do you feel they were adequately explored? Were they brought to life in a cliché or in a unique manner?

QUOTES

“My father told me once that we are on earth to learn. God wants us to receive everything that life was meant to teach. Then we take what we’ve learned, and it becomes our offering to God and to mankind. But we have to live in order to learn. And sometimes we have to fight in order to live.”

This is the most favorite quote from the novel. What are your thoughts about it?

Do you have any favorite quotes or passages in the novel that you enjoyed or found insightful?

Discuss the following quotes.

“Loving someone and then losing them would be much worse than not having them at all.”

“A rejected child will spend his whole life trying to please everyone else, and never please himself. A rejected woman will often cheat, just to feel desirable. A rejected man will rarely try again, no matter how lonely he is. A rejected people will convince themselves they deserve it, if only to make sense of a senseless world.”

Were there any particular quotes that stood out to you? Which ones and why?

STRUCTURE, WRITING & GENERAL DISCUSSION

What did you think of the overall structure of the novel? Were you engaged immediately?

What did you think about the time-line and points of view?

How did you feel reading it? Which emotions conveyed the story? Did the story keep you interested?

Would you say this is a plot-driven book or does the story unfold slowly with a focus on character development? Were you surprised by the plot? Or did you find it predictable?

How credible did the author make the setting and dialogue?

What scene did you find was the most pivotal for the book? How do you think the story would have changed had that scene not taken place?

What scene resonated most with you personally in either a positive or negative way?

Did certain parts of the novel make you uncomfortable? Were there any scenes that made you laugh?

What is the significance of the title? Did you recognize it in the book? Would you have given the book a different title? If yes, what is your title?

What surprised you the most about the book?

How important is the setting and time period to the story? How would it have played out differently in a different setting? What about a different time period?

Based on the prologue, did you expect the ending or were you surprised?

Did you think the ending was appropriate? How would you have liked to have seen the ending go?

Discussion questions by chapter

Prologue

The book opens with Angelo. The reader knows he's in terrible condition and that something has happened. What were your feelings as you read? Were you frightened to continue? Was there anything that jumped out at you?

Chapter 1

We see Angelo and Eva as children in this chapter. How did they bond? What connected them? What were some moments of foreshadowing?

Chapter 2

How do the new laws affect Eva's life? How do they change the relationship between Eva and Angelo?

Eva asks Angelo what he believes in. He says that he believes in God and Eva says she believes in people. Did this cause you to examine your core beliefs? What do you believe in?

Chapter 3

What do you think Eva meant when she said, *"I really never thought about being Jewish until I started being persecuted for it"*? How can you relate to this?

Eva and Uncle Felix share a very tender scene where Felix talks about things that cannot be taken away. Is freedom of the spirit different from physical freedom?

Chapter 4

Camillo and Angelo have a heart to heart, and we begin to understand the choices Angelo must make. What would you have done? Do you think preferring death over separation is a Jewish trait or a human trait?

Chapter 5

This section opens with Eva's thoughts on rejection. Do you agree with her? Why is rejection so devastating?

Angelo goes to counsel with Don Luciano. What do you think Don Luciano means when he says to Angelo, *"Judaism is not who YOU are?"* How does this play into Angelo's past and his insecurities? How is religion part of who we are, even when we are not devout?

Chapter 6

Death and mourning are big themes in this chapter--how was the number seven significant? What did you learn about Jewish mourning and tradition that struck you?

Eva draws similarities between the death of her uncle and Angelo's decisions. How are they the same?

Chapter 7

Camillo makes arrangements to go to Austria in Chapter seven. What were your thoughts? Were you screaming at him? Did you understand his reasoning?

When Angelo goes back to Florence, with the intent of taking Eva back to Rome, how does she greet him? Why does she act the way she does?

Chapter 8

Nonna Fabia says to Eva, *"God sees you, Eva. He sees Angelo too."* Eva's internal thoughts are, *"Either God sees everyone or he sees no one."* What do you think she means?

How does Angelo's prosthetic leg work in his favor? Can you see a sort of providence in his disability?

Chapter 9

Uncle Augusto and his family live in Trastevere, in Rome. Why isn't it safe for Eva to stay with them? Why is Angelo so adamant about it? And why does Augusto think all will be well?

