

The PROMISE
of Home

A Mill River Novel

DARCIE CHAN



A Reader's Guide



A CONVERSATION WITH DARCIÉ CHAN

Random House Reader's Circle: The fictional town of Mill River, Vermont, serves as the setting for all of your novels, and many characters overlap across all three books. What was the biggest challenge in creating and maintaining such an interconnected community?

Darcie Chan: Strangely, when I was writing the first Mill River book, I had no inkling that it would become the first of at least three novels with a common setting and many common characters. It was simply my first novel, one that I hoped would be published someday.

When it became clear that I would have the opportunity to write more books set in Mill River, I had to think carefully about how to proceed. Consistency is key. Characters who appear in more than one book must be consistent across, not just within, the books. At the same time, I think it's vital that I continue to explore and develop those characters.

I also view the town of Mill River itself as a central character in my books, if not the heart of each story. It's important to keep the details of the town consistent—not only the physical details, such as the location of certain buildings and streets, and their positions in relation to others—but also the town's safe, cozy, and welcoming feel.

The residents of Mill River play a large part in achieving that

latter goal. As I plan each story, I'm constantly focused on which of the townspeople should be involved, which would have some connection to or know about the events taking place, and what kinds of people I might like to meet were I to actually visit the town. Should I involve a character who is already known to my readers, or should I introduce someone new? What kinds of things might happen in a small town that would involve and intrigue the people there? And why would the people of Mill River want to live there in the first place?

In a way, building the Mill River series and maintaining its interconnectedness are much like trying to re-create the structure of a hurricane. The town itself, calm and peaceful, is at the center, with the actions and stories of the town residents swirling around. Everything is held together as part of a single, consistent system. And as with the path of a hurricane, what happens in a small town like Mill River can often be unexpected or unpredictable, as my readers well know.

RHRC: What is your writing process like? What helps you when you get stuck?

DC: Before I start writing a new book, I need to have the main characters and a central plot in mind. I must also know how the story will begin, how it will end, and a few "main events" that will take place in the middle. Unless I have that bare minimum of information, I don't feel ready to put anything on paper (or my computer screen, as is more often the case).

Once I've planned out the basics, I try to do a brief chapter-by-chapter outline to serve as a roadmap. Some chapters start in that outline completely blank—as was the case with my most recent novel—and I end up filling them in as the plot unfolds and ideas come to me while I'm writing.

I've been fortunate in that I haven't yet had a serious case of

writer's block. I do two things to try to keep that from happening. First, I end each writing session knowing what it is that I'm going to write next. That's hard to do sometimes—stopping when I'm on a roll—but knowing exactly how I'm going to start the next writing session makes doing it much easier. And second, before I start writing for the day, I read over and edit the pages I wrote the previous day. Doing so helps refine the draft and helps me to coast into writing whatever comes next in the story.

RHRC: Who was the first Mill River character you ever came up with? What was the inspiration behind him/her?

DC: Mary McAllister was the first character I developed, and she did indeed have a real-life inspiration.

In the 1940s, a Jewish gentleman named Sol Strauss fled Nazi Germany and settled with his mother in my hometown of Paoli, Indiana. There, he opened a dry goods store on the town square. Even though his business was successful, Mr. Strauss quietly lived alone above his shop and never seemed to be fully embraced by the town's predominantly Christian population. Still, he considered Paoli his adopted community and its people *his* people. When Mr. Strauss died, the town was shocked to learn that he had bequeathed to it millions of dollars, which were to be used for charitable purposes to benefit the residents.

The Sol Strauss Supporting Organization Fund is still in operation today. Among other things, it provides clothing and additional necessities for needy children and an annual supply of new books for the high school English department. Residents of Paoli may also apply to the fund for assistance in carrying out a project that would benefit the town. The fund is the legacy of Mr. Strauss, who continues to be remembered for his extreme and unexpected generosity.

