

# Still Small Voice- Allen Brokken Extended Author Q&A

## Why did you decide to write fiction?

As a kid I always had an active imagination and took to writing as soon as I learned how. I began the Towers of Light Series as a story to my kids. I was traveling for work 4 days a week and spent a lot of lonely nights in hotels across the country. I started writing a story about them in a fantastic setting and then shared it on the weekends. They loved it.

## How do you come up with your plots?

I start with a high level idea or concept I want to get across. Still Small Voice really came from a desire to help Christian kids see how their faith can create conflicts with non-believers. Sometimes they are minor misunderstandings and other times they create conflicts between doing what they feel is right and what other people expect them to do. The focus was on needing to listen to God's calling regardless. Once I get that down, I create what I call a flight plan or a series of major events I'd like to happen. Then I stitch it altogether.

## Do you ever name your characters after people you know?

The kids in the story are my kids. That was very intentional since I was writing a story about their adventures.

## What's your favorite kind of ice cream?

The chocolate fudge from Baskin Robbins.

## How do you research for your stories?

Fear No Evil takes place in the "Muddy River" valley. To mentally build the setting, I did a mix of internet research and travel to representative places. I've taken a couple of different River Boat tours one in Peoria Illinois and another in Minnesota. They both gave a flavor of 1800's river navigation and lifestyle. But I also look to older fiction Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn both provided some of the flavor for the worldbuilding in this area.

## What is your favorite vacation spot?

My wife and I really enjoy historical locations. There's something about Victorian era homes and the American frontier that I really enjoy.

## Do real life stories get turned into fiction plots?

When I was a kid we had fireworks at the fourth of July. The first time I lit a smoke bomb it scared me so I just randomly threw it away. It landed in the blue kiddie pool we had in the yard. The ball bounced below the water and then started sputtering around making colored smoke bubbles and bobbing in and out of the water. It was so cool to see, that we spent the rest of the afternoon dropping smoke bombs in the pool to see how the colors would mix. That was the

inspiration for the Censer you see on the cover being thrown into the water. It corrupts the water and what's living in it, but it also has this weird mix of fire and water.

### Do you have an interesting writing quirk?

I write while I travel. I'm most productive on an airplane. Something about the general discomfort keeps my brain sharp. However, I'm a really big guy and I can't usually use my laptop or I'm beating people up with my elbows. So I've taken to writing books on my phone keyboard. Something like 30% of the first draft of *Still Small Voice* was written on my phone.

### Have you ever read a book that made you cry?

There is a significant moment of decision in *Fear No Evil*. I don't want to give it away, but it's arguably the most powerful moment I've ever written. The morning I came up with it I flew to New Jersey and wrote the pages coming up to that scene just before I landed. I had a 30 minute drive and wrestled with how that was going to go on the drive. When it finally came to me, I just started crying and had to pull over to let the feeling pass.

### What is your funniest typo?

I meant to write "Fear clenched his gut" however I typed the word 'but' I had two different critique partners and my editor provide some very fun commentary on that typo.

### What is your writing Kryptonite?

*Time on my hands. When I have no deadlines or far away deadlines I just end up with fanciful ideas bouncing around in my head with no outlet. Give me a deadline, even a self imposed deadline and words fill the page.*

### What about writing do you love?

*I write from a Christian world view as an outgrowth of my faith. There have been moments as the words flow, that I just feel closer to God. There are very few things that bring me more joy than that.*

### Do you end up doing research for every book?

*Every book is different. This one I spent an serious amount of time studying bears. They are a central part of the conflict in *Fear No Evil*. I had an impression before my research that the Grizzly bear would be the most dangerous, but learned that actually brown bears can be much more deadly. Additionally I learned that they would eat roots and tubers, which plays significantly into the story.*

### What is the funniest thing you've ever had to google?

As a part of my marketing I host a youtube channel with JJ Johnson, writer of the Iggy & Oz series called @twodadsandajoke. I spend a lot of time searching for Dad Jokes. Here's a good one

Why can't pigs be trusted? Because they always squeal.

