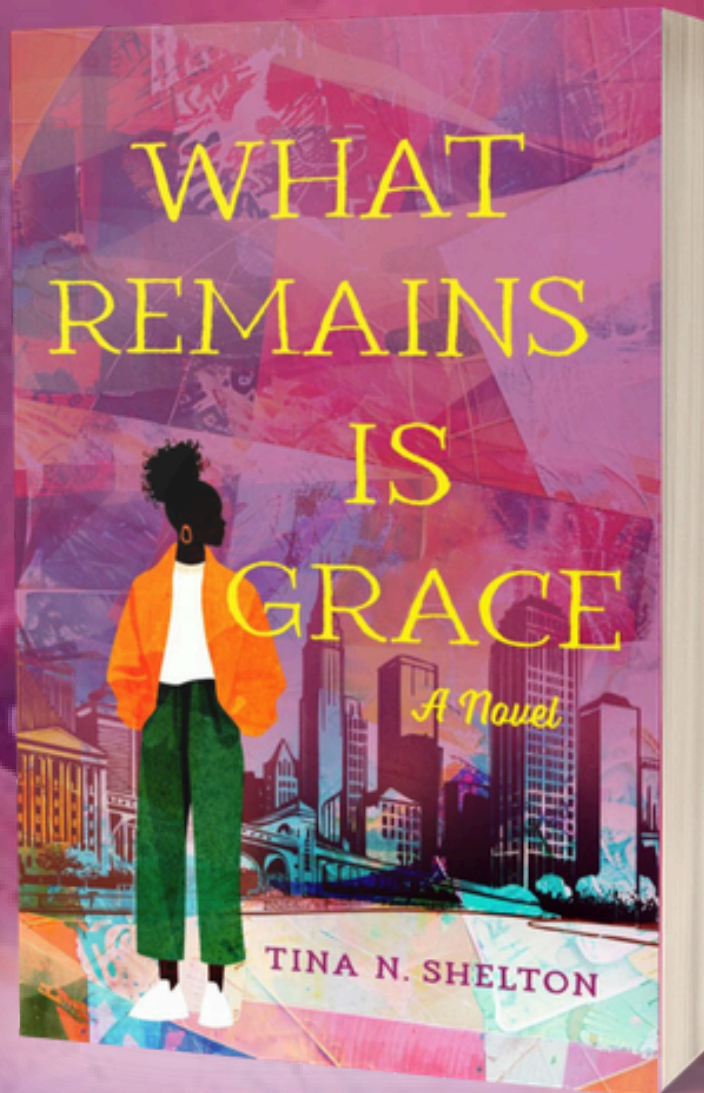


BOOK CLUB GUIDE



TINA N. SHELTON

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Gracey returns to Englewood after the North Shore teaching job is rescinded. How do place, identity, and worth get tangled up in her early grief over the lost opportunity? What does she discover about home that she did not expect?

2. Candi describes herself, during her years caring for Miss Nelda, as someone in survival mode and walking around in a fog. How does the novel honor the work of caregiving without sentimentalizing it? Where do you see the hidden cost?

3. Miss Nelda has died before the novel opens, but her presence drives much of what the three women do. How does a person's absence shape a story differently from their presence? What did you come to know about Miss Nelda through other people's memories of her?



Watch the
author's
response

4. Reflect on the title of the book: *What Remains Is Grace*. As you finished the book, what did you think remains for each woman (Gracey, Candi, Francine)? How is grace different for each of them?



Watch the
author's
response

5. The novel weaves in the history of redlining, contract-for-deed sales, and stolen land in Mississippi. How does inherited injustice show up in the everyday choices the characters make about money, marriage, vocation, and where to live?

6. Gracey says she does not want anything to remind her of Mississippi, and being in church will take her right there. How does her relationship to faith shift over the course of the book? What does it mean to lose your religion in a community that taught it to you?