I had Mr. Strauss in mind when I was brainstorming ideas for

a first novel. I thought it would be interesting and challenging to build a story around a character who is misunderstood or different in some way, and to show that even someone who is seemingly far removed from his or her community may be more special and loving than anyone could imagine. I liked the idea of an older woman peering down at a small town from her window and knowing that she was helping the people who lived there—her people—even though most of them knew little or nothing about her. This woman, of course, became the character Mary McAllister, and her life story became *The Mill River Recluse*.

RHRC: Do you have a favorite character? Why?

DC: I really love the character of Father O'Brien. Writing scenes involving his "spoon problem" are such fun! I also like the fact that he is an incredibly kind and gentle person, and that even at his advanced age, he's an active and beloved member of the Mill River community.

I'm also fond of the character Emily DiSanti, first introduced in *The Mill River Redemption*. I suppose it's because Emily shares some personal qualities with my youngest sister, Molly. Both love dogs—Emily's dog, Gus, is based on a dog my sister used to have. Molly has a degree in landscape architecture, so she's very artsy and outdoorsy, with a skill set to match. I think it's really cool that she can drive a dump truck and refinish furniture, and she has her own hip waders for trout fishing. Molly can also grow *anything*. She somehow managed to raise perfect artichokes during the short, cool summers in Green Bay, Wisconsin! I really admire my sister's self-reliant, can-do attitude, and I wanted the character of Emily DiSanti to have that same state of mind.

(I should add that my other sister, Carrie, is also a fabulous person with her own set of unique talents . . . which might be borrowed for a future character!)

RHRC: Readers have met Father O'Brien before, but in *The Promise of Home*, they find out so much more about his backstory. When did you first start to think about the details of his personal history?

DC: Over the years, many readers have written to me wanting to know why it is that Father O'Brien is so obsessed with spoons. Once I was able to turn my attention to developing the plot for my third book, I realized that I wanted to give my readers an answer to that question. Gradually, a story took shape in my mind—Father O'Brien's story—and it seemed it would make a good addition to the two Mill River books I'd already written. I wanted to let my readers see a bit of his childhood and learn what experiences shaped him into the priest they know. And, I wanted to contrast that historical portion of the book with events in the present to reveal how his past still had the ability to change his life.

I was fascinated by my research into living during the Great Depression. It was a time of struggle, when little was taken for granted. Children grew up much more quickly and were expected to do more at a much younger age. Father O'Brien, or Michael, as he was called back then, certainly would have experienced this, and I think that reality is borne out in this third book.

RHRC: How did you decide which Mill River residents you wanted to focus on in *The Promise of Home*?

DC: Once I came up with a story and plot for *The Promise of Home*, I knew that Father O'Brien, both as an elderly priest and as a teenager, would feature heavily. Since this book was to be crafted as the third in a series, I thought it was important to continue with certain previously established plotlines and characters. Kyle and Claudia appeared in the first two Mill River novels, and their relationship continues to evolve in this one. Both DiSanti sisters from

The Mill River Redemption are put through an emotional wringer in that story, and I wanted to follow their journey—especially Emily's—in this new book.

Of course, I am always striving to further develop the town of Mill River itself. New characters help expand and enrich the fictional community and play important roles in this new story. And I always like to let established characters make cameos in new books, even if they're not heavily involved in the plot. My readers like to find out how and what they're doing, and so do I!

RHRC: Do you think of your novels as having any overarching messages or themes?

DC: Although I can see certain themes—particularly emphases on the importance of kindness, family, and community—in the finished books, I don't sit down to write a new story with any particular message or theme in mind. Rather, they seem to take shape along with the story.

I've often wondered why these themes have emerged in my writing. Each of them is important to me personally. But I think the real reason is my feeling that our society has changed over the years, and is continuing to change, in a way that isn't good. I think an argument can be made that in many places, kindness, family, and community are under siege. Crime and racial tensions are often in the news. Families of all kinds are struggling economically and socially. At school or neighborhood events, people who manage to leave work early to attend, and who might once have struck up conversations and gotten to know each other, now sit silently glued to their smartphones. For all the digital and electronic interconnectedness in our current society, I sometimes feel as if we're actually *disconnected* from one another and from a focus on human qualities and in-person relationships. Even in Mill River, life is nei-

ther easy nor perfect, but an effort to be kind, to help families thrive, and to develop relationships that foster a strong sense of community could make life more meaningful and enjoyable for many people.

