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**an evocative debut novel explores the need to believe and the false prophets who exploit the vulnerable**

“Based on the harrowing true story of two young girls abducted by a traveling preacher in 1971, this is a novel about delusion and determination, faith and grit, good and evil. Meticulously researched and masterfully written. A stunning debut by an important talent.”

 – Abigail DeWitt, author of News of Our Loved Ones

“With gentle humor and a profound appreciation for the marginalized lives of her characters, Avery Caswell illuminates the America that’s alongside us, and which many of us rarely acknowledge.” – Arthur J. Magida, author of Code Name Madeleine

“Deep respect and gratitude to Earthell Latta who mindfully decided to untether the festering shame, pain, scars, and cleanse the wound that was whispering to be opened. In the spirit of generosity, celebration, healing, and redemption, Avery Caswell, chosen spiritual creative midwife triumphantly and expertly guides *Salvation* forward.” —Jaki Shelton Green, North Carolina Poet Laureate

*“Ain’t no sin in money!” Reverend Ike’s velvety voice proclaimed over the radio. “I like money. I need money. I want money … Say it with me now. You gotta BEE-lieve!”*

Even as she struggles to put food on the table, Del Munro, a single mother with four young children, sends a dollar every month to the reverend’s Blessing Plan. It’s the summer of 1971 and Del has to believe her fortunes are about to change. She works hard, takes care of her children and goes to church most Sundays. Why shouldn’t life be easier? Why shouldn’t she be able to have more food in her pantry, buy a new dress and start saving money, like her neighbor Bobette, so her kids can go to college?

When Del learns that Mother Franklin, a traveling evangelist, is coming to town, she welcomes her into her home to benefit from the heaps of food the church ladies always deliver. “This is the beginning, she feels it, when blessings will start falling down on her like summer rain, soft at first and then a deluge.”

Blessings are what Mother Franklin, whose ambitions are as outsized as her enormous girth, trades in. Inspired by Sweet Daddy Grace, the Messiah-like preacher who baptized her many years ago and was worth $25 million at his death, she believes she’s destined for greatness.

Mother Franklin can see that Del is exhausted, trying to make ends meet and quiet her daughters’ constant bickering while caring for her baby sons. When school is delayed because of court-mandated busing, the preacher offers to take Del’s girls, seven-year-old Glory and nine-year-old Willie June, home with her to Savannah for two weeks at the beach.

For the girls, restless at the end of a long hot summer in Charlotte, it's a dream come true. To Del, it's a much-needed reprieve.

But what seemed like a blessing soon turns into a nightmare when the girls are pressed into service by Mother Franklin who promises power and glory to the unsuspecting while relying on the book of Ezekiel to propel her ministry. Along with her driver Luther, a man with questionable connections and a Saturday Night Special hidden in a wig box, they travel from one church to another along the backroads of Georgia and Florida.

After months of separation from a mother they find increasingly difficult to remember, Glory and Willie June pray to forget each day’s horrific struggle as they starve—for food, shelter, and deliverance. Meanwhile Del, cagey about whether or not she accepted money from Mother Franklin, contacts the police and FBI who offer no help. People begin to wonder if instead of sending her daughters on vacation, she sold them to the evangelist.

Written with sensitivity and courage, *Salvation* is based on a true story told to Avery Caswell by a woman who needed to make sense of what happened to her and her sister fifty years ago. Powerful and unforgettable, the book explores how mistakes made by desperate people willing to put their trust in false saviors can lead to tragic consequences.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Avery Caswell is an award-winning writer, designer and essayist. Her previous work includes *Mother Load*, a collection of short stories *Kirkus Reviews* called “stunning” and *Luck: A Collection of Facts, Fiction, Incantations & Verse*, which Lee Smith said was “a feast for the eyes, the intellect, and the imagination.” A graduate of Kent State, Purdue University and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Caswell received MFAs in theatre and creative writing. *Salvation* is her first novel.

