



PRESS RELEASE  
December 2, 2014

**For Immediate Release**  
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## An interview with NLB Horton, Author of *The Brothers' Keepers*



It could be argued there is no stronger instinct on earth than that of a mother to protect her family. The lengths she will go to do so are explored in *The Brothers' Keepers* (RidgeRoute Press/November 17, 2014/ISBN: 9780991401734/ \$14.99), written by award-winning journalist and world traveler NLB Horton. In *The Brothers' Keepers*, we meet archaeologist Grace Madison who is in Brussels cataloguing looted antiquities when her son's bride is attacked in Switzerland. Her day careens from bad to catastrophic when daughter Maggie disappears in France.

Coincidence is a luxury Grace cannot afford as history - saturated in espionage - is repeating itself.

**Q: The title of the book, *The Brothers' Keepers*, refers to heroine Grace Madison's determination to protect someone important to her. To what lengths would you go to protect someone you cared about?**

I would do whatever it took - and I remember the exact moment I decided that! I stood at the edge of the tel Dan (northern Israel) archaeological dig pit in 2007 with my husband and two then-teenage children. They had accompanied me on an archaeological survey as part of my master's degree from Dallas Theological Seminary. Heavy artillery fire began booming from Syria as staccato machine-gun reports peppered near the Lebanese border. An Israeli Defense Force camouflage-painted plane broke through an unseasonal cloud cover, circling the site. I hoped they could see we were unarmed! Grace Madison was born from this harrowing experience.

**Q: *The Brothers' Keepers* largely focuses on doing the right thing. Tell us about a situation in which you chose to do the right thing despite personal cost. Was it worth it?**

My business was thriving, my children were young, and I had to choose between a smaller role in their lives or limiting my company's growth. My husband was trying to transition from one career to another, and I was the family's wage-earner.

This was a particularly difficult time because money was tight, and the decision tore at who I was as a businesswoman and mother. I chose to limit my accounts, and eventually

put small school desks into my office to home school for a time. (The kids are now an attorney and an engineer, so they survived my teaching!) I've never regretted the choice to put family first, but it was not an easy one.

**Q: Grace is in the midst of rebuilding her marriage and struggles with the commitment she made vs. still being in love. How hard do you think it is to try to fall in love again when things become difficult?**

Love is a choice, not an accident. A covenant, not a commitment. Choosing to love again can be extremely difficult in a society of immediate gratification, and requires a willingness to risk transparency by trusting someone who has failed you. And the process requires an equal commitment from both partners; it can't be one-sided.

I know that God loves me despite my failings and throughout my spiritual deserts and rebellion. He exhibits grace to me, and I'm called to act in His image. (Note that I am, at times, an "epic failure," to use a favorite phrase from one of my characters.) Being mindful of this model of love and forgiveness is the only path I know to reconciliation.

**Q: What is the difference between a commitment and a covenant?**

A covenant is a binding agreement, sealed with an act of some kind. A commitment is dedication, without the binding element, and unsealed. A covenant is much stronger than a commitment. To develop a healthy respect for the strength of a covenant, mosey through the Old Testament!

**Q: Independence is important, even within a marriage. Does independence ever cause problems between spouses? How can you maintain a sense of self without living completely separate lives?**

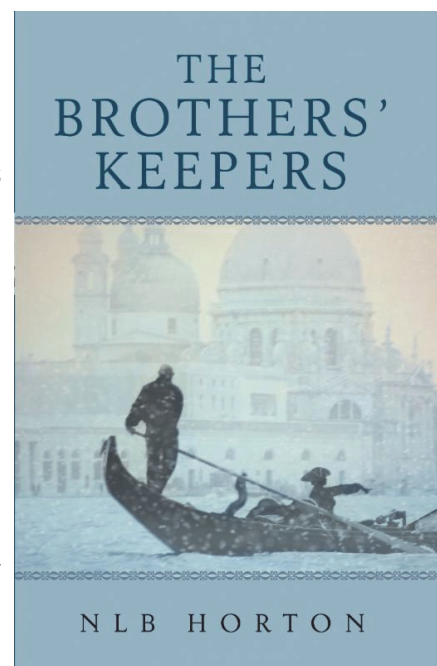
Independence AND dependence can cause trouble between spouses. There's a balance . . . somewhere. The answer lies in both partners working to identify with the Imago Dei, or Image of God. Being Christ-like can create a healthy sense of self and appropriate selflessness as a daily act of worship. (I confess that "epic failure" comes to mind again.)