RHRC: What is your favorite thing about Mill River?

DC: My favorite thing about Mill River—other than its wonderful residents—is the way it offers a sense of safety, comfort, and community. If I close my eyes, I can easily picture its quaint houses and shops and its neat, quiet streets. I can imagine peering out the window of one of those houses, listening to crickets and tree frogs singing on a summer night or the howling wind of a blizzard during the winter. I would feel cozy and safe, surrounded by neighbors I knew in a community steeped in kindness and caring. Mill River really is the little town of my dreams, a place I wish existed in real life. I would move there in a heartbeat!



QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Promise of Home* rotates among the perspectives of several different characters: Karen, Claudia, Emily, and Father O'Brien. Were you drawn to any one of their storylines more than the others? Why do you think that is?
2. A significant portion of the narrative includes flashbacks to Father O'Brien's youth. Why do you think the author chose to include those flashbacks when the rest of the novel takes place in the present day? What would the novel be like without them? How might the other sections change?
3. "The very hands that rested on his knees, the hands that were suddenly unable to do what he wanted them to, had held a rifle and ended a man's life. Up until now, he hadn't allowed that realization to sink in. . . . The weight of it, regardless of the man's actions toward his mother, was immense" (page 70). This quote is from the moment Michael O'Brien begins to process what he's done. Do you think he is too hard on himself, considering the circumstances? How do you think you would react in a similar position?
4. After deciding that it's best to conceal what happened with the intruder, Frank says to a young Father O'Brien, "This is one of

those tough situations, Michael, where there are no good solutions. It isn't possible to do something right without somebody else getting hurt or paying a price. These situations will come up every once in a while during your lifetime, and you need to recognize them and choose which solution does the least harm and who should suffer that harm" (page 197). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

5. After reading one of the letters from the briefcase, Emily learns that Father O'Brien killed a man and ultimately finds his actions, under the circumstances, to be "perfectly justified and understandable" (page 148). How do you think some of the other characters would react to the news? Why?

6. When Claudia goes in for a wedding dress fitting, Pauline offers her this piece of advice: "Falsehoods and little white lies never lead to anything good. And be careful when you decide what's false and what isn't. Sometimes things and even people aren't what they seem" (page 82). How is this advice relevant at different points throughout the novel? Are there any moments in *The Promise of Home* when you would disagree with it?

7. Mill River is clearly a unique place to live. Why do you think so many people are drawn to it from other places, and why do you think so many people return after years away?

8. When Emily first meets Matt, she is offended by his advances and pushes him away. Do you think she is too quick to judge him based on her past experiences, or is she justified in her reaction?

9. When Father O'Brien suspects the worst has happened to Karen, he rushes to find her, putting his own health at risk. Can you think

of other times when he acted selflessly? In what way(s) is he a pillar of the community? Give examples.

10. Throughout the novel, Karen struggles with suicidal thoughts and even acts upon them, but she is ultimately given a second chance. In what way do you think some of the other characters were afforded second (if less obvious) chances?

11. Claudia tolerates Misty, the rude girlfriend of her future brother-in-law, with a smile on her face, and she even bites her tongue when she realizes Misty is making inappropriate passes at Kyle. Where do you think she finds the strength and faith to stay out of the situation? What do you think her silence on the matter says about her character and her relationship with Kyle? Could she have made her concerns known to Kyle in a constructive way?

12. Frank makes some difficult decisions to help spare Michael and Anna more pain and difficulty. Do you agree with his decision to tell them that Grace died as an infant? Given his opinion of orphanages, were there any other reasonable options for him at the time?

13. What do you think of the title, *The Promise of Home*? In your opinion, does it fit the novel? Why or why not?