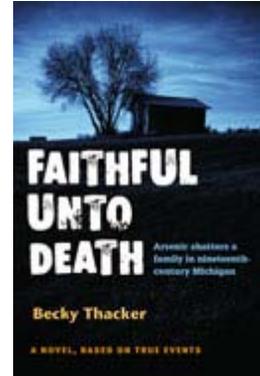


Q&A with Becky Thacker, author of *Faithful Unto Death*

Benzonia, Michigan, 1894: a sleepy Congregationalist community, dedicated to the education of hardworking and virtuous young people of both sexes and all races. Anna Spencer Thacker is the daughter of missionaries, a faithful wife, and mother of five, pious to a fault. She is suddenly stricken with a mysterious ailment that soon proves fatal. Was it truly an unfortunate illness? Or was it murder—or suicide?

Taking a true story of a murder in her own family, Becky Thacker has crafted a historical mystery novel whose cast of characters rapidly builds, including William Henry Thacker as deputy sheriff, deacon in his church, a kind man . . . but perhaps just a trifle too fond of the attractive young housekeeper; and Charlotte Spencer, the pretty missionary sister, almost saintly in her efforts to bring Jesus to the Armenians in the mountains of Turkey, though a bit prone to exaggeration. She could be a suspect—or the next target.



Becky Thacker was born in Hancock, Michigan, in 1948 and hasn't been back there since. With her military family, she has lived in Morocco, Florida, and Turkey, returning home many summers to the family farm in Leroy, Michigan. She lives with her partner Harriet in Indianapolis. Her previous books are *Amazon Girls Handbook* and *The Chorus Kids' Memorial Day Parade*.

The University of Michigan Press: How did you first find out about the case?

Becky Thacker: I was visiting the family farm, up in Leroy, Michigan, and it was apparently a state occasion because there were a lot of relatives up there – aunts, great aunts, uncles, great uncles, so forth – and I was a teenager. My cousin and I were about the same age, we were running riot through the farm, having a grand time.

We came in from outside and the grown-ups were all gathered around the dining room table, drinking coffee and arguing about something – and these folks just didn't argue that much, especially not when there were a bunch of them together. They were very peaceful and they pretty much agreed with each other on things. But they were very heated about something – “No he didn't,” “Well she couldn't possibly have.” So of course I stopped and kind of tuned in on it and my cousin said, “Oh, they're talking about the murder.” And I thought, ah, they must be talking about history, they're all history buffs, maybe it was the Tudor succession or something. She said, “No, no. The family murder.” The family murder?

Well then the grown-ups noticed we were there and they all sort of stopped and looked at each other. My aunt Charlotte, who was Penny's mom, said, “Oh, I think you're old enough to have heard about this by now,” and Penny said. “You know, our great grandmother was murdered.” “Cool.” I said – cause you know, you're a teenager, that's a cool thing – and somebody else at the table said that it might not have been murder, it might have been suicide. Well you never know.

“Oh, that note was forged,” and away they went again, and they just continued this argument on about who did it, who didn't do it. That's how I learned great-grandmother had died of arsenic poisoning. So each one had their own opinion about it and each one had an opinion based, pretty much on what they thought about the characters. They hadn't really researched it. And as the years passed, I noticed that each one's opinion seemed to shift to

other things. So if one person agreed on one thing at one time, they might have a totally different opinion another time. Obviously it was a lot on their minds, still.

UMP: When did you decide to do the book?

BT: The discussions went on about the murder, among various different relatives - every time they got together at some sort of family reunion or other gathering. And each time they would kind of run down to the end of their discussion, somebody would say, "Well, somebody should write a book about this." And of course, nobody intended to write a book about it, they just said somebody should. Time passed, we all got older, I grew up, older folks got older and there were fewer folks around the table each time. And about ten years ago, the argument raged on with, I forget whom, except my father was there and someone said, "Well, somebody should write a book about this," and my dad said to me, "Well you should be the one to write it, you're the published author." And I said, "Well yeah, the published author of *Amazon Girls Handbook*, which is sort of a humorous, advice thing. It has nothing to do with historical fiction. I wouldn't have the faintest idea as to where to start." And my partner Harriet said, "Well it's very simple. You just do the research and you just write the book. Easy!"

UMP: How did you get started with your research?

