

PRAISE FOR LIN WILDER

The Reluctant Queen: The Story of Esther

Reluctant Queen is the rare plotline that not only matches but perhaps outshines the story of Esther in the scripture. Lin Wilder has proven to be an exceptionally skilled writer, able to handle both deep human connection and incredible action sequences around this sensitive matter, effectively imparting a heavily important message of humanity out into the world. She successfully captivates her readers with her expertise in both the scripture and the Jewish tradition and culture.

LONDON BOOK REVIEW

Wilder does an excellent job of fleshing out the society and finding a way to tie the famous story of the Persian Wars into the less well-known history of Purim as found in the Biblical *Book of Esther*. The highlight of the novel is Xerxes and his catastrophic descent into self-delusional madness thanks to his near limitless power. If the hand of God seems strong in the book, it's because the hand of God is believed to be strong in antiquity. There is nothing preachy and certainly nothing foreshadowing Christianity/Catholicism. Anyone, religious or secular, interested in reading about this period can enjoy this book.

CATHOLIC READS

plausible
liars

plausible liars

A DR. LINDSEY McCALL MEDICAL MYSTERY

Lin Wilder



Plausible Liars

Lin Wilder

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Wilder Books

To Father Dan

The spirit distinctly says that in later times some will turn away from the faith and will heed deceitful spirits taught by demons through plausible liars.

—St. Paul, 1 Timothy

FOREWORD

“But Lin, I thought that’s what novelists *do*. They make the impossible, the incomprehensible, real. So readers can walk in the shoes of characters so far outside their own lived experience that they can get it.”

That was my friend Paul’s reply to my ten-minute whine about this new novel I was trying to write. Our conversation took place sometime during the summer of 2019. And for the next year, I flailed about, researching and working to create the story you’re about to read. Finally, the following summer, I listened to my husband, John, who, after hearing a protracted version of that whine, advised, “Quit. This isn’t your story. It’s someone else who asked that you write it. Instead, write the book you would have written if Father Dan had never asked you to write this.”

Being me, my first response to John was, “What? Quit?” But later that day, I was busily and, I might add, quite happily, working on *The Reluctant Queen: The Story of Esther*.

But *Plausible Liars* and its characters continued to lurk in the back of my mind. Joey/Zoey Carmichael and Dr. T. haunted me because these were the characters I needed to do a deep dive into. Enough that they could be felt, appreciated, even loved.

No matter how we euphemize it, this isn’t a pleasant subject to think or read about. That dis-ease accounts for the absolutism of the defendants and practitioners of gender fluidity, the intransigence against any crack in the wall of certitude. And for those of us “on the other side,” it’s far more preferable to keep our heads down and refuse to accept that such beliefs

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are plausible. That is precisely what I was doing before my friend Father Dan's insistence that I write this story.

Four years ago, easily accessible information on transgenerism was scarce. Today, it's ubiquitous, with a vast selection of podcasts, books, and articles. With all the available information and opinions, it's tempting to think we understand how we got here, to trace its genesis back to the infamous sexual revolution, the rise of feminism, and the institutionalization of equality as a right. But those are merely consequences of the disorder unleashed on Creation and all creatures by our first parents.

Nothing I've ever written has been as brutally taxing as this story. There are hundreds of reasons for that, but I've come to understand that fear is the primary one.

I didn't come to fiction until I'd had decades of experience with writing and publishing non-fiction. The two are worlds apart. While writing is always taxing work, a never-ending search for clarity and coherence, nonfiction requires far less from the author than fiction. Fiction writers are responsible for creating characters: they must sit beside us as we read the story. If they aren't, we haven't done our job.

Therefore, writing about Dr. T.'s character forced me to plunge into places I had no interest in going. A person like her would not have come into this beautiful world looking for a kid to control, manipulate, or seduce. Something must have created massive wounds in her psyche.

Writing *Plausible Liars* has reintroduced me to the inescapable fact that delving deep into what we know is unnatural and indefensible forces a plunge into the problem of evil.