Watch the
author's
response

7. Each of these three women carries something her mother—or Miss Nelda—could not put down. Where do you see Gracey, Candi, and Francine working to keep that inherited trauma from passing to whoever comes after them? Where do you see it quietly repeating in them despite their effort? What did the novel suggest it actually takes to break a generational cycle?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

8. Friendship across generations runs through this book: Candi with Miss Nelda, Candi with Francine, and the three women with each other. What does each friendship offer that family cannot? What does it not give?



Watch the
author's
response

9. Charlotte (Gracey's mother) left her daughters and moved down South. The book treats her decision with surprising tenderness at times. How did you feel about Charlotte? Were you able to forgive her, and does the novel ask you to?

10. Candi has stayed married to a husband she has been separated from for years. What do you make of her relationship with him? Does the novel ask readers to root for reconciliation, separation, or something else?



Watch the
author's
response

11. Francine's return to the South Side becomes the catalyst for the three women's adventure into Miss Nelda's past. What did you think they were going to find? What did they actually find? And what is the difference?

12. Abandonment hollows out something in the person left behind AND in the one who does the leaving. How does the novel show absence reshaping who a person believes herself to be? What, if anything, does the book suggest can be recovered when someone you needed to be there for you simply was not?

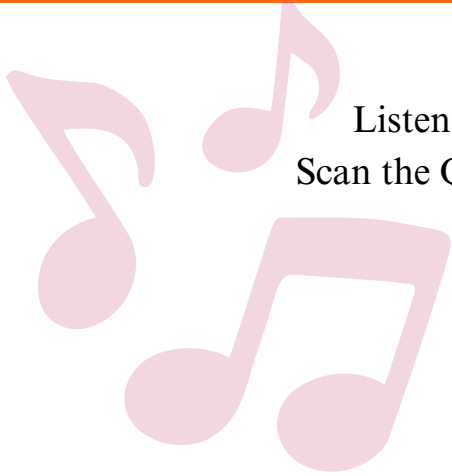


Watch the
author's
response

13. There is a line about people who turn their backs to the wind and run with it, and people who walk into it face forward. Which of these three women does each? When does the wind change?

14. If you had to choose one Bible verse, one song lyric, or one proverb that captured the heart of this book for you, what would it be and why?

BOOK CLUB PLAYLIST



Listen to the songs that inspired the book!
Scan the QR code to get to the YouTube playlist.



- Un-Break My Heart by Toni Braxton (1996)
- Don't Wanna be a Player - Joe (1997)
- Count on Me – CeCe Winans and Whitney Houston (1996)
- Fantasy – Mariah Cary (1995)
- This is How We Do It – Montel Jordan (1995)
- Before you Walk out of my Life – Monica (1995)
- On and On – Erykah Badu (1997)
- Melodies from Heaven – Kirk Franklin (1997)
- Silver and Gold – Kirk Franklin (1997)
- Ain't No Mountain High Enough – Marvin Gaye and Tammy Terrell (1966)
- Stand by Me – Ben E King (1961)
- The Battle is the Lord's – Yolanda Adams (1993)
- Beauty for Ashes – Crystal Lewis and Ron Kenoly (1997)
- Waterfalls – TLC 1995
- Killing Me Softly – Fugees & Lauren Hill 1996
- Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire – Roberta Flack (1997)

LETTER *from the* AUTHOR

After the Shaking, Grace Remains

By Tina Shelton

What Remains is Grace exemplifies how the best-laid plans can be shaken up, whether by us moving in the wrong direction or the injustices that surround us. It's how we handle the shaking that matters most. Who are we when the ground beneath us shifts? Where is God in the midst of these changes? In front, leading us to a place of peace, or behind, chasing after us as we charge full speed ahead on the path not paved for us? This novel is an attempt to answer these questions through flawed characters who are earnestly trying to lean into the possibility of their dreams.

This novel is about a few topics I've been ruminating on for quite some time: aging, love, and land. I had no idea how the three would come together, but the more I wrote, the more the characters revealed the story.