In the confession at the end of this chapter, Eva remarks that she can't find her will to be hopeful. *"Angelo wants to save me, but what am I being saved for?"* Why is Eva feeling this way?

Chapter 10

The Nazis demand fifty kilograms (roughly 100 pounds) of gold to be gathered from Rome's Jewish community. Why do you think they did this?

The raids begin in Rome. Discuss the heroism shown here by multiple people.

Chapter 11

The Jews gathered in the October raids were taken to the Italian Military College, a stone's throw away from the Vatican. What were you thinking through this part? Were you heartbroken when you realized some could have escaped and chose not to?

Angelo tells Eva that the more he sees the harder it is to believe in God. What is her response and Monsignor Luciano's response, and how does what Angelo experiences in this chapter start to change him as a priest?

Chapter 12

In this chapter, we see the hiding begin in earnest, the lengths that must be gone to to provide for people who cannot provide for themselves. Ration cards/documents/official registers - the effort and the ingenuity of the Catholic clergy (even using Catholic guilt) was remarkable.

Discuss the suicide of the German soldier - how did you feel about him? Can you understand why Eva did not want to *share* her music with him? How did your feelings change?

Chapter 13

There is a very powerful worship scene in this chapter, where Eva and Angelo pray side by side. What did you learn here?

Discuss the character development, both Eva's and Angelo's from the beginning of the story until now. How have they both changed? At this point, Angelo the priest and Angelo the man are warring with each other. Why?

Chapter 14

Eva finds the gold in the closet -- discuss her reactions. What was your reaction? **The gold collected from Rome's Jews was discovered at the Via Tasso when the Germans left Rome. This is not fiction.**

Chapter 15

Discuss the song Eva sings. This Christmas song is not about Eva and Angelo, but about Jesus coming to earth. How does it apply to them and to everyone involved in the effort at this terrible time?

Chapter 16

Eva witnesses Aldo Finzi's death in this chapter. Discuss Eva's reaction to the death and Angelo's reaction to her desperate need for affirmation.

In Eva's confession she says, *"We are all products of the places we are raised, the people who love us or have power over us, and the things we hear, over and over again, as we grow. Our beliefs don't have to be based on personal experience, but when they are, they can rarely be altered."* Do you agree?

Chapter 17

Greta Van Essen says something interesting here that makes us think there might be more to her than meets the eye. *"There are worse things than being afraid . . . Being resigned is far worse. Being afraid lets you know you still want to live."* Do you agree? Eva says that Greta is shallow because depth would *"drown her."* Discuss.

Eva is made to perform for a room full of German diplomats and dignitaries. What has her job at Via Tasso put her in a position to discover? What are her feelings about sharing her music, her talent, with the enemy?

Chapter 18

Angelo is picked up by von Essen and taken to Santa Cecilia for the raid. Discuss the events of the raid: the Lord's prayer, the cloister, the courage of Mother Francesca and hiding in the crypt.

The chapter closes with a confession, and the theme of the slaying of dragons resurfaces again. What did it mean to you when Angelo is warned that he will slay his dragons, but not before they slay him?

Chapter 19

Angelo rejoins Eva at the hotel. What has he begun to realize? (Dragons again!) How does that break down the final walls between him and Eva? What were your favorite moments of this scene?

Were you worried that Angelo would regret what he had done? How did it make you feel when he greets her at the Sacred Heart?

Chapter 20

Greta deliberated three days before she told her husband. Makes me wonder what people would do in her shoes?

Chapter 21

No one tried to escape. Why was that? Was hope so powerful that it would cause a man to cooperate to the very end?

Chapter 22

Eva dreams of Camillo - what is going through your mind as he tells her she must jump?

Angelo knows if he stops moving he will be the next casualty of war's hopelessness -- how was hope both terrible and necessary?

Chapter 23

Angelo asks the monsignors if he can only serve God if he's a priest? Did you agree with Angelo's feelings in this section?

Chapter 24

Italy celebrating when Americans come. Why? They were never on the side of the Americans, yet they welcome them.

How did you feel about Mario going with Angelo? Do you understand Mario's need to go?

