

SEPTEMBER MUSINGS

SHARON VIRT



What Happens When We Stop Reading?

I came across an article in *The Atlantic* recently that has stayed with me. Written by Rose Horowitz, its title in the magazine was deliberately provocative: “**The Age of Reading Is Over.**” My first reaction was that surely this was an exaggeration. People still buy books. Bookstores still exist. Libraries are still open. I write books, and many of you reading this newsletter are readers yourselves.

Then I looked at the numbers. Fewer than half of American adults reported reading a book of any kind in 2022. Only **38%** read a novel or short story. The percentage of Americans who read for pleasure on any given day has fallen from **28% in 2004 to just 16% in 2023**. And then there is the statistic that stopped me: **Only 2% of American adults reported reading to a child on any given day.**

Two percent.

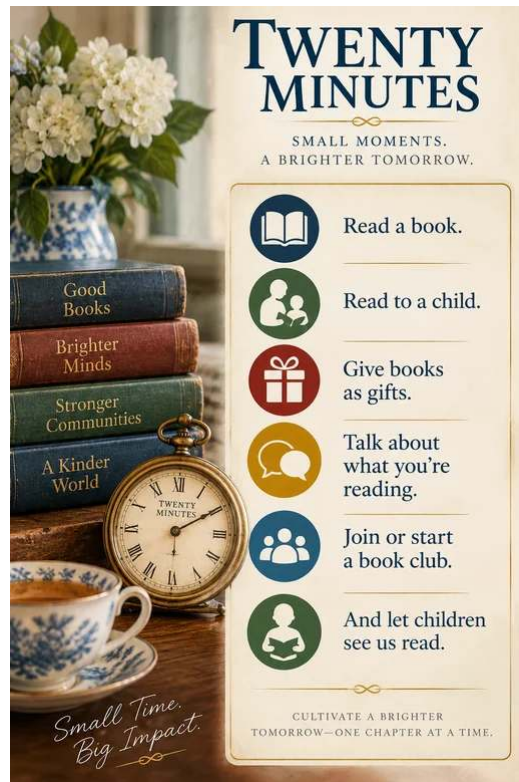
This isn't simply about whether the publishing industry will survive or whether novelists like me will continue to have an audience. It is about something much larger.

We Have Been Here Before—and it led to the Dark Ages

There is a temptation to think that human progress moves in only one direction. *FORWARD*. Unfortunately, history tells a different story.

The ancient world accumulated extraordinary stores of knowledge. The great Library of Alexandria became a symbol of that achievement. Scholars gathered manuscripts, studied mathematics and astronomy, edited literature and attempted to preserve what human beings had learned. The library eventually disappeared, although not in one dramatic fire as popular legend sometimes suggests. The centuries that followed the decline of the ancient Mediterranean world were enormously complicated. Political institutions collapsed. Trade networks fractured. Cities declined. Education changed.

It would be far too simple to say that people stopped reading and the Dark Ages began. But there is a lesson here: **Knowledge survives only when one generation cares enough to preserve it—and the next generation possesses the ability and desire to receive it.**



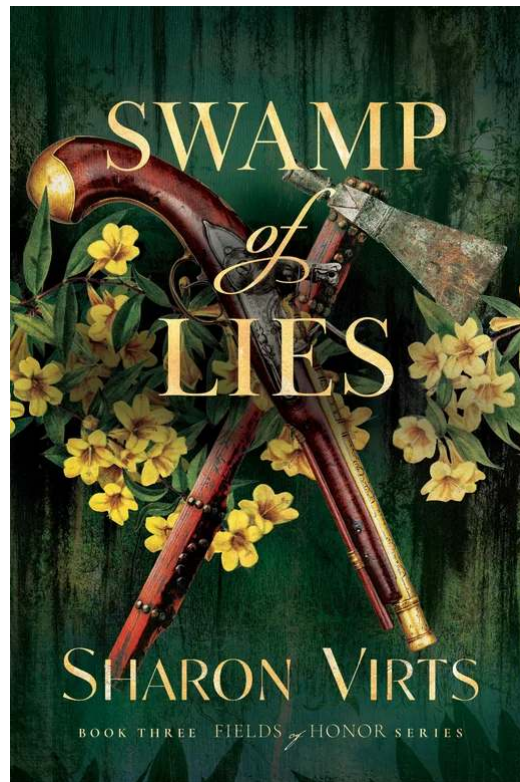
Today we face a strange reversal of the ancient problem. Our libraries are not burning. The books are still there. Indeed, virtually the entire accumulated written inheritance of civilization is available to us in a way that would have astonished anyone who lived before our time. The danger is that fewer of us may be willing—or eventually able—to sit still long enough to read it.