Nelda drives the story with her narrative. She is a culmination of the elderly women I've befriended throughout my time in pastoral ministry and the women I grew up around, mostly family. I was always struck by two things: one, their capacity to forgive extremely selfish acts by family, friends, and spouses. It seems that breaches and betrayals shrink over time. As hard as we fight to remember the wrong done to us, it doesn't hold the same power over us that it once did. Not that we've forgotten, but God, through time, over time, allows us to let go of the anger, the bitterness, the pain. We get tired, seemingly, of being angry and holding resentment. It takes up too much good energy. Besides, year after year, time peels away all the complex layers and allows us to see the fragile, little seed that caused all the trouble in the first place. And two, most of the women I've met who consider themselves "old" have lived pretty colorful, accomplished lives, but you can't see past their present-day conversations of loss, physical pain, and this frustrating and even ridiculous new world that seems to be passing them by. I recall visiting a nursing home, and outside each person's door was a picture of that person in the room, young and vibrant, in the prime of their lives as parents, doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. I'd look at those pictures and then peer into the room of them resting in the prison of their aged bodies, and suddenly, I wanted to know their story. The stories that have been buried by time. Time, the double-edged sword that it is. Hence, Nelda, a woman with a rich history, whose good has gone forgotten.

This ties in with another topic I care deeply about, love. It seems we either spend our lives lavishing in an abundance of it or agonizing over a lack thereof. Bell Hooks, in her book, "All about Love" writes this, "Love allows us to enter paradise. Still many of us wait outside the gates, unable to cross the threshold, unable to leave behind all the stuff we have accumulated that gets in the way of love. If we have not been guided by love's path for most of our lives, we usually do not know how to begin loving, or what we should do and how we should act." This I've found to be tried and true. As humans, we crave love, but if we didn't grow up with it, we have no idea how to give or receive it. And then sometimes, the little understanding we do have gets robbed by a continuous stream of infractions from others that ultimately mount up to a block between us and true happiness.

LETTER *from the* AUTHOR

Gracey and her sisters, Francine and Joanna, want love in abundance. The love they were robbed of growing up—their father suddenly passed, their grandmother moved away, and their mother abandoned them—these events still haunt them and make them fear losing the love they do have and perhaps never being loved in the future as they dream.

The Downing women have endured three generations of a love drought. Never having enough has caused them, in some cases, to self-sabotage and inadvertently harm the lives of those closest to them. I wanted to see if this could realistically be resolved. If the old hymn is correct, earth has no sorrow heaven can't heal, then I wanted to see that through as a co-creator with God. What happens when we do forgive? What happens when we do let go? What happens when we have courageous conversations and take chances on reconciling? What if we love as 1 John 4:19 says: "We love because he first loved us"? There are times when it doesn't work out, and we know to continue living a boundaried life, and there are other wonderful times when God moves, the waters part, and we are able to come together.

Finally, the notion of land ownership has moved me since I read about the daughters of Zelophehad in the scriptures. I remember, as a teenager, feeling so proud of these women who refused to let their father's land go just because he didn't have any sons to inherit it. They took their petition to Moses, the Priest, and the leaders, and Moses took it to the Lord, and the Lord ruled in favor of the daughters, granting them the land and their father's inheritance. And here's my question. What if they never asked for it? What if they never advocated for themselves? Would the assembly of men and God have voluntarily given them the land? Likely not. Though it may have crossed the minds of the men, they would have brushed it off as a ridiculous thought. And God, ironically, was unable to move without the women taking the first step.

From these five sheros: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah, and Tizrah, I learned that women need to fight for land ownership, especially the land that's been in their family for several generations. I'm always saddened to hear of families selling off their land because they can't afford to maintain it; family homes with decades of cherished memories are torn down and replaced with businesses or condos. When do we fight to keep what our ancestors worked so hard to give us? Aside from the Evanston reparations battle and all the issues Chicago suburbs have faced with redlining/rezoning to avoid the "white flight," Chicago faced the South Side shifting from predominantly white to predominantly black in a span of twenty years; the core of this is land ownership for women. It still amazes me that women weren't eligible for a mortgage until the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974.