BT: So, we said, "All right, we'll have to do this research on this thing, where do we begin?" Harriet, my partner, said, "Well, let's go to Benzonia, Michigan, where it happened, and just start digging." So we went up to the family farm again, which is at Leroy, which is fairly close to Benzonia. We told my Uncle Francis, Francis Thacker, who was the grandson of Anna - who is the murder victim - and we said we'd like to go to Benzonia, we'd like to do some research, can you give us an idea where to start. And he said, "Well yes, get in the car and I'll take you on over there." He's not usually a very loquacious man, but he got in the car and he started driving and my Aunt Ingrid was there, and he just started telling us about all the things that he'd been thinking about, all of the years that he thought about who was where at different times. He knew names, he knew dates, he knew places, he knew up the hill and down the hill and what it looked like and how things were back then. It was like somebody just turned a switch on with him, he'd just been waiting for somebody to ask him.

He gave us information, he took us around Benzonia, he took us to the historic center, he took us to the library. He pointed us to the court house - unfortunately it was closed while we were there - he took us to the cemetery and pointed out the headstone which just said "Faithful unto Death: Anna Thacker." He really gave us a lot of what we needed to get going. I had pages and pages of stuff by the time we left there that day. I contacted the court house; they had the entire trial transcript. I ended up with 300 pages of trial transcript; I had all this paper. Still had no idea how to make a book out of it, but I had all that stuff, so I had stuff to work on.

UMP: How important is this case still, to your family and the community?

BT: Benzonia was interesting because when we made the visit doing the research, we went to the history center and we asked them what they had about the Thackers and the family murder and so forth. They all looked at one another as if they had never heard the name; they had no idea what I was talking about. It wasn't until we got over to the library and started reading the *Benzie Banner*, which was written a hundred years ago, and they had all the issues there. We started reading about the trial and how people were affected by it. This trial apparently shook this town up. People took sides. People were angry about it. People were embarrassed about it. It was a nice Congregationalist village and that sort of thing didn't happen there.

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There were questions about adultery; did Henry Thacker commit adultery with their live-in housekeeper or not, and adultery wasn't anything they even wanted their children to know about – except having maybe read about it in the Bible. They were still very upset about this thing.

I have no idea yet how they are going to handle the book about that. It doesn't really go well with "Waiting for the Morning Train," which was the other Benzonia story; which was a very sweet book about life in Benzonia back then. My family's sort of proud of having a murder in the family; we're not ordinary people and that just proves it, the idea. Now, my family has not read the trial transcripts, the family doesn't realize what I realize. That we have a few very unstable people in our family, you can just look at some of the testimony in the trial and see where it came from. (-Laughs-)

UMP: This is your first novel, how did writing it compare to your previous work?

BT: It was a whole different world. I had a wonderful time writing the *Amazon Girls Handbook*, it just all poured out. My friends were saying, "Oh, there should be a badge for this, there should be a badge for that," and I would just sit down and write all the steps for earning your party badge, or your this and that. It was just a silly thing, kind of a piece of fluff. It was humorous, it was a fun book – I hope it's still fun for the people who have it.

The Benzonia mystery story was a whole different thing, and it started being pretty dry and I had a hard time getting into it at first because I had names, and dates, and figures, and a trial. And murder mysteries are interesting, but I wasn't really getting anywhere, until I got a little ways into the trial transcript and I read a piece where Lottie Thacker, 14 years old, Anna's daughter is testifying at her father's murder trial. It started out, "My name is Lottie Thacker, I'm 14 years old, I did nothing to poison my mother."

And I just thought, "Wow, this kid was taking art lessons, she was a school kid, her oldest brother was a college kid, he was in the school band – these were very respected people in a very respectable town and suddenly these kids – their mom is dead, she's died horribly, their father is being tried for murder." I said that's where the story is: It's these kids and how they went through that, and how the family progressed on, and then how the town reacted with them, and who were their friends during all of that difficult time, and who were not their friends, and who might have been and they didn't know. I said, that's where the story is, and then I just started kind of channeling these people – and then it started writing itself, just like the *Amazon Girls Handbook*. It was a piece of cake after I found Lottie.

To read more about *Faithful Unto Death* by Becky Thacker, visit The University of Michigan Press at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=3889940>