Chapter 25

"In a bombed-out village, in a foreign land, a tiny leaf had appeared on a new branch, a new sun dawning on a day when so many suns had slipped away." Discuss what happened in Belgium.

Chapter 26

Eva's violin is found in the rubble. What does she choose to do? Why is it significant?

Epilogue

Eva tells us what has happened to her family. She still has the dream. Why doesn't she think she will ever go back to Maremma?

Eva says she is still a Jew and Angelo is still a priest - What does she mean by this?

"There are two things I know for sure. I love you, and no one knows the nature of God." What are things you feel like you know for sure?

Discuss the Author's Note

Q&A with Amy Harmon

This is the Question and Answer that was organized right after a group of readers finished a group-read of *From Sand and Ash*. [This Q&A is also published on the author's website. Feel free to leave your thoughts there.](#)

What was the hardest part about researching/writing all of this?

The hardest part was the fact that EVERYTHING had to be researched. Clothing, weather, historical events, particulars of the war, the culture, the language, the violin, Angelo's birth defect, prosthetics, the Catholic religion, the Jewish religion, a day in the life of a priest . . . you get where I'm going right? It was endless.

How long did it take you to write *From Sand and Ash*? Did you have to put it down some days to give your brain a breather or did you write it consistently every day?

I began my research first, just combing through a lot of different sources trying to pinpoint where I would focus. Once I had a window of time in the war where I could set my story, I had to get more and more detailed in my research. The research continued as I wrote the book. I didn't know, for instance about the Battle of the Bulge timeline (Bastogne). I stumbled across the fact that Bastogne happened in exactly the time frame I needed it to. Little miracles. But there were always difficulties and the research sometimes derailed where I thought I was going to go with the story or what I wanted to do. Even researching the routes to get to specific camps, etc. was tedious. All in all, I suppose this book took me about six months of pretty intense work to write. That doesn't count edits after the publisher received it, etc. Sure. I had to take breaks and step away. But usually, once I really get rolling on a project, I stick with it until it's done. I'm a firm believer that once you stop, it's really hard to get started again.

Was this the longest you've ever taken to write a book?

Yes. No book has kicked my trash in quite the same way, and each one kicks my trash.

Have you ever taken violin lessons? Wondering how you chose which musical pieces to highlight . . .

No. However, just like anything else, I had to research the violin. I listened to violin music, watched people playing the violin on YouTube, watched Itzak Perlman teach classes on the Violin - etc.

I'm always curious where a book starts? Did you start on page 1 and continue to the end or did you jump around a bit and connect it together later? Did you know the ending when you started?

This one was particularly hard to organize. There was a great deal of time covered in order to accurately create the setting. I had to reconfigure the order several times and I rewrote the beginning several times. I usually write in pieces and then put them together, but with this book it was a double edged sword because I couldn't take too many liberties with the actual historical events.

You normally don't write historical fiction so what was your inspiration to take a risk and try a new genre?

Making Faces had some elements of a true setting being wrapped into a contemporary book (The attacks on 9/11 and the Iraq war). I like historical romance, always have. I am also a WWII buff. Many of my books are genre busters, though. *The Law of Moses* with his spiritual gifts, or *A Different Blue* and *Running Barefoot* with their Native American history weaved in, *The Bird and the Sword* feels like medieval fantasy, which is also very different. I suppose I just want to write books that have some staying power, that will possibly grow in popularity rather than reflect a moment in time. I liked the challenge.

Did you ever consider having Angelo not physically break his vows? Emotionally yes, he had most definitely broken them, but I was actually surprised when he physically broke them as well.

Actually, that was the one thing I was pretty sure of throughout my writing, that he would choose a life with Eva. I hope I built a solid case for why he made that decision throughout the book. Angelo had come to certain realizations about God and his relationship to him, his desires for purpose and immortality, and his true and, I would argue, righteous desires for his life. I would never want to urge a man who has made vows as a priest to do what Angelo did, but in the context of my story, of fiction, I also wanted my reader to understand why he did.

Did the book take an emotional toll on you like it does to the reader?