I'm hoping this book will encourage families to keep their family homes and pray/trust God for provision. And I'm hoping women will be even more inspired to own their own property.

These are the major themes in this Grace novel: the strands that braided themselves. I hope it's as much a blessing to read as it was to write. I hope it makes us better sojourners of this one wild and precious life, as Mary Oliver calls it. I hope it embodies Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." (NIV)

SPECIAL FEATURE

A LETTER TO MISS NELDA

August 15, 1969

Dear Miss Nelda,

Thank you for fighting on behalf of our families who have been displaced. It's unbelievable what's been happening to us, absolutely sickening. Why should we have to move just because folks don't like the color of our skin? We are equally human inside and out.

You may not know that my great-grandparents were slaves who worked on a plantation in Alabama. My great-grandfather was a candle maker, and my great-grandmother was a doctor of sorts, helping to birth the babies and tending to them in their infancy. Neither one of them could stand being under the helm of oppression. Finally, they mustered up the courage to escape one quiet dawn after their master's family had set sail abroad and the overseer was found oversleeping. They followed directions through the wooded areas and along the Tennessee river banks to the Underground Railroad and ended up in Evanston on their way to Canada. But as the Lord would have it, the abolitionists needed someone who could take the fat from mutton and make it into candlesticks for their chandeliers.

So my great-grandparents stayed and made a family. And over time, their children grew up, married townspeople of color, and educated their own children through Foster Elementary and Evanston Township High School. They were educated but still limited in what they could do, if you get my drift. They weren't allowed to participate in extracurricular activities and had to go to the African American YMCA just to play basketball and swim in the pool. It was my parents, though, who finally got a piece of the pie, as they say, when they came back from college and got started working in the community as a pharmacist and a teacher.

SPECIAL FEATURE

A LETTER TO MISS NELDA

As you can imagine, my father and mother were so proud to have a 3-bedroom home. It was a beautiful farmhouse with its own porch. They were so particular about the furniture and the family heirlooms that went into it. And then one day we got a letter in the mail, telling us we had to move, telling us we had one month; there was no apology. It began with the words, "Unfortunately, due to rezoning, this residential property will soon be demolished...."

Nelda, I don't need to tell you, our family was heartbroken. We knew they didn't want us there. But we had set our faces like flint to be able to take all of the hatred they gave us day after day. The grass was cut the second it rose above carpet level, and we cleaned up the trash no matter how much garbage was thrown on our sidewalk. We took the stares, the name-calling, the threats; the neighbors were always peering over the fence, spying on us, looking for something to complain about. And when they couldn't find anything, they'd make something up.

And we knew they wanted us to go and live in the 10th ward, which was the only place black folks could qualify for a home. It was overcrowded, and the area wasn't cared for nearly as well as the rest of the city. The properties were dilapidated, some of the streets were unpaved, and some of the homes lacked proper plumbing. We knew that moving meant life would suddenly be very different. This wasn't the dream the candlestick maker and midwife had for their descendants.

So thank you, Nelda, for fighting for justice. Thank you for seeing us. Thank you for hearing us. You and I both know God is the one who determines the times and the seasons and the places we're supposed to live. When greed gets in the way, God's will for us to live free is hindered. When we can't live free, we

SPECIAL FEATURE

A LETTER TO MISS NELDA

can't have peace. And when we can't have peace, the rivers within boil constantly.

I used to think justice would come in my lifetime, but now I understand this fight will outlive me. Yes, we got a little money from the lawsuit, and we were able to move to the outskirts of the city where there's more tolerance for folks like us, but nothing will erase the pain and disgrace my parents faced. And they never did put a business on the property. All that hoopla over nothing. I don't know from whom you draw your strength, but we are most grateful to be the beneficiaries of your courage.

