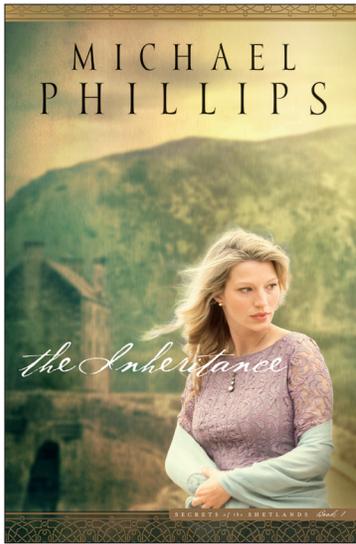


**QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH MICHAEL PHILLIPS**



**The Inheritance**

SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS #1  
by Michael Phillips

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**1. Can you briefly describe your new novel *The Inheritance*, Book 1 in the SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS series?**

The death of Macgregor Tulloch, unmarried and with no children, throws the fortunes of the small island of Whales Reef into uncertainty when it is discovered that the aging clan patriarch left no will.

Everyone assumes old Macgregor’s heir to be local favorite, the titular “chief” of the island clan, naturalist and shepherd David Tulloch. The relation between the two men, however, is distant. Controversy over the inheritance erupts when David’s third cousin Hardy, fisherman and local cad, steps forward to lay claim to Macgregor’s estate. That both men are involved with the same young woman—local beauty Audney Kerr—spices up local gossip all the more.

At the last minute, word comes to the island that neither David nor Hardy will inherit. An unknown heir has been found with a closer claim to Macgregor Tulloch’s estate than either man—an American . . . an American *woman*. The traditionalists on the island are aghast.

When thirty-one-year-old Alonah “Loni” Ford arrives on Whales Reef to take possession of her new property, her plan is simply to sell, be done with it, and leave as quickly as possible. She does not anticipate the peaceful atmosphere of the island exerting an intoxicating spell upon her. A lifetime’s uncertainty about her own roots in the midst of her Quaker upbringing—lost to memory by the death of both parents—stirs to life in her heart. From their initial hostility, the villagers gradually open their hearts and homes to the newcomer. Loni begins to wonder, *At last have I found the true family I never knew I had?* And in the middle of Loni’s changing outlook sits her kind, erudite, and handsome half third cousin, shepherd-chief David Tulloch.

**2. Where did the idea for this series come from?**

There were two sort of “genesis” moments. The first came one summer a few years ago in Scotland. My wife, Judy, and I spend time in Scotland periodically, where hopefully I get inspiration for my Scottish series as well as continue our work with George MacDonald. We stay in a 140-year-old former fisherman’s cottage. One day the thought suddenly struck me, What if a modern young American woman inherited a cottage like this out of the blue, from a distant line of her family roots she knew nothing about? What if she came to a village like this, knowing no one, knowing nothing about Scotland? It was fascinating to consider how her life would change and how she would gradually get drawn into the life of the community.

The second moment came when I was reflecting on an inscription in a Bible that belonged to my grandfather Ernest. I found myself thinking of all the ways past generations influence us and build into us a legacy that is more deeply part of who we are than we usually have any idea. The power of ongoing family influences, especially spiritual influences, wove a spell on my mind and gradually flowed together with the germinal idea of a young woman receiving an unknown inheritance.

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**3. Can you explain your fascination with Scotland and the Shetland Islands?**

We have been in love with Scotland ever since discovering the writings of George MacDonald forty-five years ago. It is a magical land with magical history, music, and beauty. Since then I've written a dozen novels set in Scotland in addition to my ongoing work republishing the books of MacDonald. I think the "magic" stems from the history, the music, and the wildness of its geography—the highlands and moors and rugged coastlines. I've always said that to write a good novel means creating a world that readers want to visit—like C. S. Lewis did with Narnia. MacDonald's "created world" was a real place—Scotland. You feel like you're stepping back in time into George MacDonald's "Narnia," if I can take the liberty of describing it like that. When we visit the village of Cullen where we spend a good deal of time and where I first had the brainstorm that led to *The Inheritance*, and where I wrote a good deal of it, we feel that we are living inside the MacDonald story about Malcolm, which took place there. All of Scotland is like that because so many of MacDonald's books take place in various parts of the country. And now as I am writing my own novels, it always gives me a warm feeling of fulfillment when something I write gives a reader that same feeling of love for MacDonald's homeland that I have.

**4. What is the main theme of *The Inheritance* and the other books of the series?**

Generational legacies, family, roots, the heritage passed down to us by our forebears. Obviously this has shades of the "family saga" type of thing so often done in historical fiction and which I have done several times. In this case, however, I wanted to explore these themes, in a sense, backwards from the normal linear unfolding of a family story. I wanted to feel what it was like for an individual, in this case my heroine Loni, to discover her roots and thus her family legacy, having grown up as an orphan and knowing absolutely nothing about those roots. In a way, isn't this how we all discover our roots? When we are young, we don't think about such things. As we mature, the past begins to matter more to us. We begin to investigate. The past takes on new meaning. Our lives are enriched the more we realize how much we owe those who came before. At least this has been true in my own life. And since all books are to some degree autobiographical, I suppose Loni's story partially reflects my own, which is one reason I used my own grandfather's name, Ernest, for one of the significant characters in the series. Loni begins the story knowing nothing about her family history. By the end she knows *who she is* because she has discovered *where she came from*.

**5. How interconnected are the books of the SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS series? Does the collection tell one continuous story or several individual stories?**

They are completely interconnected in that they do tell a single multigenerational story. At the same time, however, one always tries to write each book of a series so that it can be read alone. They are more independent than a pure serial, yet are connected in developing the lives and histories of the same cast of characters into a single overarching saga-type story spanning ninety years.

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**6. In *SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS* you interweave past and present narratives with certain characters appearing in both. That must present unique creative and literary challenges different than would be the case in a single straightforward narrative.**

Every fictional structure has pros, cons, and challenges. But yes, interweaving two time sequences is one of the more difficult of those challenges. I have written several of my series this way because I like to tell multiple stories at once, weaving them through one another so that in the end they really are telling a single, more expansive story. Of course, the difficulty is that readers become more bonded with one character or one part of the story than another, and then may be annoyed when an author jumps around! That's the challenge—keeping all aspects of a multidimensional story interesting. But it's about more than just telling two stories. You're trying to show how the past story (in the case of *SECRETS OF THE SHETLANDS*, which takes place in the 1920s) plays out through time and spawns Loni's contemporary story. By the time Loni comes along, so much time has passed that she has no idea about everything that happened in the 1920s. That is the whole basis for the series—Loni's discovery of who she is as she uncovers her past roots and realizes to what an extent she is dependent on, and even reliving, the past.

**7. Your use of Quaker themes and motifs in the series is unique. Have you done so to capitalize on the interest in the Amish and other such Christian groups that readers are curious about?**

Not at all. Actually a large part of my own ancestry is Quaker. One of my ancestors came to America on the *Shield*, the second ship of Quakers to arrive in America in the late 1600s, fleeing persecution in England. Since then my Quaker roots have fascinated me, and much of my own spiritual growth has been deeply influenced by certain Quaker writers. So the Quaker themes are very personal to me. I am proud of that heritage. I have also written about it in the *AMERICAN DREAMS* series in which I explored my wife Judy's Cherokee heritage. Interestingly, Judy also has Quaker roots in her background—one of her Quaker ancestors married a Cherokee princess. What a great story! We both treasure these interesting and diverse legacies in our genealogies.