



*The Art*

OF KEEPING SECRETS

PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY

This Conversation Guide is intended to enrich the individual reading experience, as well as encourage us to explore these topics together—because books, and life, are meant for sharing.



## A CONVERSATION WITH PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY

*Q. This novel taps into a fear that many married women share—that they can never be certain of their husbands’ fidelity. What inspired you to explore this issue, and in particular, why did you decide to set up the story so that the husband has already died?*

A. I’m not sure I meant to explore infidelity or women’s fears about their husbands. What I did mean to explore were the issues of faith, trust and belief in our uncertain world. I always start a story with a what-if, and this story began with “What if everything she ever believed about her marriage was challenged, called into doubt?” For both the reader and myself, I wanted to ask the hard question: can you *still* believe when everything points in the opposite direction, when certainty is crumbling?

Annabelle has two choices—to let her faith disintegrate or to continue believing in her marriage. Her decision to believe in her husband, and their life together,

prompts action, sending her to Newboro to discover what he was doing before he died.

I set up the story so that the husband has already died so that the person who can best answer Annabelle's questions, and provide the proof that will dispel her doubt, is gone forever. Annabelle must examine her own beliefs and move toward her own truth, and if Knox were there to answer all her questions, she would never make the journey that has the potential to make her a stronger woman.

*Q. Often Sofie appears to love the dolphins in her life more than the humans. Why do you give dolphins such a central role in this novel?*

A. Dolphins have appeared in myth and story, and in countless pieces of art, for thousands of years. They often represent innocence and beauty, and frequently appear as "helpers." Humans seem to feel a compelling need to understand the dolphin, and we often attempt to do so through story, making the dolphin a god, a healer or a force for good.

I decided to explore the dolphin world because of my own interest in them, and I thoroughly enjoyed the research I did for the book, learning about their signature whistles, how they give birth and many aspects of their behavior. I've stood on the beach and watched dolphins, reached over the sides of boats to touch their

sleek backs. and wondered: what do they think about us? Do they talk to each other? To us? Are they capable of love? Just as Annabelle wants definitive answers about her husband, I found myself wanting solid, provable answers about the dolphins. But as Sofie learns and Annabelle comes to accept, answers aren't always possible. Often we must learn to live with uncertainty, believe without confirmation.

*Q. Liddy has died before the book opens, yet her actions have a profound effect on other characters—especially Annabelle and Sofie. What factors did you consider in shaping Liddy's character? Do you think she was a good mother?*

A. I hoped to show that just because someone is gone—to either death or another location—does not mean their influence has left with them. Both Knox and Liddy are dead, yet they remain vital to those who loved them. But memories are hazy at best, formed and shifted through time. Sofie and Annabelle must wrestle with their memories—the words said, the actions taken—without the assurance that their recollections are exactly true. When I shaped Liddy's character I knew that her words and actions, which take place before the novel begins, would continue to have authority over Sofie's and Annabelle's lives. Liddy's past deeds needed to be powerful and real. Although she is

gone, the ramifications of the lies she told and the decisions she made are still being felt.

I'm not sure I think Liddy was a good mother, as much as she was the best mother she knew how to be. Lies, deceit and fear are not good mothering techniques, yet they were all she knew to use to keep control of her life and protect her daughter.

*Q. Sofie's life is defined and constrained by the lies her mother told her, and the lies she tells others. What intrigued you about Sofie? Why did you decide to explore a character with such an unusual background? Do you think Sofie will be capable of living an honest life in the future?*

A. What intrigued me about Sofie was how she chooses to deal with the lies: she turns to the sea, and to dolphins, in particular—to the world of the unknown. She looks for meaning and solace in a place outside human love and connection. I wanted to explore how a young woman like her could possibly love when lies and deceit were all she's ever known. Can she reach out to another human? Can she ever trust?

I do believe Sofie can live an honest life, but not without cost. (Can anyone live an honest life without cost?) She must let go of certain fears, beliefs and doubts to truly love. Sofie didn't consciously choose to shut herself off from other people; she merely offered her love and soul elsewhere. Once she trusts someone

enough to open her heart again, she will be able to love again. Yet I also wanted to make Sofie an example—we might not all have as many secrets as she does, but we all must let go of certain fears in order to love fully.

*Q. Both Annabelle and Liddy face significant challenges as mothers. As a mother of three children, ages fifteen to ten, do you particularly sympathize with what Annabelle and Liddy confront as mothers?*

A. The challenges and joys of being a mother are endless. Each age and each stage of life offer new moments to appreciate and new tests to endure. One day I'm teaching them to ride a tricycle and, *blink*, the next I'm teaching them to drive. The overriding emotions, for Annabelle, Liddy and myself, are unconditional love and the need to protect, mixed in with a dash of exhaustion. So, although I've never had to face any of the situations Annabelle and Liddy do, the needs and passions remain the same.

*Q. Do you ever have time to read for pleasure, and if so, what have you particularly enjoyed lately?*

A. So many books, so little time. My to-read pile has grown completely out of control. I believe reading is imperative to good storytelling, yet it's hard to find time to keep up with all the good new books being

published. Out on the road, talking to booksellers and readers, I hear about new authors. I buy their books, put them in the pile. . . .

