

THE TRUTH ABOUT GRANDMOTHERS

by Jill Althouse-Wood

EDITOR'S NOTE: *From what source does a first-time novelist draw inspiration? For Jill Althouse-Wood, it began with a very provocative opening sentence. From there, she followed her instincts to tell a story that is both contemporary in its fresh-*



Jill Althouse-Wood,

author of

Summers at Blue Lake



My grandmothers were lesbians, a truth they neither exposed nor concealed. Every Sunday they took their place in the third pew, left of the aisle, at Lakeside Lutheran. Their white-gloved daughter sat between them, drawing Jesus in the margins of the bulletin while they nodded and fanned away their sins or their guilt (or whatever it was they came to church to exorcise). Their fellow parishioners embraced them in the cool shadow of the Sunday sermon, even loved them as one should love sisters in Christ, but not without question. During the steady marches that Lutherans often mistook for hymns, the board members took turns policing the third pew—if only to convince themselves that my grandmothers' bond was solely economic. And they were momentarily convinced that it was. *The daughter is an angel. Or, They are members of the social commit-*

SUMMERS AT BLUE LAKE
by Jill Althouse-Wood
ISBN: 1-56512-496-0
Hardcover
Publication: August 2007

ness, and timeless in its truth, the story of legacies passed from one generation to another, and of a love more binding than the blood ties that hold together a family. Here is an excerpt from the first chapter.

tee. But at the service's end, my grandmas would lean into their final *amens* with more tilt toward each other than to the altar.

Then, even their friends accepted the verdict: these women were the daughters of Eve.

The congregants weren't proud of their judgments. Quite the opposite. They were as uncomfortable with them as they were with the stiff collars and shoes that pinched their flesh on the Sabbath. For my mother and her mothers, Sunday was a day of grace. People folded under the influence of the Gospel and chicken dinners until they were drunk on their own goodness.

Monday would come, and with it, a spiritual hangover. Once again, my grandmothers were acknowledged with a whisper, a nudge in the hardware store, a smile that lasted a second too long. There were other things, too—unspeakable other things that caused my mother to turn

away from me when I asked her about her childhood.

Maybe she was right to not tell me, her only daughter. She had moved away from her childhood, geographically and emotionally. She and my dad had married—a move that had taken her away from the dimpled hills of Pennsylvania to a similar topography in Virginia. They bought a house in a subdivision with driveways notching the sidewalk at regular intervals, and mailboxes (with one surname only!) flagging each notch. I completed their lives two years later.

I was a child of the 1970s. My mother pulled my hair back into daisy barrettes for most of the decade, and I never lacked for anthems—mostly disco music

at the roller rink. Attitudes had changed in the twenty-five years since Mom was a girl, at least on the outside. Feminism, along with civil rights, had strangled the press with its message of tolerance, but inside the bi-levels of Jefferson Heights, the slogans softened to a tap on the shoulder rather than a grip.

In our household, my father listened to my mother with more respect than most husbands, but he voted a straight Republican ticket, prayed the Pope's prayers, and watched sports while Mom cleaned the dinner dishes. Under this reign, the three of us watched the TV news of gay activity in San Francisco as if it, too, was an example of liberal extremism rather than a limb of our family tree.

The word was not forbidden in our house. I had heard it often and had practiced saying the beautiful syllables in my mirror. *Lez-bee-an*. It sounded exotic like *sapphire* or *emerald*, only

more purple like *amethyst*, jewels that were secret and dark and lovely in velvet boxes.

"Lezzz-be-ann." There was power in the *z* sound as it chiseled through my mouth. With only one child in the house, my parents seemed to forget the careful zones of adult conversation. My father squinted as he said the word in not so hushed tones to my mother. But the *z*'s didn't change his expression. . . . *Lesbian*. Though the resonance hypnotized me, and the power entranced me, the meaning evaded me.

For my fourth-grade family heritage report, I boasted that I was Scotch-Irish on my father's side, and on my mother's side we were Lesbian. I did not understand when Mrs. Faust sent me to the nurse's office to wait for my

mother after school. Nurse Witmer and my mother tried to explain the meaning of what I had said by using several visual aids. After pamphlets of young girls with new breasts and one long filmstrip about special kisses and touches, I said, "I already know about sex. What does that have to do with us being Scotch-Irish?"

My mother nodded to Nurse Witmer, and together, they fumbled over blunt phrases they had hoped wouldn't be necessary. With those judicious definitions, my education was complete. Visits to my grandmothers became charged with my new knowledge, as if I had just been given the secret ingredient in the family recipe for barbecue sauce. I never had to entertain the baggage of Mom's childhood; I could see my grandmothers with the wonder they were due. When I was with them, I felt cemented into my heritage in a way that surpassed the fourth-grade curriculum. ■

"Lez-bee-an. It sounded exotic like sapphire or emerald, only more purple like amethyst, jewels that were secret and dark and lovely in velvet boxes."

—JILL ALTHOUSE-WOOD