What is it?

Why does it exist?

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Then we must look at it and name it.

If, after reading this novel, you're interested in learning more, I've added an abridged list of the sources I found most helpful.

PROLOGUE

Lindsey's breath of relief stuck in her throat. She felt pinned to the chair and tried to look everywhere but at that table, at those seven faces filled with pure, unadulterated malevolence.

What are the odds? A billion to one? Two indictments for murder in four years?

But her gaze was drawn like a magnet to the prosecution table. Zach Cunningham's interrogation had been easy; how could she have thought the worst was over?

Time seemed to slow as she watched Prosecutor Emilio Martinez push back his chair, gather some notes and rise. Only after he was standing did he look at her and smile. A wolfish grin stayed on his face as he walked to the witness stand where she sat.

As he sauntered over, Lindsey forced herself to study his shoes. They were Stacy Adams loafers. She was surprised to see them because they were her husband's favorite brand of shoes. She thought about that coincidence as she watched the shoes draw inexorably closer.

This is just a man, McCall. A man with great power over you and Kate, for sure, but just like Rich, he got up this morning, showered, shaved, and slipped into those loafers. He probably kissed his wife and kids goodbye. Then, he headed out the door, got into his car, and onto the freeway. Preparing to continue his battle of words. Words that were crafted to persuade twelve men and women of a conspiracy of hate.

Lindsey thought about the whiteboard with its lists of strengths and weaknesses, sitting in the great room of Kate's house. She also thought about the hours spent on that white-

board. And finally, she recalled the two nights she and Kate spent in jail. They were frightening, terrifying even, but they'd survived.

Was this any different from the first cardiac catheterization she had done?

Or the last?

The terrible lesson was that she could do everything perfectly and make no mistakes; still, catastrophe could happen.

For the millionth time, Lindsey reflected on Nate Morrison, the oil executive who'd been persuaded by his internist to have a cardiac cath. Nate Morrison was a vigorous Houston oil exec who had been referred by his internist during his annual physical. He had no symptoms, but his doctor wanted it done to ensure his coronaries were clean. He had perfectly healthy coronaries but began to fibrillate just as they finished the procedure and could not return to normal sinus rhythm. He died at age fifty-three because of an overzealous internist who did not appreciate the risk of subjecting his patient to a cardiac cath. It was the last time she had set foot into a cath lab.

Lindsey took a deep breath and let her eyes travel up to Martinez's coffee-brown trousers, well-fitting jacket, and striped light blue shirt with a red striped tie. Then she locked onto his dark gaze. His eyes were almost entirely black.

"This isn't the first time you've been convicted of unintentionally murdering someone, is it, Dr. McCall?"

Of course, he would open with that; he'd be a fool not to.

Lindsey surprised herself with her calmness, but as she opened her mouth to reply, was stopped by a thunderous cry.

"Objection!"

CHAPTER ONE

October 16, one year earlier

Dear Diary,

I found you in the campus bookshop yesterday and was psyched at discovering your torn, scuffed-up cover underneath a bunch of half-price books. It felt like fate because I've been wondering how I can get my thoughts organized well enough to explain.

Ms. O'Brien has been talking all semester about the number of writers who recorded their innermost thoughts and fears in diaries or journals. Listening to her talk about Thoreau made me think about doing it, too, even though I misled Ms. O'Brien by quoting him last week in class.

Stupid, I know better than to talk in class, but I felt sorry for her because no one was paying attention to her. Most were either on their phones or staring out the window. So, when she said that Thoreau had lived on Walden Pond for three years, I didn't even think. I blurted out, "Actually, Ms. O'Brien, he lived on Walden Pond for two years and two months."

I could feel my face heat up when she spun around from the board and clapped her hands, "Why, Joey, you're quite right. Thank you." Her smile was so warm and genuine that

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I kept talking. “I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when it came time to die, to discover that I had not lived.”

I was as surprised as Ms. O’Brien because I never talk in class. Ever. And now I’ve made her think I’m smart.