If I start listing my favorite books and authors, I'll waste pages and pages on this conversation, and still inevitably leave someone out. My Web site ([www.patcallahanhenry.com](http://www.patcallahanhenry.com)) lists some of my favorites, and I also recommend new and upcoming titles. Also, I am part of a blog with some of my very favorite authors—go check them out! ([www.southernauthorsblog.com](http://www.southernauthorsblog.com))

My recommendation for finding a good new book: don't just go to the "bestseller" table. Visit your local bookstore, ask the bookseller what she recommends. These book lovers have their finger on the pulse of the reading community; they know what is coming out soon, and have heard about or perhaps already read terrific novels that you might not see prominently displayed or advertised.

*Q. Many of your good friends are writers and artists. What do you particularly enjoy about those relationships? What have you learned from them about the creative process?*

A. I won't sugarcoat it: when I first started stepping into the unknown world of creative work, I was scared. Truly frightened. This new life threatened to expose the softer side of my heart and soul, a vulnerability that most people who know me might not suspect is very



much a part of me. I walked on tiptoe, carefully and slowly, into writers' groups, conferences and classes. I began to talk to other writers, other artists, and I discovered that many of them share a conviction—that *not* writing, taking photographs, painting or whatever their creative endeavor would be more detrimental to them than the possibility of rejection or defeat.

What I enjoy most about these relationships is the camaraderie that comes from being in the trenches together. Only another writer (or artist) can understand when melancholy takes over your heart, when a deadline threatens to break your spirit, or when a breakthrough thrills your soul. What I have learned from other writers is that this is a journey with ups and downs, that learning never ends and quitting is not an option. We remind each other of why we write, and in doing so, we help each other move forward.

Yet I also cherish the relationships I have with those who do not write—friends, family and loved ones who enrich my life with their presence and affection, and with their acceptance of my chosen path. I am blessed.

*Q. You have been writing and touring over the past five years. What is your favorite part of the writing life? What is the hardest part?*

A. My favorite part is creating the stories—forming new worlds and exploring my characters' lives. I thrive

on thinking about, researching and discovering the story. Blaise Pascal says, “Things are always at their best in the beginning,” and maybe they are, because I love my story when I first meet it. Yet I also adore getting to the end and in rereading the story, discovering the themes and meaning I wasn’t fully aware of while I was caught up in the journey.

I also value the lessons inherent in any artistic pursuit. Every time I learn something about “craft,” I also discover something about myself and my life (and it isn’t always pretty). Sometimes I believe that I’ve been led to write because I’m so stubborn, I wouldn’t learn some of my harder life lessons any other way. In addition, the relationships that have come from this writing life are amongst the most beautiful I’ve known.

The hardest part about writing is, for me, the editing, the cutting and changing. Although I am always thrilled with the outcome, since the book ends up being better, I liken the process to exercise: I’m glad when it’s over.

*Q. You’ve written five novels in five years. How do you stay inspired and energized to continue writing at this pace? What are you working on now?*

A. I have discovered that even in a dark and doubtful moment, quitting is harder than continuing. I’m not sure I can explain why this is so—I just know that stop-

ping would quell something significant inside of me. I'm not always energized, or inspired, but I am committed. I believe in the power of story, and so I write. There are days when I am so inspired, I believe I could write a book in a day. Then there are days when I'm not sure I can force myself to sit down at the computer. But on both days, I write.

I can reenergize and reinspire myself by taking a walk, reading a book, listening to the sounds around me, sharing time with other writers, and with those I love. There is a fine line between being led to write another book, and forcing myself to write it. I struggle, as most writers do, to find that balance.

Right now I'm excited to be working on a novel tentatively called *The Driftwood Cottage*. It's a story about three sisters who run a small coastal bookstore in a summer-retreat town. The summer people arrive every Memorial Day and their stories become entangled in the life of this cottage bookstore. On this particular summer, secrets will come to light, lost love will return and the sisters and the town will never be the same again.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Did you enjoy *The Art of Keeping Secrets*? What parts did you like best? Least? What do you consider the strongest aspects of the novel? The weakest?
2. Annabelle struggles to believe in her husband's love, but he's not there to talk to. Are there people in your life, dead or merely gone, with whom you wish you could discuss their true feelings about some past event?
3. Like Annabelle, have you ever faced a situation in which something fundamental about your life suddenly seemed uncertain? Were you able to keep on believing? Why or why not?
4. Do you think most married women worry and wonder whether their husbands have remained faithful? If so, why do you think that is? Do men worry about their wives in the same way?

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

5. How does Patti Callahan Henry use the gathering of shells in this novel? Do you have a ritual in your own life that has helped you through a hard time?
6. Annabelle and her best friends come to the conclusion that “we all have our secrets.” Do you agree? Do you think we keep secret parts of ourselves from even those we love most? Do you think Knox should have told Annabelle about Liddy and Sofie?
7. Have you lost someone and then discovered something eye-opening—even shocking—about them after they were gone?
8. Mrs. Thurgood tells Annabelle that it’s not about what the reader *needs* to hear, but what the reader *wants* to hear. Do you think people who ask for advice want the truth, or to hear their own preconceptions reaffirmed?
9. Liddy and Shawn both talk about the agony of loving someone who doesn’t return the feeling. Have you ever loved someone who didn’t love you back? How did you handle it?
10. If you were Sofie, would you tell Annabelle and Jake *everything* as soon as they arrive in Newboro? Is

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

Sofie justified in keeping her secrets for as long as she does?

11. Why do you think Sofie was attracted to Bedford? Why does she stay with him?

12. Which is your favorite novel by Patti Callahan Henry, and why?