Let's say it takes the reader a week to read the book. For that week, I have no doubt that I put my reader through the wringer. But just compound that by six months to a year of research, writing, re-writing and then publishing. When I published the book, I felt absolutely rejected in most quarters because not only had I suffered through the creation and research of the story, but people weren't buying it or reading it. It was emotionally devastating. BUT! It has begun to gain its own special readership, and my publisher has continued to make strides with sales. So. It has been worth the tears in the end. But yes. This book about killed me.

Did you stay in the different areas of Florence? Did you map it all out? And if so, did you visit various basilicas to get a feel for the period?

I've never been to Florence. I have a friend who is a priest that talked to me about the art in Florence, about how he felt about the art, about how it directed his choices and helped him to actually become a priest. He inspired some of the feelings Angelo had. I did have to map things out and research what happened to Florence, where things were located, etc. Fortunately, my assistant was also living in Italy at the time, and she and her husband's family helped me when I had some very basic questions about Italy, like what would a family in 1943 actually eat? Especially one of mixed religions.

Your favorite scene Amy?

Favorite in the sense of it bringing emotional relief? The love scene at Villa Medici. Favorite scene as far as being proud of the writing and the desire to capture my reader? Wow. I'm not sure. I have a few. But the chapters when Eva and Angelo are being questioned, the Caves at Ardeatine, the scenes in the cattle car, the emotional devastation of believing the other is dead or gone -- those scenes were incredibly powerful to write and bring to life.

Were you ever afraid that the readers wouldn't give this book a chance because it is historical?

Many readers (and bloggers) didn't give it a chance. And that's okay. We shouldn't read an author's books out of a sense of obligation. My hope is that they will pick it up at some point. I know I have gained a whole new readership from this book, and that's been amazing too. I knew going in that I needed a publisher, because this book wasn't going to appeal to many in the indie world.

What inspired you to set the book in Italy at that time and how did you come up with the names?

I didn't know much about Italy and the war going in. I had had an idea about wanting to write a book about a priest and a girl he loves (scandalous!) but I never want to write provocatively just for the sake of being provocative. So I started digging around in WWII history and stumbled across an account of the Catholic clergy hiding Jews in Italy. That sparked my interest and fell in line with the characters I wanted to write. As far as their names, Batsheva is a Jewish name that could be shortened to something more universal, plus it is similar to the name Bathsheba from the bible (King David), which has interesting parallels in a man falling in love with a woman he can't have. Angelo Bianco means white angel. So . . . pretty cool. Bianco is the last name of my assistant, and it was fun to give a nod to her.

What scene was the hardest/tearful one for you to write?

Hardest? Actually, the scenes that are emotionally difficult are easier for me to capture. The things that are harder for me are the scenes with logistics - where the characters need to be at this moment, the description, the historical details, the history. Weaving that all in without making it feel like an info dump or losing the reader is always challenging. As far as emotionally taxing --- the whole book was emotionally taxing. I remember the Sunday I finished. I was done with the writing (pre-edit) and I just crawled into my bed and cried. I had made it to the end, and I knew, even though there was more work to do as far as polishing and correcting, that the hardest part was done. I was so grateful. I could have stopped so many times with this one because it was just that hard.

This book is so informative, researched and deeply written, was *From Sand and Ash* the most challenging book you've written to date?

Yes. Without a doubt. But this story was hard in EVERY way. Every book has its unique challenges. Sometimes I am my own obstacle. Sometimes my head and heart aren't where I need them to be to push through with a project, and I'm fighting myself more than I'm struggling with a story. But this one was hard in all aspects.

When you are writing the story do you see yourself as each character? If so, did you relate more with Eva or Angelo?

I related more with Angelo. I have, from the time I was a little girl, had a very deep desire to have a relationship with God. I know that's a wild and crazy thing to say in this day and age, and some people may immediately feel uncomfortable that I've admitted it. But spirituality and religion are very important to me. Trying to balance my desires and my purpose and my roles as writer/mother/teacher/wife/ daughter/sister PERSON has been a struggle. I understand Angelo's desire to narrow his focus to God, because it feels like the most righteous, best choice. It feels like it can't POSSIBLY be the wrong choice. But he finds, through his journey, that there are more ways to have a relationship with God, to be a good, even great, person, and not serve him in the way we originally thought we would.