I feel kinda silly writing in a diary because boys aren’t supposed to like doing this kind of stuff. But I need to practice telling my story, so my new friends can make sense of it. And maybe writing it will help me make sense of it, too.

So, here goes.

My name is Joey Carmichael. I was born in a tiny little northern California town called—if you can believe this—Strawberry. I have no idea who my father is, but my mom’s name is Cassie, Cassie Carmichael. She likes the “CC,” thinks it sounds like an actress. I bet I asked a trillion times about my father, but she refused to even utter his name, claiming that speaking his name would call down ruin upon our house. She would say that in a breathy hiss, just like the vampires and witches in the movies she loved to watch.

Mom could have been an actress, as she has told us kids a million times. She certainly has the looks. But she sacrificed that ambition to keep me and the rest of us off the streets. I

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believed her until—wait, I’m not going there! I am not!

When I was little, I looked exactly like Mom did at age three, then four, then five: freckles, curly red hair, and dimples. She showed me pictures to prove it. I’ve heard that some kids get stories read to them before bed. Not me. Just about every night, she would bring out that photo album and touch them and then me. “You’re going to look just like me, Zoey, honey.”

Oh no, Cassie Carmichael, I am not going to look just like you. In fact, by the time I’m done, we won’t look like we’re in the same genus. OK, diary that might be a slight exaggeration, but you’ll see

CHAPTER TWO

“How dumb can I be? Switching from a physics major to pre-med?” LJ’s bright green eyes shone in the light of her laptop. There was no response from her best friend, Morgan, who sat cross-legged, her own laptop open beside the huge physiology textbook she was studying. Morgan’s expression was intense and focused. LJ groaned. Still nothing.

“Morgan, are you even here?” Both dogs jumped at LJ’s shout.

“Of course I’m here. Where else would I be? You can see me, right?” Her brown eyes were lowered at the two dogs, now sitting at alert. “Max, baby, shhh, it’s OK,” she whispered. “Nothing to get upset about. It’s just LJ’s drama queen act. Gus, be still, boy. Everything is fine, just fine.”

They were an unlikely pair, Max and Gus. Max was an eighty-five-pound pedigreed red Doberman, and Gus was a forty-one-pound mutt, a strange combination of pug and lab that somehow worked. Max had the purebred Doberman’s beautiful, almost regal look: long legs, a lean, muscular torso, and expressive amber eyes. Gus was, well, the exact opposite.

LJ Grayson and Morgan Gardner were just as unlikely a pair. LJ was the biological daughter of Dr. Lindsey McCall. She’d gladly accepted Lindsey’s offer to house her and fund her undergraduate education at California Polytechnic State University.

Morgan and LJ had become fast friends the year before while waiting in the mile-long registration line for freshmen who had not made the deadline for online registration.

“You’re pretty,” Morgan said. “I bet you had a bunch of boyfriends in high school, right?”

Before LJ could reply, Morgan continued. “I know, I’m getting personal way too fast, but I do that when I get nervous, and I’m very nervous right now. I have ASD.” Noting LJ’s puzzled expression, Morgan explained. “Autistic spectrum disorder . . . Asperger’s, high-functioning autism, take your pick. If you’d prefer another, I have about ten more depending on which DSM the current psychologist uses.”

Laughing in delight at Morgan’s lack of guile, LJ extended her hand. “I’m Lindsey Grayson, but now I’m LJ for Lindsey Junior because my biological mom’s name is also Lindsey. Her husband, Rich, decided that two Lindseys would be too confusing for everyone, most of all him. I live in Pismo Beach but am originally from Friendswood, Texas. Oh, and I’m an alcoholic.” *And I’m babbling like a total idiot.*

The tall, awkward, geeky young woman and the short, shapely, lovely young woman grasped hands for support, then doubled over in hilarity, their sides heaving, unaware of the eye rolls around them. They were inseparable from that moment on.