**Q: *The Brothers' Keepers* is the second book in your *Parched* series. What meaning does the series name hold for you?**

Around the world, there is a shortage of water for drinking, irrigating crops, and supporting livestock. That is true even within US borders, especially in the West where I live. Historical issues aside, a huge factor in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is unequal distribution of water.

The world needs new sources of potable and economical drinking water, and we need to manage this most precious resource wisely. As a Christian and environmentalist, I believe humans are stewards of God's creation. *Parched* addresses stewardship of the highest order, and I hope the series raises awareness of this literally life-threatening issue. We can live without oil, but we can't survive without water.

**Q: Many books feature youthful heroes and heroines, but *The Brothers' Keepers* highlights the life of a more mature protagonist. What are some of the factors that led to your decision to write characters a little older than the norm? What kind of feedback have you had?**



Readers ADORE Grace Madison. The response has been overwhelming.

Regarding the decision to write about a more mature protagonist, what's not to love? Our decades should make us more nuanced, more self-confident, and less afraid to broaden our horizons. Middle age can be a season of richness and vitality that I hope to depict with joy and vigor - exactly the way I try to LIVE!

By developing the character of Grace's daughter, Maggie, I have the chance to contrast their generations while ignoring neither. From the octogenarians, to Grace and her husband, to Maggie and the "twenty-somethings" (her brother and sister-in-law), each group in *The Brothers' Keepers* responds to challenges in its own uniquely age-appropriate way.

**Q: In *The Brothers' Keepers*, we see two different women - one who raised a family and chose career later in life. The other sacrificed family life for career. Can a woman "have it all?"**

Of course we can. But "having it all" can come at an almost sacrificial price and creates repercussions that can last for decades. If you're going to "have it all," you'll have little of yourself left at the end of a difficult road that will probably be littered with shrapnel.

**Q: Is there a right or wrong answer to choosing a family or a career as your primary life goal?**

I think there are absolutes in life, but don't believe the family-versus-career talking point is one of them. Each woman has to make her choice by responding to her own situation and environment. And she has to be flexible because situations change, and marriages evolve over time. Spouses can grow in different directions, make untenable choices and act outside the boundaries established by the marriage vows.

I'd like to see less emphasis on this divisive dialogue, and more focus on women's education and empowerment - which lead to freedom of choice and self-determination.

**Q: Which of the characters in *The Brothers' Keepers* can you relate to the most, and why?**

That's a tough question. I can understand all of them - their motivations and desires - and enjoy them all, except when their conversations keep me awake at night by forcing me to take dictation at my computer! But like readers my age, I especially relate to Grace: her faith, skepticism, flaws, and humor. I agree with the reader who wrote, "I want to be Grace!"

I also identify with Grace because I am a Christian who is "in the world, but not of it." My career, my education, my travel: each of these elements formed me, but they occurred in the midst of people whose beliefs did not always ally with mine. I am invigorated by God's creation, as is Grace. I want to experience it! And I hope her character portrays a demographic of Christianity that is intelligent, fair, and fearless because of its belief in God's empowerment, one attractive to non-believers because these Christians live their faith with realism and love.

**Q: Every good story has an antagonist, and your *Parched* series is no exception. We learn some things about your villain in *The Brothers' Keepers*, however, that might make readers look at her in a new light. What does Laura McAlex's story teach us about having compassion for difficult people?**

MaAlex's past doesn't excuse her actions and choices, but reveals motivating aspects of her psyche. Discovering her life journey makes her behavior easier to understand, but no less evil. I hope her character is a warning to guard vigilantly against becoming hardened against the greater good. God's standards never change, regardless of our trials.