Why did you choose to write it in third person?

There is far too much going on in this book to narrow the focus to one person's thoughts. I couldn't encompass the historical record that way. Plus, Angelo and Eva both needed to tell this story.

I know this book has touched and maybe changed many lives of who read it, my question is how would you say this book impacted your life?

This book was proof to me that I could accomplish something that seemed almost impossible. I learned a great deal, but mostly, I conquered a personal Everest.

Have you considered having this book made into a movie?

Making a book into a movie requires a producer and a director and a money source. I don't have any of those things. SO! I won't personally be spearheading the effort to make it into a movie, but I would love to see it happen, and at some point, hopefully someone will buy the rights to make it happen.

In all of your books, you manage to weave different themes throughout the book. What theme(s) were you hoping came across to readers with this book?

There were some pretty complex themes woven throughout. This book is a study in hope - both the detriment of hope (if it makes us blind) and the power of hope (if it keeps us from quitting). The history in itself is an ongoing theme. There is a constant reoccurring cycle that humanity seems to go through. I think understanding the history as it really happened is always important.

If you could change one thing about this book and what surrounded it like the release, the research time . . . etc, would you change anything and if yes what is it?

I wouldn't change anything. It all worked out in the end. It usually does.

If you could go to Florence one day, what would be the first place you want to visit?

I have to go see St. George, don't you think? I've been to Italy but never to Florence, and I will have to do a *From Sand and Ash* art tour.

What was it that inspired you to write Angelo's and Eva's love story? I mean coming from different beliefs so opposite from each other.

I love contrast. I love comparison. I love the fact that there is opposition in all things. It is the tug of war that makes love stories so compelling, don't you think? I love to give my characters very real reasons they shouldn't be together, and put them together anyway.

One of the things that intrigued me the most in the story was Angelo's relationship with God. I love and appreciated that you included such a beautiful epilogue at the end. After the war and when he made a new life in America, would you say that Angelo questioned his faith or still sought God?

I think he expanded his faith in the sense that he didn't have as narrow a focus or path, but I think Angelo remained very devout in his desire to know God and to be like him. My dad told me growing up that there are two goals for this life - To *know* God and *be* like him. I keep that in mind a lot. I think Angelo would have also.

Do you think you might write more historical fiction?

Yes! I have one in the works - but it won't be quite as devastating a setting.

The first title you chose for this book was *A Candle and A Cross*, what made you chose *From Sand and Ash* as the new title?

Great question. The publisher didn't want *A Candle and a Cross*. They thought having 'cross' in the title would make some people not want to read it. Their job is to sell the book, so they pushed me to change the title. I couldn't come up with one. I just really had the other one in my head, and nothing felt right. Then, on a bumpy flight home from a Texas signing, I thought about the ingredients of glass - Sand and Ash - and I thought about how they represented so much in this story, Camillo's desire to make beautiful things from sand and ash, the need to rebuild after WWII, the beaches of Maremma (sand) and what they meant to Eva and Angelo. Ash is also very significant in the Catholic religion. And that's when the new title was born. *From Sand and Ash*, rebirth. *From Sand and Ash*, new life.

Do you believe that the Church must abolish the celibacy? And this book compromise your belief in god?

I am not Catholic. I would never want to speak for the Pope. I trust that they will do what they feel is best for the church and for the continuance of the religion. I can't even begin to have an opinion on that. Spirituality and religion are so complex, and since I am neither Jewish nor Catholic, this book doesn't begin to scratch the surface of the scratch for me. But I DO believe in many of the conclusions Angelo arrived at and many of the things that were discussed.

Was there a particular reason you chose the violin for Eva and not any other instrument?

It is an instrument that is portable (piano was not going to work) and an instrument that is classical--her grandfather was a famous violinist--and an instrument which has a very mournful, very ethnic sound. I know that sounds a little odd, but when I hear the violin, something in the way it sounds engenders thoughts of Judaism. I can't explain it. It's just the way I feel.

What did you learn in doing your research for this book?

So many things! I discuss this somewhat in several answers above, but I truly didn't know the extent that the Catholic clergy went in Italy, specifically. I know not every Catholic priest, monk or nun contributed, but as a whole the contribution was a very big one.