Both dogs settled back down at the sound of Morgan’s voice. Mirroring each other’s splayed-out positions, the two now lay back-to-back, Max facing LJ and Gus’s gaze fixed on Morgan.

After glancing at LJ to ensure she was focused on her studies, Morgan stared back at Gus. The happy little dog had taken to her when she met him. Morgan had never seen antics like Gus performed when greeting his family back home. First, his short legs carried his chunky body in a race down the stairs and across the deck. Then, upon reaching his person, he stopped and ran in tight circles before taking off again, the epitome of exuberance and joy.

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But when Morgan and LJ studied, which was almost every night, Gus's preferred place was close to Morgan, like now. Staring into the dog's amber eyes, Morgan felt her unease subside. LJ had been right when she accused Morgan of being somewhere else. She had been acting like she was studying animal physiology, but her mind was that boy—girl-boy—Joey Carmichael. He was a transfer from Chico State, arriving halfway through the first semester, so everyone in her English lit noticed him. Something dark hovered around him. At first, Morgan tried to persuade herself that it was her imagination, but she could see it.

And it was growing.

CHAPTER THREE

November 2, 2019

Dear Diary,

I can't believe it's been over three weeks since I wrote to you. So much has happened. Some good and some not so good.

Here's the good part: Ms. O'Brien asked to see me after class the day I quoted Thoreau. I was super nervous because I was afraid she would ask me to do something I'd hate, like write a story about him or do a stupid talk for the class about why I loved "On Walden Pond."

But it was none of those things. Instead, she invited me to the GLSEN meeting on campus, which happened to be that night. I had no clue what she was talking about but I pretended I did.

Would I be free to attend?

Ha! Let me check my crammed social calendar. How about that? A free night for once! Sure, I can go. By then, I knew what it was: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educational Network. Diary, that stopped me for a second or three. Am I gay? Can a girl who's decided to become a boy be a lesbian?

Cool stuff but I'm not about to say no at a chance to meet some other kids who might be weird like me.

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She even bought me supper at 19 Metro before the meeting. And I was good. Instead of the hamburger and fries that I would have ordinarily stuffed down my throat, I ordered a salad, like her.

And here's the second piece of good news. I invited another student to come to the meeting, too. I hadn't planned to ask her, but she just happened to be standing outside the classroom, waiting for someone. So, I figured she was waiting for her beautiful friend, LJ. I see them together all the time.

So I introduced myself and began talking about stuff, intriguing stuff, even though she's odd. Funny I should call someone weird, right? But she is. I think she might be autistic because she doesn't say much, and she talks in a monotone voice when she does, as if she's reading a script. Now that I think about it, our conversation was pretty one sided. I talked nonstop, and I assumed she was pretending to listen. But Morgan really was listening because when I stopped to breathe, she said I was transgender. She didn't ask, she just said it in the same manner that anyone would say anything. Like "You're a Protestant" or "You're a Catholic," or "You're a Democrat."

No one has ever said anything like that to me. And she didn't back off when I stood there gaping at her like a fool. She didn't cover her mouth and say, "Gee, I didn't mean to notice

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that you bind your breasts and hack off your hair like a Marine recruit or have a body shaped like a block of wood—a very flabby wood, that is.” She just stood there and looked at me as if I wasn’t the weirdest person she had ever seen. As if zits and sparse red beards were a natural look.

So I blurted out, “Hey, Morgan, Ms. O’Brien invited me to come to the GLSEN meeting tonight. Would you like to come?”

When I walked into the meeting, Morgan was standing by herself, right by the door. Afterward, she told me about her friend, Dr. Lindsey McCall, head of the Animal Science Center. Morgan suggested that I go over there because Lindsey had twelve Dobermans there. They had heart problems, and Dr. McCall worked on nutritional methods to alleviate their symptoms. She said Dr. McCall was always looking for students to exercise the dogs. Would I like to help her?

Would I? Would I ever! I love dogs, all dogs, but especially Dobermans!

I meant to write a whole lot more—about the bad news, that is—but it’s getting late, and I have to study.