## What is your process for coming up with a title?

*I look to the verse that serves as the basis for the book or the spiritual concept I'm coming up with. In the case of Fear No Evil it was Psalm 23.*

*"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou [art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. - Psalms 23:4*

*Fear No Evil takes the children to a metaphoric valley of the shadow of death.*

## How do you develop your characters? Do you use character charts?

*In the case of my characters they were patterned after my kids and family members. So I really didn't use a specific technique. However, for some of the world building bits, like I added the Iron Priestesses and the Steel Brotherhood Fear No Evil, I used a chart of my own design to map out important aspects of the races, how the darkness interacts with them and their motivations as a people.*

## What is the best thing writing makes you feel?

*When I cry at my own writing I know I've done something. There are a half dozen lines in Fear No Evil that just wrench my heart. I feel like if the story feels that strongly to me, then others might be hooked the same way.*

## When you're feeling down in the dumps, what book do you read because it makes you feel better?

*I like funny kid books. Something that takes the edge off. Iggy and Oz and the Soda Pop Wars, by JJ Johnson or I'd punch a Tiger in the Eye for you by Ben Wolf come to mind.*

## Why did you decide to pursue a career as an author?

*This is actually a side job for me. I started writing a story for my kids while I was traveling for work and 12 years later I'm self-publishing the second book in a series.*

## What was your first published work, and how was it received?

*The current first book in the series Light of Mine, was originally self-published as Darkness Cloaks the Land. The first two versions of that title were a learning experience for me. When I finally reworked it into Light of Mine, I had found my voice and it's a story that is generally loved by those that enjoy middle grade fantasy.*

## When you are writing, what does your daily schedule look like?

*I get up early in the morning and try to get a couple hours in before my day job. I can usually get 2-4 days a week in like that when I have a deadline. I write best stuck in an airplane, but lately that's not really been an option.*

When writing a book of fiction, what kind of research do you normally have to do?

For this series I did a bunch of research on the technology of the 1700-1800 in America. I really wanted to build out an American frontier feel for this series. I believe that has been well received and a lot of it was research from trips to places like the Little House on the Prairie Museum and the Midwest Old Threshers Reunion. Also a fair amount of internet research, in this case I spent a lot of time researching bears.

Where do you get the ideas for your stories?

I used my kids as a starting point. How they might react in various situations. Then it kind of grew from there. In a lot of cases I was trying to not be the typical elves, dwarves and trolls fantasy. So I had to think a lot about what I was doing when I decided to introduce fantastic new races into the story.

What is your favorite genre of fiction to write and why?

I'm enjoying the middle grade fantasy right now, but I have a more adult work, Fat Guys can be Heroes if... that is a lot of fun to work on. Being a big guy it gives me a chance to talk about challenges I have in my day to day while writing a fun story.

How do you insert the faith element into these stories so that it is woven naturally into the storyline?

This is a story of faith that has a direct action in the world. Being dishonest will dim the light and give the enemy a literal foothold. Not listening to the holy spirit's calling has cascading consequences. The series is an allegory, but with some very direct references to scripture in places and at times that would make sense in the setting and the culture. It would be unnatural today, but in the 1800's much of what I've put in was a part of daily life.

What book was the most difficult for you to write? The easiest for you to write? Why?

Light of Mine was the hardest because I just didn't know what I was doing at first. 18 major revisions over 12 years. What I find the most frustrating though is that by all accounts Fear No Evil is a really solid book. Everyone who's read it is impressed with the pacing, emotional intensity and it's a real page turner. For me personally it's a little frustrating because to get Light of Mine to the same quality would require a 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> revision just because of all I've learned.

Do you have aspirations of your book being turned into a film or TV series? Why or why not?

I have had people tell me it ought to be a TV show on like Pure Flix. I think it would be great. I had a conversation with my daughter about that when I was first writing it and she said. "Daddy if they make it a show or a movie can I be the book slapper?" I asked her, "What is a book slapper?"

“I want to be able to get on the set and every time they don’t do it like the book I want to be able to slap them with it and say, that’s not right.”

So I think if it ever does get a theatrical treatment it will be in the contract that she gets to be the book slapper.

### What was the inspiration behind this story?

I began writing the towers of light series for my kids when they were little. I was traveling for work and would come home on the weekends and tell them a fantastic story about themselves. Still Small Voice in particular is about listening for the holy spirits calling on our life and the importance of heeding that calling.

### What's in your current TBR pile?

I’m reading the Mercury series by Steve Raza.

### Tell us about any research trips you took while working on this book.

The setting is inspired by Little House on the Prarie and the rural Midwest I grew up in. A trip to the Peoria Riverboat a few years back informed much of what I know about 1800’s river navigation.

### Tell us about your writing routine.

I write best early in the morning or on an airplane. When I have a deadline I build a chart of what I need to get done and then drive that as many days a week as possible early in the morning.

### You can have dinner with any character, who would you pick? What would you eat? What would you talk about?

I always wanted to be Han Solo. I think we’d meet at a space diner like in Episode 2, eat some bantha burgers drink blue milk shakes and I’d ask him to hear his version of the Kessel run.

