1. Tell us about your latest novel *Paradise Valley*.

*Paradise Valley* is the first book in a series called *The Daughters of Caleb Bender*, which together tell the story of a group of Old Order Amish who migrated to Mexico in the 1920s to escape what amounted to religious persecution in Ohio. In an effort to stamp out the abhorrent child labor practices of the early 1900s the state instituted new laws requiring full time public school attendance for all children between the ages of six and eighteen. The Amish saw no reason to comply, and ultimately several of the fathers were arrested and charged with neglect and abuse. When they still refused to cooperate, the state took away their children, put them in a state-run children’s home, cut the boys’ hair and took the kids’ Amish clothes away from them. Caleb Bender began searching for a way out and discovered a cheap parcel of land for sale in the mountains of Mexico. As the elder statesman and first pioneer of the Paradise Valley settlement, Caleb risked everything when he migrated south of the border with a large family. He took along two grown sons and six of his seven daughters, several of whom were of courting age, so there’s a lot of room for romance.

2. I’m told *Paradise Valley* is based on historical events. Is it a true story?

It’s based on a true story. The major events and motivations are historically accurate, but the characters in the novel are entirely my own creation. There really was a group of Amish who moved to Mexico in the 1920s for precisely the reasons given in the novel. My great-grandfather was the elder statesman of the group, and he did in fact have seven daughters and two sons, but I never knew any of these people. I only know their descendents, so I created my own characters and story lines—*Paradise Valley* the way it might have been. However, I’ve done extensive research in order to get the geographical and historical details right. The chaos in Mexico in the wake of the Mexican Revolution makes for a dramatic backdrop.

3. *Levi’s Will*, your third novel, was also based on your family history. Are the two stories related in any way?

Yes, as a matter of fact, the new series deals with the same family a generation earlier, making the whole thing sort of a multi-volume prequel to *Levi’s Will*. Levi himself appears in these books as a young man, and Will is actually born while they’re in Mexico. I also believe by the time I’m done, the story will give readers of *Levi’s Will* a whole new perspective on Levi’s character and why he behaves the way he does.

4. What, in your opinion, sets *Paradise Valley* apart from other Amish fiction?

I would say scale and scope. It’s a grand story, the story of a family driven by religious principle to uproot themselves and face tremendous hardships while forging a homestead a thousand miles away, in a country where their language and customs are not understood. In addition to a wonderfully strange backdrop, the story gives me room to explore Amish attitudes about church and state, a subject that has seldom been dealt with in Amish fiction.

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I love big questions, but at the same time I’ve never believed that the purpose of fiction is to provide answers. I think fiction should work more like a parable; it should ask intelligent questions and then let readers find the answers for themselves.

5. What makes *Paradise Valley* different from your other books?

Romance. I’ve never really tried to write romantic fiction, and this story seemed to me to be the perfect vehicle. Caleb’s daughters provide hugely romantic story lines in each of the books, and I’ve tried to approach them in my own way, with my own style. When I think of romance I think Jane Austen, *Gone With the Wind*, *Wuthering Heights*. Big, heroic romance. And I’ve actually taken to it. I’ve enjoyed working on the romantic angles, and I’m anxious to hear what readers think about it.

6. What made you want to write *The Daughters of Caleb Bender* series?

I was looking for an Amish story I could sink my teeth into, a big story with high stakes and inherent moral dilemmas. One evening I was talking to my father, who was born Old Order Amish, and I asked him how he came to be born in Mexico. He gave me a rough sketch of the Paradise Valley settlement and told me he thought it had something to do with the schools. So I started digging. Eventually I came across an obscure book that gave a fairly detailed account of the colony and their reasons for leaving Ohio in the first place, and I knew I had my big story.