<<READ THE REST OF THE ARTICLE>>



Introducing ... *Swamp of Lies*, Book 3 of *Fields of Honor*

The Advanced Reader Copies (uncorrected proof) of my upcoming novel *Swamp of Lies* arrived on my doorstep this week!



ARC Readers Sign-up Here!

I am looking for advanced readers and if you or someone you know is a bookstagrammer or book blogger, let me know! Scott says this is my best book yet...and on March 16, I will be able to share it with all of you!

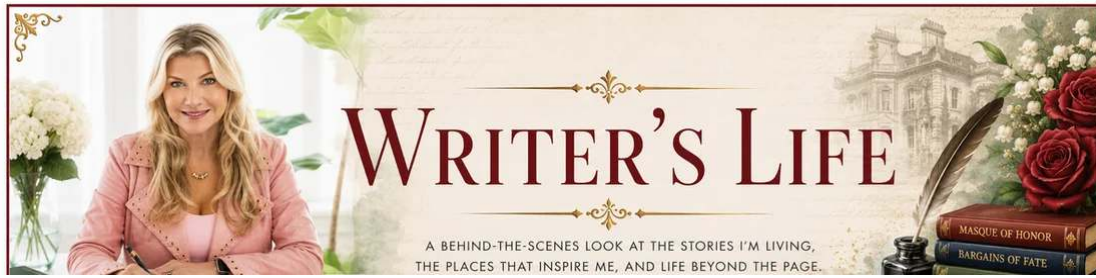
HONOR & HOPE

Join me and NYTimes best-selling author Heather Webb on October 7 at Belmont Country Club in Ashburn, Virginia as we travel between two eras to explore:

- The interwoven worlds behind ***The Hope Keeper*** & the novels in my **Fields of Honor** series.
- Love, marriage, money, reputation, scandal and societal changes between the 1820s and the 1920s.
- The role Belmont played in the lives of the McCartys and Lees of my stories and the lives of the McLeans who owned the **Hope Diamond** and Belmont in Heather's book.
- The real history that inspires historical fiction,

The evening begins with a cocktail reception featuring my husband's Napa-based **Amlés Wines**, followed by a historical talk with me and Heather and a book signing.





Another Trip Around the Sun

September has always felt like a beginning to me. Maybe it's because it's my birthday month, or because the first hint of fall still carries that childhood promise of new shoes and a new school year. But this September arrived with a reminder that beginnings and endings often travel together.

A few days ago, I learned that an old college flame had passed away. We hadn't been particularly close in the decades since, but he remained a connection to a shared past that reminded me of the younger version of myself. Football games at Scott Stadium. Late night studies in the library's stacks. The Skip Castro Band at Mad Bowl during Easters. Friday nights at Grady's. His death made those years feel remarkably close. When we're young, we live as though there will always be another football game, another concert, another Friday night. That life stretches endlessly before us. Until it doesn't.

So as another birthday approaches, I find myself looking backward with gratitude—not only for the extraordinary moments, but for all those wonderfully ordinary ones I didn't know enough to treasure at the time.