Bye for now.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Hi, Dr. McCall. I’m sorry. Looks like I interrupted your conversation just now. I can come back tomorrow if you like, I just had some free time between classes and wondered if I could walk any of the dogs for you.”

Lindsey ended her call and then stood up to face Joey. “That’s fine, Joey. My friend and I had to get back to work anyway. How much time do you have? They’d all like a walk before I close up for the day!”

Fourteen Dobermans were kenneled in pairs in the back of her lab, but Joey didn’t care, he loved each of them. “Great!” he said, clapping his hands. “Let’s get going then!” His broad, freckled face split into a wide grin as he did an about-face to leave her office.

As she followed the teen, Lindsey calculated that he was at least fifty pounds overweight. His skeletal frame was small, and he should weigh about 105 pounds—LJ’s weight—not the 160 or 175 pounds it looked like he was carrying. She wondered about his hormone therapy. If he had received a cross-hormone treatment before the onset of puberty, he would not have experienced a growth spurt. Moreover, Joey’s excessive weight gain indicated some dosage problems since testosterone should drop body fat, not increase it.

The dogs’ frenzied barking put a stop to Lindsey’s thoughts. By the time she arrived at the kennels, he already had the first two dogs, a red male named Cyber and a fawn-colored female named Lucky, leashed and was grabbing another two out of a second kennel.

“Joey! Hey, even two of these guys will be a handful! But

I was kidding; we don't have enough time to walk all of them before I close up at six." Lindsey tried to ignore the disappointment on the teen's face as she strode across the vast exercise area to close the kennel door.

Just then, she heard two sets of feet hurrying down the hallway toward the lab. The sound of footsteps was accompanied by her boss Jodi Tamarack's distinctive voice. "Hey, Lindsey, got a sec? I have a postdoc student who would like some time with you. I'll bet you have all kinds of neat trials she could dig into for the remainder of the semester."

Jodi's jeans-clad backside appeared through the hallway door before her tousled mass of curly brown hair and a red plaid flannel shirt. She was walking backward as she talked to the postdoc student behind her. Just as Jodi was about to back into a table loaded with a wide array of glass beakers and other breakables, she turned around.

"Well, that could have been a colossal mess," she said. "Sorry! Lindsey, meet our newest postdoc from UC Davis." Jodi was nearly out of breath. In fact, Dr. Jodi Tamarack, Department Head of the Animal Science Department at Cal Poly, was almost always out of breath, able to cram more words into a shorter space of time than anyone Lindsey had met, and yet she was still oddly calming.

"Dr. Christine Phillips, meet Dr. Lindsey McCall, former head of the cardiac Cath lab at Houston General in the Texas Medical Center and now our esteemed director of animal research."

"Dr. McCall, I'll just take these two outside for about ten minutes or so, OK?"

Somehow, Joey had kept the two leashed Dobermans calm, but with all the activity, they were getting twitchy.

Jodi noticed Joey for the first time. “Oh, please excuse my bad manners, but I didn’t know you were here.” Then she squinted at him. “Do I know you?” Jodi needed glasses to see any farther than a foot, but she hated wearing them.

Smiling at her clueless boss, Lindsey introduced Joey and then agreed to his ten-minute outing for the two fortunate dogs. “Joey is a sophomore in Animal Science. And no, you haven’t met him before.”

Jodi and Christine watched the odd-looking teen struggle with the dogs as he fought to get through the doorway. Joey’s width with an eighty-plus-pound dog on either side required some juggling.

Jodi turned back to Lindsey, her lips parted as if to speak and her dark eyebrows drawn together in a frown. Cutting off Jodi’s question before she could utter it, Lindsey smiled at the tall, thin, newly minted veterinarian. “Welcome, Christine. I can’t tell you how delighted I am to meet you. Jodi’s right: we have a long list of ongoing studies you can choose from.”

She proceeded to deliver her elevator speech, which included a five-minute explanation of how an internationally known interventional cardiologist and researcher walked away to embrace animal research.

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