**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Title: SALVATION by Avery Caswell

Publisher: ‎ TouchPoint Press

On Sale: September 15, 2021

Format: Trade Paperback / 280 pages

Price: $16.99

ISBNS: 1952816556 / 978-1952816550

**PRAISE FOR SALVATION**

“Deep respect and gratitude should be extended to Earthell Latta who mindfully decided to untether the festering shame, pain, scars, and cleanse the wound that was whispering to be opened. In the spirit of generosity, celebration, healing, and redemption, Avery Caswell, chosen spiritual creative midwife triumphantly and expertly guides *Salvation* forward.”

—Jaki Shelton Green, North Carolina Poet Laureate

“What a riveting and deeply moving story Avery Caswell has given us. Based on the harrowing true story of two young girls who were abducted by a traveling preacher in the early 1970s, this is a novel about delusion and determination, faith and grit, good and evil. Meticulously researched and masterfully written . . . There is great love in this story, and profound generosity. Most importantly, the beauty of Caswell’s prose, her compassion for all of her characters, and her recognition of their complexity, elevates this account into a universal story of human frailty and courage. Each of these characters—nine-year-old Willie June, with her imaginary diary; seven-year-old Glory with her hunger; their misguided, hard-working mother and her alcoholic employer; the hapless P.I. who keeps missing his target; even the terrifying preacher, Mother Franklin, and her lost-soul driver—is complicated and deeply human. This is a stunning debut by an important talent.” —Abigail DeWitt, author of *News of Our Loved Ones*

“A haunting, disturbing journey through an America of misplaced hope and overvalued faith, of surprising redemption. With gentle humor and a profound appreciation for the marginalized lives of her characters, Avery Caswell illuminates the America that’s alongside us, and which many of us rarely acknowledge .” – Arthur J. Magida, author of *Code Name Madeleine*

“‘No one ever talks about what happened,’ Glory Munro says of the events that shaped this remarkable narrative based on the 1971 kidnapping of two Charlotte, North Carolina sisters by a well-known evangelist named Mother Franklin. *Salvation* not only talks about those events, but examines them via the lenses of memory, race, poverty, the shape-shifting powers of faith and, most importantly, longings of the human psyche. Avery Caswell’s *Salvation* and its characters are so achingly rendered I knew them, sat with them, listened to them tell their stories for themselves.”—Karen Salyer McElmurray, author of *Wanting Radiance*

**Q&A WITH AVERY CASWELL AND EARTHELL LATTA**

**An author and her subject discuss their unique collaboration and the story behind the book**

**1. *Salvation*, like many novels, is based on a true story, but this one has a very unusual backstory. Could you both talk about how this book came to be written?**

**AC:** Seventeen years ago when we were both picking up our daughters at daycare, Earthell, whom I’d met before, approached me with a question. Her aunt had mentioned to her that I’d left my advertising job to write full time so Earthell asked if I would write about what happened to her and her sister in 1971. When she shared what had happened, I was floored. When they were seven and nine, she and her sister were kidnapped by a traveling evangelist. For decades, no one in her family had ever talked about it. Earthell wanted her story told.

**EL**: I wanted to know how my sister and I came to be kidnapped by a preacher, a woman who had been invited into our home, and why, so many years later, even as adults, we weren’t able to discuss it among our family. I wanted answers, as well as understanding.

**2. Avery, why do you think this story begged to be told?**

**AC:** It’s always shocking when a person you trust, a religious figure or your own parent, does the unthinkable. That was what initially hooked me. But the mystery at the heart of Earthell’s story is what I found so compelling: was it possible that that the girls’ mother had been complicit in the kidnapping? I wanted to know more about Earthell’s mother and the circumstances surrounding the girls’ kidnapping.

The story also turns on our need to believe that salvation is always at hand. At our deepest moments of despair, that hope is often all that sustains us. Also true is that there are those who use our desperation for their own gain.

So many things were happening in the fall of 1971 that the girls would have had no way of knowing. Tens of thousands of US soldiers were dying in Vietnam while political leaders were consolidating the support of white Southerners by adopting a stance of “benign neglect” on civil rights enforcement. A second wave of women’s rights was rolling across the country. The story opened up after Earthell and I agreed that the story might be better told as a novel so we could weave in the dramatic events taking place in 1971.