*Sincerely,
Theodora Lattimore*

INTERVIEW *with the* AUTHOR

- 1. Tell us about the Chicago that shaped you. What corner of the city does your imagination keep returning to when you sit down to write?**

I'm suburban kid who grew up in Evanston, IL. But my ex-husband was from Chicago and his father was of Grace Calvery United Methodist Church, which was on 78th and Loomis. We lived in the parsonage there for a while, with my father-in-law while we got on our feet. It was here that I fell in love with the community. Everyone watched out for each other and there was an after-school program that I took part in at the church as well as their Vacation Bible School in the summers. I recall the man at the fruit stand in the summer mornings and conversations with neighbors that just lifted my spirit. And I got to know the children who were so full of energy and loving life. It was a season I'll always cherish.



- 2. Miss Nelda dies before the novel opens. What made you decide to build an entire book around a woman who is already gone? How did you keep her present on the page anyway?**

One thing I've noticed in ministry is that the elderly want to be remembered for their accomplishments. We see them in their retirement days, when their lives have slowed down, but they are so happy to share about who they were, where in their hey day. In some cases, we hear these stories over and over again to the point where we can finish their sentences. But for some, when dementia sets in, the stories disappear, and we have no idea who people were in the past. Their history becomes locked in a human vault, and all you have are clues around the house to put together like a puzzle. I wanted to encourage curiosity in others. For Nelda, she was able to reach into her long-term memory and share what she could, but it didn't give us the whole picture of who she was. I love it that Candi was on a mission to get to the bottom of things, and that's essentially how I kept her on the page.

- 3. The novel alternates between Gracey's voice and Candi's voice. Whose voice came to you first? Was there a moment during the writing when one of them pushed back on you or refused to say what you had planned for her to say?**

Gracey's voice was the first to come to me, perhaps because my children are in their 20s, so I'm familiar with the age. But Candi was the one who pushed back the most. I didn't know her as well as I thought I did. I didn't understand why she made the decisions that she did. I really had to wait and let her character speak to me. I wanted her to be my free-bird character, but in many ways I came to realize she wasn't as free as I thought she was. It seems she lives on the outskirts of her family so she can breathe.

INTERVIEW *with the* AUTHOR

- 4. The title is *What Remains Is Grace*. How did that title come to be? If a reader closed the book and asked you plainly what actually remains for these women, what would you tell them?**

I chose the title from a list the publishers presented. I appreciated the way they tied the title and the main character together nicely. So many Christian books have the name as a main character and it's perhaps because grace is like honey to the bitterness we encounter daily. Grace makes it so we can get past the hard things and still be in tact. Gracey and her sisters give more than their fair share of grace to their mother, and they deserve more than a fair share of grace in their lives. We all know the phrase, hurting people hurt people. The girls will have to continue to work to resolve their own trauma so that they can love in ways God calls them to do so. Each one of them can help a thousand just by sharing their story of overcoming rejection.

- 5. You weave the history of redlining, contract-for-deed sales, and Black land loss into the story with a light hand. What did that research require of you emotionally?**

All of these stories are were floating around growing up, in the South and in Evanston. Now there are museums that carry this information. The Shorefront Legacy Center, for instance, can give detailed accounts of the housing disparities in the past in Evanston. I'm so proud of Evanston being the first city to give reparations in order to acknowledge the harm done to African-Americans in the past. I just wanted to highlight the harm done to our parents, grandparents and great grandparents. The more we talk about it, the more we can make a difference. Maybe measures can be made to make sure it doesn't continue to happen.

- 6. The Mississippi scenes have a specific texture—the porch, the water, the family land. What did you have to know, or unlearn, before you could write them?**

I spent many summer days in Mississippi on my grandparent's farm growing up. I think I was just recalling as much as I could. Some days were great and some were miserably hot in a house with no air-conditioning. The porch was the front room. I'd sit on the swing and listen to my mother and aunts trade colorful stories. At one time I kept a journal of their conversations because they were better than television, but I lost it decades ago.