And looking forward with hope. There are still stories I want to tell, paintings to make, places to experience, people to love better, and things to do that I haven't thought of yet. Perhaps that's the real gift of a birthday. Another year isn't simply a number added to the ones behind us. *By God's grace, it's more time—and a reminder not to take a moment of it for granted.*

So here's to September. To remembering where we've been, being grateful for those who traveled part of the way with us, and looking toward the year ahead with

curiosity, purpose, and joy.



The Dark Ages

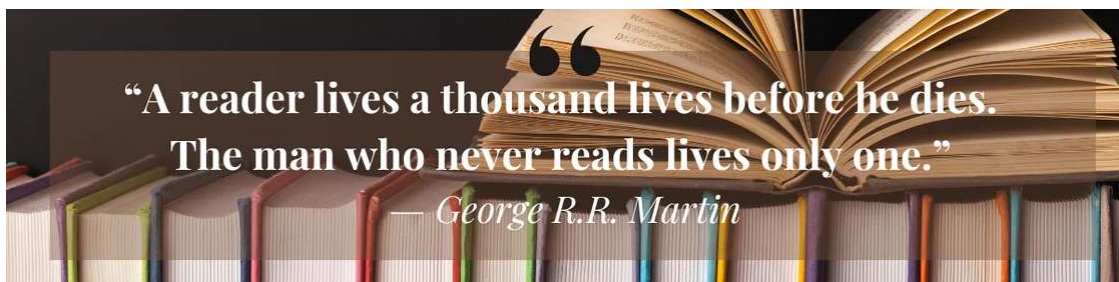
What happens when the world stops reading

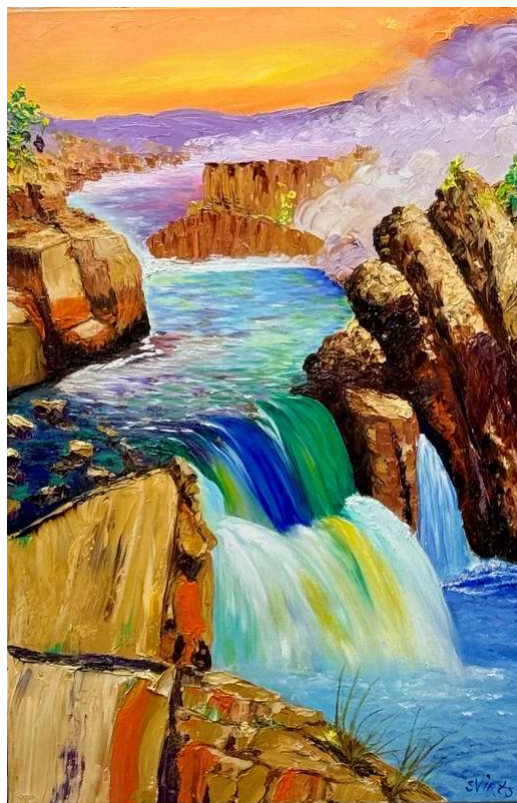
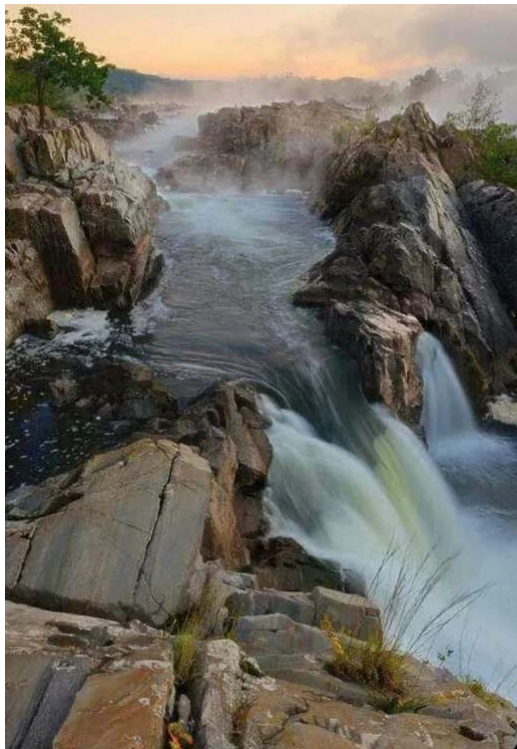
When the Western Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century, its libraries didn't burst into flame nor did its people wake one morning unable to read. What happened was less dramatic. The scaffolding that had supported widespread literacy simply began to deteriorate. The Roman empire had been built on the written word. Its laws, contracts, tax rolls, military orders, and endless correspondence moved through an administrative machine that stretched across three continents. That machine relied on people who could read and write. In the cities and among the prosperous, schooling was common and books were copied, traded, and treasured.

