

Local author sets suspense trilogy in Ohio's Amish country

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ThisWeek Contributor

USA Today and New York Times best-selling author, Karen Harper, has mined 16th century England for her historical mysteries and explored dramatic locations such as Washington State's Snoqualmie Falls for her contemporary thrillers. *Dark Harvest*, her latest romantic suspense from Mira, takes the protagonist from the streets of Columbus to rural northeast Ohio, where the peaceful inhabitants of an Amish farming community face a rash of hate crimes.

"Most of my books start with a setting that I love or that is evocative," Harper recently told *ThisWeek*. "And the Amish country of Ohio is that." The author has studied the "Plain People" for over a decade, visiting them and building their trust. "Once the Amish realize that you're genuinely interested in them and willing to honor their lifestyle and values while you're a guest in their community, they return the respect," she explained.

Harper was shocked to learn of the real-life terrorism experienced by these gentle folk. Thanks to their "turning the other cheek" and their reluctance to involve the police in their troubles, the Amish are targeted by bullies and worse. This practice of harassment is called "claping" by their attackers, a term coined from the derogatory "clay apes" nickname for farmers. In *Dark Road Home*, the May release from Mira that launched Harper's Amish trilogy, the heroine—an attorney—tries to aid the threatened pacifists. "*Dark Road Home* begins with a car hitting a buggy," the author said, "which is symbolic of what happens when the Amish and worldly cultures collide."

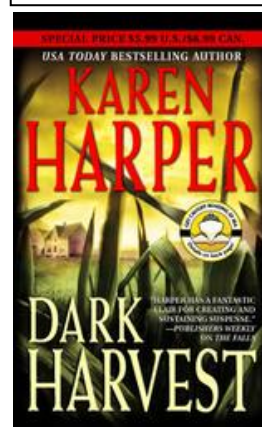
Dark Road Home, June's *Dark Harvest*, and the final book in the trilogy, *Dark Angel* (a 2005 Mira release), offer readers a rare look into a unique culture. While the "English," as the Amish refer to outsiders, may be familiar with certain aspects of their quiet existence—from their plain clothes and faceless dolls to their horse-drawn buggies and electricity-free homes—Harper's novels reveal engaging details about their work, religion, and family lives. "The love story in each book is fascinating and forbidden," the author said. "As in the movie *Witness*, having one main character from the Amish world and one from the English world really increases romantic tension."

Born in Toledo, Harper developed an appreciation of hardworking farmers visiting her great-grandparents' northern Ohio farm. Her roots enriched her depiction of the trilogy's rural setting, and her curiosity about other cultures led to praise for her books' "multidimensional characterization." *Romantic Times Bookclub* wrote, "*Dark Road Home* is a moving and soul-stirring story about the effects of grief, treachery, love and acceptance." The same publication described *Dark Harvest* as "the kind of rich reading experience readers have come to expect from Harper."

A resident of Columbus since 1967, Harper enjoys setting and promoting her books in Ohio. "I came here to attend OSU for grad school and taught the infamous freshman English Courses 101, 102, 103 for two years," she said. In addition, the author taught English at Whetstone and Westerville North High Schools. When asked about her upcoming booksigning, Harper said, "I'd love to see my 'old' students there."



Karen Harper



Two out of three of Harper's stepchildren live in Columbus, as well as her only grandchild. And she is very active in Grace Brethren church, supporting its missions work. "I feel like a Columbus native," she said. "We are big OSU fans in every way...and very proud to be on the committee working towards the renovation of the Main Library."

Harper also conducts writing workshops for local and national organizations. In Columbus, she has a strong relationship with Thurber House literary center for writers and readers, offering her time and talents to their adult and children's programs. On August 11, she'll do a presentation for Thurber House's summer picnic program, which will include a reading, a question-and-answer period, and a booksigning.

Also in August, the author will teach two workshops at the Columbus Writers Conference. For more information about this two-day conference, go to www.creativevista.com.

With more than 30 novels to her credit since she published in 1982, Harper has a wealth of writing craft and industry knowledge to offer aspiring authors. In addition to her romance fiction experience, she is familiar with the mystery market thanks to her popular historical mystery series featuring Queen Elizabeth I as an amateur sleuth. "Mystery and suspense writing is the most difficult but the most fun [writing] I've ever done," she explained. "Not only do you have to worry about the usual—character development, dialogue, setting—but clues and red herrings must be woven throughout." The author stated that alternating between mystery and romantic suspense keeps her fresh in both genres.

Asked about her typical writing day, Harper smiled. "One of the best things about writing for a career is that there is no real typical day," she said. "Sometimes when I'm 'in a book'—writing it for the first time—I really get into it, spending six or so hours on the word processor and thinking about the story day and night. Other days I'm doing research, some days promotion. And always revision. I tell my students that good writing is really rewriting."

Harper obviously follows her own advice because the demand for her books has led to their being published in a variety of foreign languages, as well as large-print and audio books. Three of her backlist romantic suspense titles have recently been re-released, repackaged with a "darker, scarier" look. *Shaker Run* is set in Toledo and southeast Ohio. *The Baby Farm* features a midwife heroine who works in Kentucky's Appalachia country. And *Down To The Bone* offers another look into Amish life. "The Amish make great characters for a suspense—no telephones to call for help, no fast vehicles to escape," the author said. "I find them fascinating and admirable."

Meet the Author

What: Karen Harper, author of *Dark Harvest*, will sign copies of her mystery and romantic suspense novels.

When & Where: Saturday, June 19, from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the Upper Arlington Barnes & Noble book store (3280 Tremont Rd., Columbus, OH).

For More Information: Call the Upper Arlington Barnes & Noble at 614/459-0920.