When you write your next historical fiction, what time period do you want to write?

My next historical, it is set in Ireland during the Irish Civil War - around 1920. It doesn't sound "cool" but I promise, it is fascinating. The 1920s world-wide were a fascinating time.

Which part of *From Sand and Ash* did you rewrite the most?

The beginning sequences, getting past and present to work together, setting the stage, that stuff was the hardest.

Was it difficult to write a love story with the man being a priest? How did you go about it? Was it very different from how you've normally written a love story?

Actually . . . no. That wasn't hard at all. I tend to try very hard to not make my books ultra-sexual. So, the difficulty for me is to make the lack of sex in a book believable. I hope that makes sense. I don't want people saying in their heads . . . "Why aren't these two having sex?" If it feels purposely deleted or left out, then the reader is going to be frustrated and the romance will suffer, and I write romance. So the story line has to work, the plot without sex scenes has to work, and when the characters are intimate, I have to feel okay about putting it out there in the world of a very wide swath of readers who have very strong opinions about the sexy scale.

Did you always know that you wanted to use journals in the story?

The book needed them. It was a way to get inside her head (and eventually Angelo's head) in first person while keeping the body of the book in third. It also gave me a chance to discuss what was happening in her community and in her life in an informational way that moved the story along without trying to weave it into the narrative. It was personal commentary and it gave me a lot of freedom to steer the story.

While doing research on both religions what aspect of each did you find the most fascinating and or surprising?

I'm pretty well versed in religion. I think the thing that surprised me most is how, at the heart of so many religions, are the same desires to just be better. To know God. I think we all fall into the traps of thinking religion is more about rules than redemption. I tend to think it's more about redemption, and the study of both Judaism and Catholicism was a true pleasure.

Is your family involved in your writing process? To what extent . . .? Like, do they get to read parts of the book before it's completed? Do you ask for their opinion on things? Do they help you with research? Do they get to pick names . . .?

No. I feel pretty alone in the writing process for the most part. My mom and my sister read my books when I'm done and give me the thumbs up or the thumbs down. I do have an editor that I will shoot stuff too if I'm struggling with a part, but that usually happens toward the end when I'm wrapping things up. I do all my research by myself because it has to be in my head - I have to have the working knowledge. My assistant reads my books in parts. I send her the first fourth of the book, she reads it. Then I send her the next fourth, and so on. But not in little pieces or scenes. I told someone once, I think it was Penny Reid, that airing my books before they are ready feels a little like stepping out of a dressing room without my pants on. Sometimes I talk through a plot with someone who will listen, just so I can work through it, and that can be helpful, but I've never had anyone be very involved in it, honestly. It's kind of my own cross.

How did the story come to you? Which character spoke to you first and wanted their story told? Were there parts you rewrote? Part that were taken out? Was the ending for Mario and his family the same always or did he have a different ending?

There were parts I rewrote multiple times, but I don't have scenes sitting in a file that were removed. I don't really write that way. Writing is like carving with the benefit of never ruining the block of wood. I can just keep tweaking and shifting and cutting and sculpting. I never go all the way down one path and turn around and go another way, so by the time I reached the part with Mario, I considered all the options and chose a path and committed to it. That's one of the hardest things to do when writing is to commit to a path and not turn back. You get lost in the woods if you don't. As far as the story coming to me, I think I answered that in another question, but I'll expound here. Stories don't come in a nice package of inspiration. When people ask me what inspires a story, I always kind of groan inwardly because it's not a sound answer and I really can't follow the threads back that precipitated the inspiration. There are little pieces and threads and ideas that an author has to wind together. One string leads to another and another until eventually you have a rope to hold on to.

I found interesting the different personalities you gave to the priests, rabbi, nuns. I loved that they were flawed because some people today still believe that just because they're ordained or religious they should be perfect. Did you create all of them that way based on your research? Or some based on personal experience?

I read several accounts of Italians during the war in Italy. The nuns and priests they can in contact with were exactly like regular people. No better, no worse. They were very flawed. It's our flaws that make us believable and make characters believable too.

