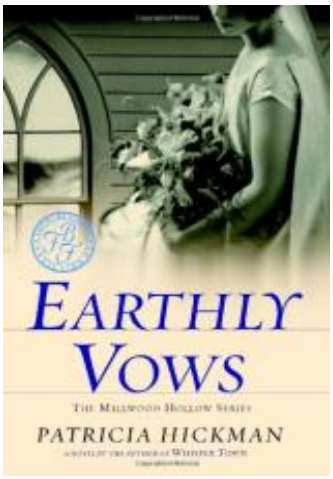
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Earthly Vows

by Patricia Hickman



About the Book

Jeb Nubey and Fern Coulter have finally set a wedding date, but plans are derailed when Jeb answers the call to lead a wealthy community church. The church happens to be in Oklahoma, which raises ghosts from Fern's past-the past she would prefer remained buried. Tempers ignite and Fern is troubled by the secrets that threaten to grow into scandal the longer Jeb remains in her hometown. In the midst of their struggles, Jeb and Fern must also deal with the disappearance of Jeb's oldest charge, Angel. A dangerous young man named Nash has played on the girl's vulnerabilities and lured her away with the promise of filling the emptiness she feels. Additionally, his gangster ties cast Angel in a perilous light.

As the final episode in the Millwood Hollow Series unfolds, Jeb and Fern realize that those we think we know so well can easily make decisions and behave in ways we would never expect. The Coulters find themselves in a swirl of impending disaster and redemptive love, trying the faith and devotion of a patchwork family. As Jeb and Fern prepare to take their vows, will they learn that broken circles can be restored, and can they find beauty in life's flaws?

Discussion Guide

1. Jeb is not completely honest with Fern in the beginning about the full purpose of their trip to Ardmore. He justifies his lack of full disclosure with Fern by rationalizing that if the new pulpit position might be a chance occurrence, why trouble her? Does this indicate that he might secretly fear she will protest? Was he being dishonest or protective?

2. Angel finally seems to be more accepting of Jeb and Fern's union. She begins to see herself as a member of a real family, her unspoken desire throughout the series. But when her sister Claudia is finally discovered to be living near Oklahoma City, she suddenly has to prepare herself for the inevitable-that after all these years, she will be reunited with her true family. Have you ever had to move away from your family and then be reliant on others to serve as your surrogate family? Was that a positive experience?

3. First Community Church in Oklahoma City welcomes Jeb with a sense of serving him as he serves others. With all of the problems he has faced as pastor of Church in the Dell, the sudden presence of a strong infrastructure and support are a huge temptation for Jeb. He has had to serve without pay at times, occasionally without support, and suffered self-doubt when some of his wise decisions faced criticism. Our loyalties tend to root for the home team, in this case the families of Church in the Dell, but, like Jeb, our human nature tends to seek out havens of support over nests of conflict. Have you had to make a difficult life change decision and worry that you were looking for an easier life? What did you learn through the process?

4. When Jeb finds Fern and Walton Baer on the roof garden of the Skirvin, he is alarmed at the seeming past intimacy they have shared. Like Fern, we may avoid discussions about certain aspects of our past with our spouse. Prior to marriage, how much should be divulged and what should remain hidden?

5. If you've read the first books in the Millwood Hollow series, what was your impression of Fern? How did it change? Do you feel others know you because you have been authentic? Do you suffer with trying to present your life as perfect in every way? How do you feel when you are loved in spite of your flaws?

6. Angel prepares to leave with Claudia but Willie and Ida May will remain under Jeb's care until she has had the chance to scope out what a life with Claudia might look like. In spite of her flaws, Angel has always made the responsible decision when it comes to her siblings. This was a common thread among people I interviewed who have lived through hard times. How might sibling relationships vary today as compared to families who lived through the Great Depression? What can we learn about relationships by studying lives lived in adversity?

7. Fern wants nothing to do with Walt Baer until she finds out his wife has a terminal illness. She accepts the volunteer assignment of taking time to care for her. Did she do this out of an ulterior motive or was she motivated by compassion?

8. Even though Angel and Claudia have come from the same parents, distance and a dissimilar set of learning tools has shaped their lives differently. How has Angel's character changed since she last saw Claudia? What were the factors in her life that served as a change agent?

9. Nash serves as get-away man for a gangster relative. But he paints himself as a chauffeur to Angel and seems to believe his own fictions-that clothes make the man, that a wad of cash in his pocket makes him a winner. He even compares himself to the men who sit along the roads in migrant camps, believing he has found success while they have succumbed to the wound of national failure. Have you gone through hard times? Did a new set of clothes help your sense of self worth? Improve your circumstances? How did hard times help shape your views of personal success or failure?

10. An artist in a wheelchair symbolizes hope for Jeb and his acquired belief that adversity and pain create beauty and a window to the soul. Because God has given us all the gift of free will, he may use adversity to open our hearts to him, or provide a window into our soul. Has life taught you any similar lessons?

11. Angel has a different view of family and home at the end of the story than the opinion she touted at the beginning of the series. What has she learned about what makes up a family? Have you or someone you know had to create a family out of a patchwork of lives? What was learned from it?

12. Sadly, we have to say farewell to the Nubeys and the Welbys but not to one another. I hope that you have enjoyed your visit and that you have found a connection of friendship in sharing this series with others. If you have not yet considered a life of faith in Jesus Christ, please know that He loves you and has a plan for your life. You can pray right now and know the transformation that comes when you embark on the great journey of faith. Please write and let me know how faith came alive to you through the reading of this series.

Author Bio

Patricia Hickman, author of acclaimed novel PAINTED DRESSES, is an award-winner, speaker and humorist who has won two Silver Angel Awards for Excellence in Media as well as a *Romantic Times* Reader?s Choice Gold Award for her novel KATRINA?S WINGS. Patricia holds a master?s degree in creative writing from Queens University and enjoys biking, hiking, and mapping out the Southern towns where her novels are set.

Critical Praise

"When you find yourself thinking of certain characters long after you've finished the book, you know the author has done her job. Patricia Hickman has certainly 'done her job' in **Earthly Vows**-the charming ending to a charming series."

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