- 7. You've described the three generations of Downing women as living in a "love drought." What does that phrase mean to you, and where did it come from in your own life?**

I feel like we all deal with love droughts at some time in our lives. I was married for nineteen years, but there wasn't a lot of love. We did what we had to do to run a household, take care of the children, etc. but beyond that, there wasn't much. It wasn't until a decade after my divorce that I found someone who showered me with love and I realized I'd been in a drought. I found myself being more affectionate than I'd ever known myself to be outside of motherhood. This kind of love opened up a whole new world for me. I felt refreshed and still do. Mind you, I was quite happy as a single woman, but I continued to feel like there was an addition on the horizon.

INTERVIEW *with the* AUTHOR

- 8. You write Christian fiction that does not shy away from anger, betrayal, or the ways the church itself has failed Black women. How do you hold both faith and honesty on the same page? Was there a Scripture, a hymn, or a prayer that sat on your desk while you wrote this book?**

I think faith and honesty go hand in hand. The whole reason we have faith, is because we see the truth everyday, whether we speak about it or not. Inwardly, we know the feelings we hold, jealousy, bitterness, resentment, hatred, lust, sadness, pride. These are all cards we hold close to our chest. Everybody struggle with something. It's human nature. We have faith that God will somehow dig deep within and give us courage to have the hard conversations so that we can unearth some of these things and just work together to find peace. When a church causes harm, it takes time to recover. She might church hop for a while until she settles on church on demand via the internet. What if we could just learn to be better representatives of Christ in the church. Leaders have to deal with their own traumas before they pass them down to entire congregations.

- 9. Which of these characters stayed with you longest after you finished the book? Is there a moment in the novel where you almost put yourself on the page?**

I suppose Nelda stayed with me the most. While she wasn't my favorite in the first book, she became so in the second. She didn't really ask for much. She had her feisty moments, yes, but really, she brought a tenderness to life that we don't often see. In the first and second book, there was always this sense of, "I did what I could with this life I was given, now what are you going to do with yours?"

- 10. If a young woman like Gracey reads this book, what do you hope she carries away? What about a caregiver like Candi? What about a reader who has been Francine, the one who left?**

I hope young women are encouraged to hold out for the guy who will love her they way she deserves to be loved. It's so easy to want a boyfriend so bad you settle for the player, but it only hurts you in the long run. God has someone set aside and when the time is right, the two of you will stand out in 3-D from across the room.

For caregivers, I hope they give themselves permission to be patient with themselves. To embrace all the feelings, peace, gratefulness, joy, fatigue, frustration, desperation... give them to God. Caregiving especially between loved ones, can be a very sacred space. God is very present as we are witnesses to our loved ones into life after death.

For Francine, sometimes you have to go to a place where you can think and figure things out on your own. Find the folks who will love you unconditionally and also guide you in the right direction without making you feel bad for being in the situation you're in.

INTERVIEW *with the* AUTHOR

11. **Your debut, *This Ain't No Promised Land*, won three major awards in its first year: the Christianity Today Book Award, the Foreword INDIES Gold, and the ECPA Top Shelf. Did those awards change the way you approached writing this second book?**

Not at all. For some reason, I couldn't really feel the awards, though I'm extremely grateful for them. Folks were so concerned for Gracey and her sisters, I just wanted to write about how they were doing, and Nelda's story kind of rose up as well—folks wanted to know what happened to her.

12. **What is one Bible verse that captures the heart of this book?**

I saw a lot of people say that Proverbs 3:5–6 was the verse for my first book, but I really think it's applicable for this second book as well. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge God, and God will direct your paths.”

We start out leaning on our own understanding, and we end up trusting in God. So I feel like every problem is like that. Our own understanding says, “Oh my God, what are we gonna do? This is not gonna work out. Let me try to figure it out. Let me try to do this.” And then when that fails, we say, “Okay, let me trust God.”

God bless every single soul who can trust God first and learn to let go of their own understanding. They get there that much quicker, I believe.

13. **Where can readers find out more about you?**

Visit me online at TinaShelton.com or follow me on Instagram @[authortinashelton](https://www.instagram.com/authortinashelton)