This book has so many layers. It was so well planned and thought out. I'd love to know how and why you chose certain churches in the story, most specifically The Church of Santa Cecilia. You mention how many churches are in the area and I found it fascinating the detail you gave us about every location. Santa Cecilia was the perfect location for what you did with it. I also love that she is the patron saint of music. I suppose I just want to crawl inside your head and discover how/why you chose this beautiful and very interesting church, as well as all the others such as The Pazzi Chapel. I'd also like to ask the same question about Donatello's Saint George. How/why did you choose him to put on your story? I feel that these aspects brought so much depth to the story and made it more powerful.

Father John Bartunek (see author's note) spent long hours on the phone with me. His love of Florentine art and Florence itself really inspired me and helped form Angelo's character. Fr. Bartunek fell in love with Donatello's St. George. His experience of just not being able to look away, of being inspired to consider the priesthood all was the inspiration for what became the dragons theme in the book. I don't remember how I stumbled on Santa Cecilia. It may have been something Fr. Bartunek said, but I think I came across her in my research. When I realized the location of the church, near Trastevere, it was just another piece of the puzzle. Books are made up of thousands of pieces.

Were you scared to write such a book? Were you afraid of portraying something wrong and getting backlash?

Terrified. But nothing is ever accomplished if we listen to the fear. We would all stay home and hide in our houses, and then our fear would convince us that our house wasn't safe either. Of course there's always the fear of backlash. We live in a backlash happy world where people preach tolerance but are so judgmental and intolerant that's it's hard to even converse with each other without someone crying false. I'm sure I made mistakes in this book. I'm sure I didn't please everyone. But that's impossible. So my goal is to just keep writing the books that move me and hope that those books will find the readers who will appreciate them.

I'd love you to discuss Angelo being American and having his particular disability. One of the things I love most about this story is that there are no plot holes. You thought of everything. Everything means something. There is a reason behind everything. (At least that's how I felt as I read). Can you tell us what inspired you to make Angelo an American with a disability? Again, this gave the story so much depth and made it more powerful for me.

I don't know exactly and specifically where and when that decision came about. It's hard because books are built in threads and pieces (like I describe above) but mostly, as the book starts to form and be fleshed out, problems arise, and an author has to correct those things or find solutions for those things that work within the context. If Angelo had not had his disability, so many other things would not have played out the way they needed to. His father sending him to Italy, attending the seminary, being able to move more freely among the Germans, to fulfill his calling as a priest. All of it. Even his feelings of having fewer options and choices because he didn't want to be a burden. Him being an American and coming to live in Italy also contributed to his ability to live with Eva's family and get to know her in a way he wouldn't have gotten to know her otherwise. It all has to work, and ideas come from filling plot holes, I suppose.

Do you ever feel the pressure of so much competition in this profession?

I don't feel the pressure of competition as much as I feel the pressure of expectation. My own expectations, the industry expectations, my readers' expectations. I want to hit a home run every time, and it's enough work that it needs to be a home run every time. Professional baseball players get a lot of "at bats" every season. I'm up to bat twice a year at best. So it has to be a quality production. It has to be a hit. I get tired thinking about it, and it has robbed me of some of the joy of creating, but mostly, I am so grateful every single day that I can actually write books for a living. I am SO LUCKY.

I loved all the tiny things I learned as well as the huge things. Is the "Italian shrug" a real thing? Did you get all of the funny Italian phrases and curses from your assistant and her family? I loved when Angelo would curse.

I think I came across the Italian shrug in something I watched. It was something that struck me. I don't even know if it's a real thing, but it felt true to me. And yes. Tamara helped me with the cursing.

One of the things that struck me the hardest was the timing of the release. With everything going on in our current political climate, and the feelings of fear, bigotry and things that are happening right now, it felt like *From Sand and Ash* could not have come at a more appropriate time. Was that kismet, or intentional?

