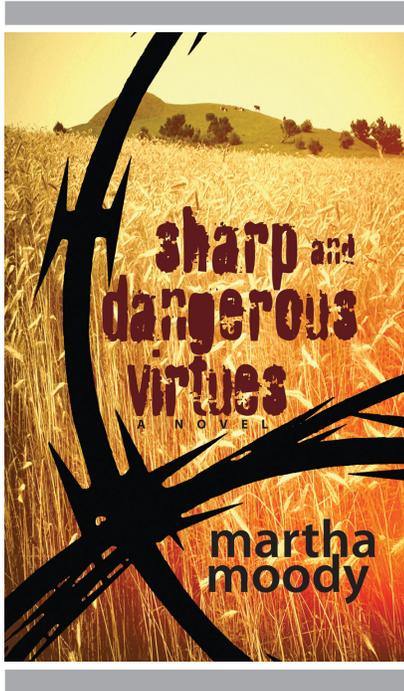


Q&A WITH

Martha Moody

AUTHOR OF

Sharp and Dangerous Virtues



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You usually write about strong, flawed women and their relationships. And—not surprisingly, as a doctor yourself—you usually write about doctors. Why did you want to write about a dystopian future in Dayton, Ohio?

Through the years, often through my medical practice, I've met people whose lives and families were uprooted by forces—wars, discrimination, clashes of big ideas and powers and egos—over which they had little or no control. I'm not sure any of our lives is as secure as we may think it is. I wanted to explore that.

Also, in 1998 I was driving home from the grocery store and had a vision of tanks rolling down the street. It just hit me. And going back further, when I was in college, I visited Yugoslavia. The place was a surprise to me because it seemed so normal, even though it was behind the Iron Curtain. Later, in the mid-nineties, places I'd visited in Yugoslavia were war zones, which shocked me. I'm sure that played a part in my vision.

The Heartland Grid, an enormous dedicated agricultural area established by the government, plays a key role in Sharp and Dangerous Virtues. Where did the idea for the Grid originate?

Two sources: 1. from driving repeatedly through the flat, green landscape between Dayton and the shore of Lake Erie, where my family vacations; 2. from having worked in a satellite medical office. In a satellite office, you can feel like you're special and not at all appreciated by the main office. Conceptually, the Grid is a satellite office.

You seem very interested in water.

Anyone walking through downtown Dayton can see signs marking water levels from the 1913 flood, and a number of local parks were established near the dams built later to protect the city. Being aware of that—and vacationing looking at Lake Erie—just started me thinking. Then I read a fascinating book about Ohio water history. So much of why things exist where they do depends upon water. Most cities and towns were established because of it.

There are several characters the reader follows through this book. Why did you choose to focus on them?

I wanted a family a bit like mine with normal day-to-day concerns—that's Chad and Sharis and their sons. I wanted someone in water—that's Lila, the water commissioner. I wanted someone very kind whom circumstances force to harden—that's Tuuro, the church custodian who finds a boy's body. I wanted a person so wrapped up in their own world they don't see the dangers around them—that's Charles, the nature center director.

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Martha Moody, author of *Sharp and Dangerous Virtues*.

Did you know how the story would end?

Yes and no. I had a general idea of the shape of the novel, but I didn't know who would live and who wouldn't. It bothers me when fictional characters are signaled as doomed from the beginning. One aspect of war, as I understand it, is that its victims are random. So I had a bright idea. About halfway through my first draft, I put the names of all the characters in a paper bag and asked my four sons to each pull out two or three. The names they pulled out were the characters who survived.

My three older sons remember doing this. Not long ago when I was cleaning out a closet I found the bag. And I threw it out, darn it.

This story was started years ago. What took you so long to finish it?

It was first finished in about 2003. My editor at the time didn't want it. My first novel, *Best Friends*, had come out a couple years before. My wonderful agent then—Harriet Wasserman, now retired—said, wait and publish something else, then re-submit this one. I had two more novels published. Between working on those manuscripts I fiddled and re-fiddled with *Sharp and Dangerous Virtues*. My best friend and old college roommate, Jill Herman, kept pushing me, saying, "I think about that book all the time!" At some point my new agent re-submitted it to my (new) editor, who also didn't want it. Thank goodness my agent Elizabeth Weed and her assistant Stephanie Sun were persistent in seeking a publisher and found a great home for it at Ohio University Press.

Are you expressing any political viewpoint in this work?

I tried hard not to express or illustrate my political views. One of my goals was that someone reading this book would think, whose side is this author on? From what I've seen, the future develops in unexpected ways, and unanticipated consequences are legion. I wanted to be surprised by the twists and turns of happenings in the world I imagined. With a political agenda, a person is writing to make a point. I wrote to explore ideas and leave myself open to something surprising.

What was the hardest thing to write?

I didn't want Tuuro to harden. But he had to.

What aspect of the book most disturbs you?

The SafeHaven Camp. The games and slogans and cafeteria tents seem perfectly plausible. You watch: at some point in the future, the hospitality industry will be contracted by a government to house and control refugees.