### Favorite dessert?

It’s called fluff. Graham cracker crust, sweetened cream cheese, chocolate pudding, whipped topping. It’s the best.

### If you weren't an author right now, what would you be doing?

That’s interesting because my day job is selling software. So this is really something I do on the side. I guess if I wasn’t doing this I’d still be doing something creative. Likely model building, or collecting and painting toy soldiers.

### Favorite bible verse?

*“And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake:*

*And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.”*

*1 Kings 19:9-13*

It's a reminder that we always are looking for God to do these huge and powerful things, but in the end he's close to us, as close as a whisper.

### What's one thing readers don't know about you?

I was a Mortarman in the Army Reserves when I was younger.

### You're on a stranded island and you can only have one book with you.

#### What would you pick and why?

I would say the Bible. Its like no other book. I've read and reread it many times and every time I find something new.

### What do you want readers to gain from reading this?

Knowing that God is there even when we are lost, frightened and alone. That we don't have to fear evil despite our isolation. In this time I feel that's a powerful story.

### Do you characters ever talk to you at odd times?

Well since the characters are my kids there are a number of things in here that are patterned off of conversations they've had. Things like waking up from a nap to see stuffed animals on their head and the like.

### What's the weirdest thing you've written notes on for a story idea?

I have another set of stories on the back burner I'm calling "Fat Guys can be Heroes if..." and then there's a series of challenges big guys like me have in the world.

...runnings not involved.

...they don't have to fly coach.

...the roller coaster safety latch will close

...an all you can eat buffet doesn't make an appearance.

I have to finish the Towers of light series before that will be real.

## What are you working on next?

I'm actively working on Books 4 Full Armor of God which, God willing, will be out in December of 2021. I determined that dropping a book ever 6 months was just too much.

## What's your favorite under-appreciated novel?

I saw a post on Facebook the other day that really put down Battlefiled Earth, by L. Ron Hubbard. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade I found a hardbound copy of it at the local libraries used book sale for a dollar. I thought I struck gold and then proceeded to read it 7 times that year. I love that book, but apparently that might be more nostalgia and the lack of sophistication of my 12 year old brain.

## How do you select the names of your characters?

The characters are named after my kids. This is actually a continuation of a story I wrote for them when they were much younger and the rest of the family are other family members. One thing I wanted to do though was to make the grown ups kind of like the teacher in the Charlie Brown cartoons. I was going for non-distinct authority figures. I try to have them interact as little as possible, but still move the plot along.

## What was your hardest scene to write?

[Spoiler Alert] At a point in Fear No Evil, Ethan ends up tied to a tree with an angry bear running towards him. Due to my schedule I had to stop writing one day in the middle of the scene. There he was in mortal danger with no way out. My schedule just kept getting in the way and I couldn't finish the scene. Finally I scheduled a writing retreat to finish the book. As I'm getting ready to leave for the retreat, my son the real life Ethan kept asking me questions and delaying me.

Finally I put a hand on his shoulder, "Look son, Ethan is tied to a tree with a bear rushing across the forest about to eat him."

My son's eyes went wide, "So how is he going to get out?"

I looked him in the eyes, "Well if I don't get out of here soon to come up with a rescue, it will likely be too late"

He looked around frantically and picked up my bag and shoved it towards me, "Then you better get going"

## What is your favorite childhood book?

I read Battlefield Earth like 7 times in sixth grade. It was so long that I never quite remembered the beginning by the time I got to the end. Although Star Ship Troopers was a close second.

If you had to do something differently as a child or teenager to become a better writer as an adult, what would you do?

I went out of my way to avoid actual literature classes. I found ways to adjust my schedule or take alternate classes because I was going into science. I really wish I hadn't.

What comes first, the plot or characters?

Character for me. Plotting for me involves thinking of how to then get them from point A to B. But I begin by thinking about the character's motivations and desires to then put things in their path.

Who is the author you most admire in your genre?

That's tough. I have a toss up right now between Wayne Thomas Batson because I love his allegorical style. But I think Robert Liparulo does a great job of dropping scripture naturally in the story in a way that just feels authentic.

What do you like to do when you are not writing?

I play a lot of games. Lately it's a mix of XBOX and Star Wars Miniatures.

If you could invite one person to dinner, who would it be and what would you cook?

The first person to come to mind would be Harrison Ford. Always been a big Han Solo and Indiana Jones fan. I think I'd cook a steak dinner.