

## Q & A

### 1. What's *An Unexpected Grace* about?

Lila Elliot, a 35-year-old struggling painter, is badly wounded in a violent office shooting. While house-sitting for her best friend, Lila is manipulated into taking care of Grace, an abused, pitiful golden retriever. Initially Lila, who is scared of dogs, resents the burden, but gradually she sees that she and Grace have much in common. They've suffered from a random act of fate, and they will need time and love to heal. As they slowly change each other's lives, Lila tries to understand why she got shot. And she falls in love with Adam Spencer, the dog-lover who rescued Grace from her abuser.

### 2. How did you get the idea for *An Unexpected Grace*?

On my way home from the post office one afternoon, I saw a bumper sticker that said, "Grace happens." I love the idea of grace, which I define as the unsought, undeserved good that comes to us. And I thought, *Grace! What a great theme for a story.* I knew I wanted to write a novel about a dog, and at that moment I decided to name her Grace and show her as a grace in someone's life. From that spark of a beginning, the story slowly evolved.

### 3. What was your purpose for writing *An Unexpected Grace*?

I wanted to write about grace, but I also wanted to show the importance of the bond that can develop between people and animals. I believe that they can heal us, teach us, and enrich our lives in countless ways. Sometimes I feel as if animals are hanging around, waiting to be kind and to help us – if only we open our eyes and see it. That's what I'm hoping readers will see in *An Unexpected Grace*.

4. How did you become a writer?

Many years ago I met a magazine writer in a California art gallery. At the time I was teaching English in a university, and she suggested I use my writing skills to freelance, like her. Though I'd won a prize for an essay in sixth grade, I'd never thought of being a writer. That wonderful woman became my mentor. I owe her to this day for changing my life.

5. After writing three nonfiction books, why a novel now?

Many years ago I had three novels published under a pseudonym; but writing magazine and newspaper articles enticed me away from fiction because they were easier and quicker and interesting to research. Later, my love of animals led me to write nonfiction books about them. But I always missed the freedom of writing novels, and I love trying to create something beautiful out of nothing more than my imagination. So getting back to fiction was a natural step in my career.

6. Why do you write about animals?

Because I love them. And because so often they are treated badly. I want to take up for them and show their sensitivity, importance, and worth. I also want my life to make a difference for them, and writing about them seems to be the best way I can make that difference. I don't think I could *not* write about animals.

7. How did you become an animal advocate?

All my life I've been supremely sensitive to animal suffering. I was born on the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi. As a tiny child, in western movies I cried so hard when cowboys dug their spurs into horses' sides that my father had to take me to the theater lobby. All my adopted animals deepened my sensitivity even more – especially Bea, my beagle, who came from a medical lab. Given my nature, I couldn't help but take injured

wildlife for emergency care, feed hungry creatures who crossed my path, and volunteer for animal organizations. Animal advocacy has been engrained in me since birth.

8. Do you have pets? Dogs? Cats?

I've always had dogs and cats, including a feral colony of kitties, who were like my pets. But last year Logan, my beloved German shepherd, and Phoebe, my dear beagle, died in the same month. I was devastated, and for the first time in my life I have no animals. But that will change soon!

9. Do you believe that animals have feelings?

Absolutely. No question about it. When I first started writing about animals, however, many experts told me that animals had no emotions and did not even think! Determined to show those experts wrong, I collected thousands of stories of animal kindness, loyalty, and courage. To me, the stories added up to data in a small field study, which proved that animals *do* feel deeply and can act on their feelings. Now most experts seem to have come around to recognizing animal emotion, and much research is being done. Views have changed. Thank goodness.

10. What have you learned from animals? How do animals teach us?

I have learned so much from animals about compassion, loyalty, courage, resourcefulness, generosity, fortitude – my list could go on. Last year when Logan, my German shepherd, was recovering from surgery, he lay on his bed for several months without complaining and showed courage like none I've ever seen. I swore to myself that if I were ever in a similar situation, I'd try to be as noble as he was. If we open our eyes, we can see that animals are constantly teaching us by setting examples.