

EXCERPT



The Surface of Water A Novel

April 9, 2024 | \$20, 336 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0753-2

Megachurch pastor Matthew Goodman is tired, focusing on the demands of his work. What he doesn't know about his new assistant, Trish Card, and her real reason for appearing will dismantle his world. In the #ChurchToo era, this novel invites readers to see life's shadowed edges— isolation, power, and abuse—illuminated by the light of truth.

The Story of a Megachurch Pastor and His Secret

"Good fiction is made up of a million individual threads woven together into an enormous tapestry. The Surface of Water is such a novel. With complexity, careful skill, and nuance, Beach kept me on my toes as she led me through the telling of Pastor Goodman and Trish Card's story, coaxing me along with compelling narrative and fully realized characters. Beach shares a tale about the beauty and ugliness of relationships, the church, and the lives we choose to live."

—Susie Finkbeiner, author of *The All-American* and *The Nature of Small Birds*

Matthew Goodman stood alone. Wind-driven sand skittered along the Lake Michigan shore as waves smashed sand. Snowpacks still spotted the wide and empty beach. The March wind had swept everyone away—builders and beachcombers. He breathed. No cameras or I-MAG screens or ten thousand seats.

Alone. Finally.

He should go too. It was nearly two hours back to Chicago. Instead, he hunched deeper in his wool coat, swiveling to the site. They had made plans; now it was only when. He had diverted funds twenty years ago—against Roni's wishes—to build a chapel, a holy space for God. It would perch on the overlook at Living Waters, past the condos and pool and seat-crammed deck—a chapel where walls of windows could watch the far stretch of water.

This was the rare desire that moved him anymore. It was the least he could do for the One who had given him much—here at his thin space, as the Irish would say. His shoulders lowered. When had the thin places gone thick?

The wind buffeted the beach grass. The strawlike grass hadn't regained its color. He tensed and turned. The lake was a rolling plain that beckoned, and he walked toward it. His Allen Edmonds loafers neared the moving edge.

One swim. That's what else he wanted. His energy lifted. That's what he wanted most. The icy water would be a . . . friend. It would quiet things. It would quiet everything. Maybe forever. The water would give him what he sorely wanted.

A chance to disappear.

—taken from the prologue



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Cynthia Beach is a professor of creative writing at Cornerstone University and author of *Creative Juices for Writers*. She has an MA in journalism from Wheaton College and an MFA in fiction writing from the Northwest Institute of the Literary Arts. She is also a trained spiritual director. Cynthia directs a faith-based writing workshop, Scriptoria, with Gary D. Schmidt. She lives near Grand Rapids, Michigan, on a quiet seven acres with her husband, Dave.

A “Counter Testimony” Story: A Broken Hallelujah

What role did a “what if” question play in your writing process and character development?

Cynthia Beach: It was perhaps November 2008, when characters 55-year-old Pastor Matthew Goodman and 25-year-old Trish Card arrived. Goodman came to my mental door, invited there by a “what if” question. What if a successful pastor is a Richard Cory?

Richard Cory is the glamorous and tragic gentleman-celebrity in a poem by three-time Pulitzer-prizewinner E. A. Robinson. In high school, I met Robinson’s poem “Richard Cory” and could not forget it. In it, the working town’s celebrity—the guy everyone loves and wants to be—has an internal life vastly different from his external, and, in the end, self-harms. This powerful poem reverberates in popular culture. Multiple songwriters have written about this troubling figure, including Simon & Garfunkel. The poem taught me the complexity of being human. Some folks who seem to have it all, in fact, do not.

So, this “what if” question arrived—but this time with an evangelical pastor. And not just any pastor, but a wealthy broadcast pastor with a Chicago megachurch—a pastor who is good-looking and articulate and wildly successful. But Matthew’s success doesn’t fill him. Why not? Matthew has shuttered his soul and fails to explore the discordant chaos around his father, radio evangelist Jacob Goodman. And what of Esther? The memory of Father’s young assistant disrupts him years later. So, yes, what if? What if a successful pastor is a Richard Cory?