Total kismet. I don't think you can plan things like that. I have been worried about the way this book would be received. I don't want people to use it as a political hammer. I didn't intend it as one. I actually think tossing around labels like Hitler and Nazi today is to underestimate what was actually done to the Jewish people during WWII. They were rounded up and exterminated. Six million of them. I see a lot of people equating the current political climate in America with the climate of Germany in 1938, and I tend to think it is an injustice to the people who were actually stripped of their rights, stripped of their property and their citizenship, and systematically slaughtered because of their religion/ethnicity. My hope is that people WILL know the history. That that they will recognize patterns and be cognizant of their own beliefs, but not that they will assume that I am making statements about

the current political climate. I hope that makes sense. I didn't quite know how to answer this question any other way. The climate FEELS so charged, that the book felt timely. I totally understand the question. I've just really worried that people would equate this as some kind of statement. My only statement is the history itself.

If you could meet any of the real life characters from your book . . . who would it be? They are all so brave and took so many risks to save others . . . what would you ask them?

I would have loved to meet Monsignor O'Flaherty and Rabbi Nathan Cassuto. I fell in love with Rabbi Cassuto in my research. He was a brilliant man, a young father, a courageous leader, and he shouldn't have died. He should NOT have died. And it breaks my heart.

One of the best parts of this particular book is all the knowledge I gained about Catholicism and Judaism. I was particularly moved by the Jewish traditions, especially the ones we learn about in the Shivah chapter. Was there anything in particular that you learned as you researched these two religions that struck you the most?

As a writer, I love hidden meaning. I love to delve into it, uncover it, write it into my stories. One of my favorite things about Shiva was all the hidden meaning. The same with Catholic rituals. They all mean something. They all signify something greater.

I saw you mention that there really was a father and son found embracing in the Ardeatine Caves. Are there any other moments like these that really happened that you weaved into your story? I was so blown away with how well you wove fact with fiction.

Did I mention in my notes that that girl, the Jewish girl that turned everyone else in, really existed too? One of the men that died in the Ardeatine Caves was incarcerated because she pointed him out. Jumping from the cattle cars - a boy who jumped without his mother, like Pierre, that was based on a little snippet I found in my research. All I know was that his mother convinced him to jump and he survived. I don't think there is anything in the book you can point to that wasn't based on actual events in some way. The woman giving birth under German watch the day of the round-up. She gave birth and she and her baby were loaded up and sent to Auschwitz. The boys who could have escaped out the back door but didn't because they would have had to leave their families. So much of what happened in this book was stuff I came across in one way or another.

I've noticed a musical theme in your books. Are you a musician?

I am a singer and I write songs. I have always been very musical and wish I'd had a mind for it. I have a musical heart but not a musical head, if that makes any sense. I am much better at creating music than I am at reading it from a page. It made becoming skilled on the piano very hard. But music has always been a very big deal for me.

At which point do you usually come up with a title, is it something that guides your writing or rather something that emerges from a story when it's finished?

Often times it's right in the beginning, because I will have an idea for the driving theme or message of the book, and the title usually is born from that. But sometimes it changes as I go because the story demands that it must. *Making Faces* was named before I even started writing the actual book. I wrote Fern's poem - If God Made All Our Faces - and the name *Making Faces* was born.

There is a quote in chapter 4: "And as their fires were banked, they both smelled the smoke" I read, re-read in context, and checked the definition of banked. Could you explain it to me?

When you bank a fire, you put it out. In this scene, they give into their passion for each other, but, just like when you put out a fire, it still smokes. There are a lot of reasons this works. Their need wasn't ever going to be "satisfied" because it wasn't just a physical need. They were in love. Also, it is foreshadowing of things to come--the fire had not yet begun to burn in earnest for the Rosselli family, but it was coming. It was an indication of the terror that was around the bend.

After all they've gone through, it seems both Angelo and Eva emerge with their faiths strengthened. It made me wonder whether they raised their children according to one particular faith or another. (I can't imagine that they would raise their children without God at all.) Do you think they raised their family Catholic/Jewish/non-denominational Christian/something in between? Would it matter? (I suppose this must be the dilemma of many inter-faith families.) I know whatever they decided, they would make it work. They didn't face down their dragons for nothing.

I would imagine they would represent both. They managed to merge their faith together in order to survive and, of course, fall in love. I would think it would important to teach their children who they are, what their roots are, and maybe most importantly, what a loving God expects of his children. I sometimes think God is far less complex than we make him.