**3. It took many years to write *Salvation*. Avery, could you talk about the challenges of telling this story?**

**AC**: There were so many challenges I don’t know where to begin. Although I’d written some institutional histories, and the centennial history for a North Carolina town, writing Earthell’s story required a completely different skillset, one I didn’t yet have, but was committed to acquiring.

At Iowa Writers’ Workshop I told a few fellow writers about the amazing project before me and they all told me to shut up. “Never talk about what you’re going to write or your brain will conclude that you’ve already told the story and you’ll no longer feel the need to write it,” they said.

So I stopped talking about it, but I didn’t stop thinking about it. It worried me. It scared me. I knew I didn’t know how to write it but someone was counting on me to do exactly that.

An embarrassing number of years passed while I honed my craft. I lived near D.C. for a few years and contacted the FBI to see if they had records. I did more research. I pulled out my old notes. I started writing.

It was slow and difficult. Finally I had sixty pages to share with the woman who had originally trusted me with her story. And she hated it.

**4. Earthell, could you talk about your impressions when you saw the first and final drafts?**

**EL**: I was uncomfortable with the first draft because I felt it gave the wrong impression. The language, the tone, the scenery, it wasn’t accurate. The portrayal of my family wasn’t correct at all. I was offended! My daughter said maybe it’s not a good idea; maybe you shouldn’t do it.

Now that it’s finished, I can read this book and feel it… not just because it is my story but because I can relate. Reading it is surreal; it’s like I’m still there. It feels so familiar. I actually said these things.

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**5. A lot of research went into writing the book. Avery, you traveled to many of the places where the book is set and went to FBI headquarters in Washington, DC. What did you learn that surprised you?**

**AC**: I met with many roadblocks at the FBI; without a death certificate for Mother Franklin, I couldn’t view any files they might have had on her. I couldn’t find one anywhere, though anyone who knew of her said she had died shortly after the girls were returned. Others involved in this story were still alive and therefore their files were not open to me either. This led me to visit Savannah, where Mother Franklin and her driver were based. There, Sharen Lee, the reference librarian at the Bull Street Library, helped me clearly see not only Savannah in 1971 but also the city at an earlier time, the time of Frog Town and Sweet Daddy Grace. A more complete picture of the itinerant evangelist began to form as did the complexity of the South during that era.

I was surprised to learn about all the unrest at that time. I was shocked and saddened by the lack of civil rights progress and amazed by the stories of Sweet Daddy and Reverend Ike. (Whites had their own mesmerizers at that time as well. Oral Roberts comes to mind).

Across the country, people were impatient and angry—not unlike today; women were fighting for equal rights, students were protesting the war, Black Americans were still waiting to see greater change, six years after the Civil Rights Bill had been signed.

Change was happening whether people were on board with it or not; many in the South were not.

I was also surprised to learn that weather likely played a role in their itinerary. A storm hit Charlotte the day the girls were expected to return; Tropical Storm Doria hit Savannah at the same time which most likely forced their travel inland. Looking at archival maps, it was possible to trace their journey and make some educated guesses at the churches and communities where

Mother Franklin and her entourage stopped. Doria left a swath of destruction in its wake, like the many protests swirling around at that time, and like Mother Franklin herself.

Several family members remember hearing that the girls had been spotted in Mexico. Given the time they were gone and the car they were traveling in, along with the girls’ memories, I doubted that they journeyed that far. When I found Mexico Beach on the Florida map, it was an “aha” moment.

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**6. Earthell, what surprised you about what Avery uncovered?**

**EL**: I was surprised by the challenges we faced then as blacks . . . I did not know that school segregation was still going on in 1971. I understand why the church was such a big part of this era and the false prophets who were everywhere, because you had to believe in something other than what you saw daily. I was also surprised by the various places we visited after we were kidnapped and the unsettledness of the era for us as blacks.