I love working with her character. It's not that she's sexually corrupt, as is so often the case with "the bad girls of literature." She's just bad to the bone in the ways most male antagonists are. How refreshing! When she and Grace lock up in book three, it's a humorous pitting of two very different Alpha Females.

**Q: You are a member of the venerable Explorer's Club whose membership has included Winston Churchill and Teddy Roosevelt. What is the history of that organization and what does being a member entail?**

I was so surprised to be nominated! Two letters of recommendation and months later, my membership was approved. The research in Israel and Jordan, an Amazon cruise (with a tarantula in the skiff), the graduate degree, and my unusual interests were important considerations for the vetting committee.

The Explorers Club was founded in 1904 and admitted its first female members in 1981. The goal was to create a place where the adventurous could gather, and the organization funds expeditions, research, seminars, and other scholarly endeavors. Explorer Club members were first to the North and South Poles, to the deepest point of the oceans, to the summit of Mt. Everest, and to the moon! I am honored.

**Q: You have traversed the globe - seeing five continents and surveying archaeological digs in the Middle East and beyond - which provided research and background for your books. Tell us about your most recent trip.**

I'm answering this question on a train between Vienna and Budapest, having crossed the North Atlantic on the Queen Mary 2 a month ago. I studied the Rosetta Stone and Cyrus Cylinder in London, then survived nicotine-infused St. Vitus's Cathedral in Prague. I tried not to yodel in Lucerne, and loudly hummed "The Lonely Goatherd" in Salzburg.

I'll be on the road for another six weeks, confirming research for book three in the series by revisiting digs and sites in Italy, Greece, and Turkey (unless ISIS invades, or the border with Turkey and Syria collapses). Grace Madison is on the move, although she's left her beloved camels in Jerusalem.

I could not write these manuscripts without knowing their settings well, and in some instances, intimately. I can picture the Temple Mount of Jerusalem at sunrise. I know what the Istanbul spice market smells like on a drizzly day. I catch my breath at the memory of height vertigo atop Machu Picchu. I remember the taste of wild blueberries after surprising a 1200-pound grizzly bear on the Kenai Peninsula. As useful as the Internet is for the copious research behind each book in the Parched series, nothing replaces living in Grace's tattered hiking boots.

**Q: You had incredibly successful careers in journalism and marketing. What brought you to writing fiction?**

Journalism, marketing, and advertising were enjoyable means to an end, but after the afternoon at tel Dan, I could not ignore the storyline that grew around Grace. No one was writing anything like the Parched series, so I decided to try to fill the void.

I have written all my life. My undergraduate degree is in journalism and my previous career prepared me to share Grace (and her friends and family) professionally, and provided daily practice with the written word.

**Q: How has your degree at Dallas Theological Seminary influenced your writing?**

I am VERY careful with the theology in my manuscripts! DTS is a premier institution with a longstanding reputation for excellence. My professors were peerless examples of aging joyfully and vigorously.

I returned to seminary seeking answers to questions created when what I was taught as a young woman didn't support the life I had lived. Along with a greater understanding, I left seminary with a vast library in fascinating subjects like Israeli Religion in the Ancient Near Eastern context, Ugaritic poetry, and the Intertestamental period. My office bookshelves are a geeky wonderland!

**Q: What plans do you have next for your Parched series?**

I'm writing book three now, which I hope to release in the fall of 2015. Then there are two, possibly three, more adventures for Grace.

**Q: What do you hope readers walk away with after they've finished reading *The Brothers' Keepers*?**

I hope they are invigorated! I pray they are encouraged. I trust they'll want to "camel up" with Grace as she continues to love God and praise Him in her own quirky, intelligent way.

**To keep up with NLB Horton, visit [www.nlbhorton.com](http://www.nlbhorton.com), become a fan on Facebook (NLBHorton) or follow her on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/NLBHorton) (NLBHorton).**

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