What larger question does this novel seek to answer?

Cynthia: A central theme in this novel is: what happens when we in our Christianity or Christian institutions value image over truth—and Love comes a’calling?

What’s distinct about *The Surface of Water* is what longtime theologian Walter Brueggemann might call “counter testimony.” Brueggemann helps us understand the polarity of truth we may experience as God’s children by framing it with these contradictory phrases: “core testimony” and “counter testimony.” Core testimony would say God is good (Ps. 34:8), and that if we obey God, we’re rewarded (Ps. 1). It would say that God is present with us (Ps. 16:8). Core testimony is the positive side—the victorious side. On the other hand, counter testimony names the darker side of our experience. It asks “is God good?” (Jer. 20:7) or admits that God is sometimes absent (Ps. 13). It’s the side that moves into fierce laments (Ps. 88) and acknowledges suffering (Acts 9:16).

The Surface of Water is a counter testimony story, a broken hallelujah. It examines the dark side of power for spiritual leaders and church life—and, frankly, life with God.

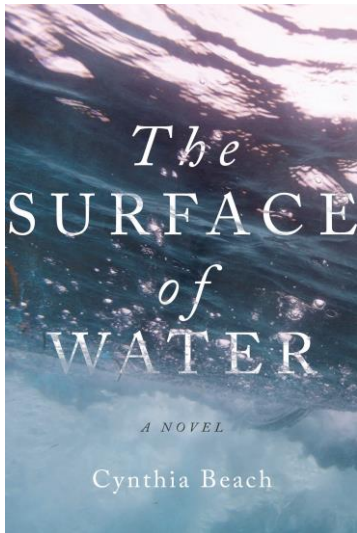


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Q & A



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“Trust Cynthia Beach to weave a good story, create authentic characters, and challenge the reader to greater wisdom and compassion. I hope to see more stories as honest as this one.”

—**Vinita Hampton Wright**, author of *Simple Acts of Moving Forward for Now* and *The Art of Spiritual Writing*

How would you describe the story told in *The Surface of Water*?

Cynthia: Although edgy, the story is neither a titillating drama, nor a legalistic call to social justice. While sexuality exists, it is a psychologically astute sexuality woven into the spirit of a person. While alive to social justice issues, the novel doesn't preach; instead, it has understated depth. It lets readers experience characters like Maria, *las manos de Dios*, and scenes like the eating of “stone soup” with its sacred vibe. And while the story reveals a God who works, resolution doesn't come through deus ex machina. It's not a Hallmark special with an ending wrapped up. Instead, the ending comes powerfully through a true encounter with the God of love.

Readers will find real characters, not one-dimensional caricatures, which is especially vital in a story about a pastor. Readers travel with a celebrity pastor, a “Richard Cory,” who finds his status isolating and burdensome. They will discover a man who is complex—aggravating in his arrogance and accessible in his sadness, and a young woman whose past makes her both strong and troubled.

What could you share about your own personal story that would lend credibility to the topics addressed in this novel?

Cynthia: I write from firsthand experience as someone who has had a long tenure in Christian organizations. I have witnessed, in the words of Frederick Douglass, the “Christianity of the land” parting ways with the Christianity of Christ. Although currently serving at a conservative Protestant university, I also value Catholic sensibilities and studied spiritual direction under Catholic mentors. I credit Henri Nouwen for saving my spiritual life. My experiences also include the journey that my husband, a counselor, took in studying sexuality under Dr. Dan Allender, who pioneered sexual abuse counseling in the church.

#Metoo and #Churchtoo demand new stories that spotlight this dark issue. It's my hope that my experiences give *The Surface of Water* prophetic depth.

What insights do you hope readers gain from reading this novel?

Cynthia: The following five ideas are a few potential takeaways for the reader.

- True Christianity differs from Christian culture.
- Our spiritual leaders are complex human beings.
- Affluence and privilege can blind us to loving our neighbor as ourselves.
- We become lost in life and must find a path to renewal.
- Spiritual leaders can be bankrupt spiritually.



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