**7. Earthell, could you tell us about the real Mother Franklin, the traveling evangelist who kidnapped you and your sister and why she wasn’t prosecuted?**

**EL**: She was a manipulator and a liar. Mother Franklin may not have even been her real name. She traveled to different places and she could portray what she wanted and then didn’t return. After our time with her she disappeared. I heard snippets when my mom would be talking with her friends. She said if she ever saw the woman again she’d kill her and this scared me. I didn’t want my mom to get in trouble. Years went by and when she didn’t come back, the fear had left. Someone said later that she’d passed.

**8. The book is set in 1971, a year that included race riots, the March on Washington, the Supreme Court’s unanimous decision to uphold busing as a means of racial desegregation, and Eldridge Cleaver’s expulsion as head of the Black Panther party. Avery, how do you weave these events into the story, which takes place between August and December 1971?**

**AC**: The busing issue is central to the story. Forced to devise a busing plan to integrate the school system, Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools delayed the start of school that year; this delay is

one of the motivating forces behind the mother’s decision to allow her girls to leave with Mother Franklin.

The activities of various protest groups—Crusade for Voters, the Revolutionary People’s Communication Network, and Malcolm X United Liberation Front—are factually presented in the book. Young Black men wanted to have their say and do their part. I believe a character like Luther, Mother Franklin’s right hand man, would have known what was happening. He would have wanted to participate. It was exciting to discover that Mother Franklin’s “tour” crossed paths with Kathleen Cleaver when she returned to the states to drum up support for her exiled husband’s next ventures.

Kathleen Cleaver spoke at Tallahassee’s Bethel Missionary Baptist on November 26, 1971 and though I found no records of the speech she gave that day, her words in the book were excerpted from other interviews, speeches, and articles she authored.

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The unrest in Savannah mentioned in the book is also based in fact. There were law suits filed against major companies regarding Savannah's discriminatory employment practices.

On a lighter note, it was a great year for southern football. One of the top high school teams in the South had been integrated that year and there was no denying that that led to incredible successes on the field. I loved reading about the University of Florida’s Gator Flop shenanigans and used that to give the somewhat hapless PI his own game plan.

**9. Earthell, how did what happened to you in 1971 impact your childhood and shape your adult life?**

**EL**: I never knew we were in danger at the time. I didn’t feel any fear and that was probably a good thing because I might have tried to run off and who knows what would have happened then. If I’d called any attention to myself it might have exposed other things they might have been doing. Not drugs, I never saw any of those. But other things.

When my sister and I got back and returned to school, other kids laughed at us; they picked at us. There was a lot of misunderstanding about what had actually happened to us. That made me shut down. I held onto a lot of anger.

This made me more cautious as a mom, less trusting of others. I never let my kids spend the night at someone else’s place.

Telling the story, talking about it, and now reading it has allowed me to get comfortable with it. Now I feel good. I don’t feel mad, I’m no longer sad. It provided a release and an acceptance.

**10. What do you both want readers to take away from the book?**

 **AC**: So much has changed since Earthell first asked me to write her story. Seventeen years ago it was less remarkable that we might team up to tackle this project. She had a story and needed a writer; I was the writer she knew. Both of us, regardless of the task in front of us, are the type of person who strives to do what is right; we give everything our best effort. Neither of us, in Earthell’s words, “never knew all this was coming with it.” We naively started down the path and just kept taking the next step and then the next one.

By trusting me with her story, Earthell gave me an incredible gift. It forced me to become a serious writer, a better writer, a better person.

Though this is a work of fiction, at its heart is her story, told so that others will know what happened in 1971—what can still happen today, when religion seeks to justify a multitude of sins; when others choose to look away, to remain silent, to claim that being poor, or black, or small, means you matter less.

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It’s also, as Earthell says, “a story about a story” one that we hope serves as a path forward, that helps bridge the gap that divides us. We hope that others will be inspired to build bridges of their own.

**EL**: On one level, reading this book is a story about two girls who thought they were being taken on a vacation to the beach. But it is greater than that. It serves to bridge a gap between two women—both mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives with determination. One Black, one white. Working to bring this story to publication has closed the big gap between us and allowed us to embrace our differences and appreciate our similarities. This story about the story, I believe, serves as an indication of how differences can be overcome to accomplish something great.