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'Renaissance' woman leads marriage therapy group

By Mike Haynes
Opinion

Melanie Wells is a renaissance woman, or at least a Texas version. She grew up in Amarillo with musicians as parents, went to Southern Methodist University in Dallas to study music, graduated in English, attended seminary, got a master's in counseling psychology and plays the violin but now calls it a fiddle.

She also leads what she calls an "outside-the-box group" of marriage and family therapists in Dallas and now, just in time for Halloween, a national publisher has released her suspense thriller novel, "When the Day of Evil Comes."

Oh, and she teaches a Bible study.

I've read only the first chapter of her book, but I'm confident in saying Wells is what Philip Yancey had in mind when I heard the famous author say 26 years ago that Christianity needs excellence in the arts, not just middling writers and painters and musicians who have devout intentions.

Wells got her spiritual start when she and friend Mary Ellen Alexander (now Garcia) randomly visited Amarillo churches as kids. "Neither of us knew anything about God or church," Wells said by e-mail. "Our friends who went to church just seemed happier than we were."

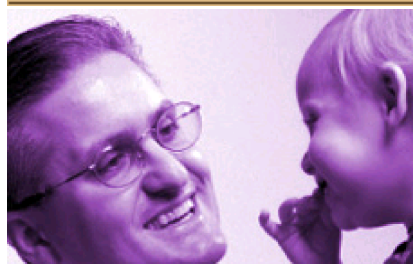
They settled into the youth group at Paramount Terrace Christian Church, where youth minister Scott Greer became Wells's "spiritual dad," and she also hung out in the choir under Jim Wells (no relation).

That group remained a "family" for years. It included my now-brother-in-law Bill Tredway and Karen Stewart (now Grantham), who became Wells's best friend. The contrast between the two illustrates Wells's maverick personality.

"She got all the way through Girl Scouts," Wells said. "I got kicked out in fifth grade."

She sounds much like Dylan Foster, the bikini-wearing SMU psychology professor we meet in the first chapter of her novel, someone who, like Dylan, would say things like "most Ph.D'd folks ... tend to be white and lumpy" or question herself for bothering God to thank him for a shady parking spot.

Although her book shows a cheeky wit and a spiritual base, it doesn't take long to get to unsettling



John Young, MD



Mike Haynes

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events a la Frank Peretti. The book opens with Dylan meeting a creepy, emaciated man named Peter Terry at Austin's Barton Springs, and if the rest of the chapters end like the first, not many readers will be putting it down.

At <http://peterterry.com>, a blogger claims her mother went into atrial fibrillation twice while reading the book in the hospital. "The nurses suggested that she not read this book at night," the blogger wrote.

Wells's multitasking life grew out of an Amarillo childhood where "my whole world was music and creative people." She said her friends' mothers "looked like Marion Cunningham from 'Happy Days.' Mine looked like Cher."

But the Christian tack of her suspense novel comes from the PTCC youth group. "It was a huge turning point for me," she wrote. "I cannot possibly overestimate the value that church had in my life. My grounding is spiritual, and that started in Amarillo at PTCC."

Mike Haynes teaches journalism at Amarillo College. He can be reached at AC, the Amarillo Globe-News or haynescolumn@hotmail.com. Go to www.haynescolumn.blogspot.com for other recent columns.

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