Then it all fell apart.

Cities shrank, trade thinned, and the schools that had trained clerks and officials closed their doors. As the demand for literate administrators diminished, so did the reasons to become one. Books—each of them copied by hand—grew rarer with every passing generation. Reading didn't disappear. There were just less reasons to read. And that small difference is the whole of the story.

[<<READ MORE>>](#)





The Color the Camera Can't See

I have stood at Great Falls more times than I can count and the river has never once looked the same way twice. The photograph on the left catches it beautifully—the granite, the Potomac shouldering through the gorge, the mist lifting into a soft morning sky. Every detail is true. And yet, something was missing: *The color.*

The water runs blue and turquoise and green all at once; the rock warms to gold and rust in the light; the far hills go lavender, and the mist turns nearly luminous where the sun finds it. None of that restraint was present when this photo was taken. So I painted what my mind saw—the part the lens left out.

That's the heart of Reflectionism. We don't take in the world the way a camera does; we bring color and light and dimension and feeling and ourselves to all of it. My palette knife lets me press those impressions further—hard stone against restless water, reflected light, the raw force of a river carving its way through rock.

This piece won't travel with me to Dallas this weekend where I'll spend my birthday at the opening of the first Reflectionism exhibition at Samuel Lynne Galleries. It will stay closer to home—bound for the Loudoun Museum's charity auction on September 22, where it will find a new owner while helping preserve the history of the county that raised me...which feels exactly right. Great Falls is a landscape I know by heart; Dallas is the adventure ahead. And somewhere between the two is what I hope every canvas reflects—not simply how a scene looked, but how it feels to stand within it.

Reflectionist Catalogue of Artists & Artwork

Reflectionism | September 12, 2026 | Samuel Lynne Galleries | Dallas, Texas





Empty Bowls

On September 17, my family and I will be attending **Loudoun Empty Bowls**, supporting the work of Loudoun Hunger Relief. The idea behind Empty Bowls is wonderfully simple: a handmade bowl becomes a reminder that, for too many of our neighbors, an empty bowl isn't symbolic.

Hunger can be surprisingly easy to overlook in a prosperous place like Loudoun County. Loudoun Hunger Relief estimates that about **one in four local households is struggling to make ends meet**, with rising housing costs often forcing families to make difficult choices about necessities—including food.

That's why our family attends together. Philanthropy isn't only about writing a check. It's about understanding the community around us, supporting the people doing the work, and teaching the next generation that caring for our neighbors is part of belonging to a place. We'll choose our bowls, share simple meal of soup and bread, enjoy being together—and help make certain a few more bowls in Loudoun are filled. You can learn more [HERE](#).



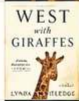
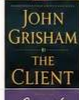
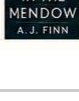
7 Books to Break a Reading Slump

If you've fallen out of the habit of reading, the answer is NOT to hand yourself a 700-page literary masterpiece and promise to try harder. You need a book that reminds you why reading was fun in the first place. So I've chosen seven very different ones to jumpstart your reading habit. Pick your poison: something funny, something historical, a courtroom thriller, a classic whodunit, or a gritty cop story. The only requirement is that you keep turning the pages.

[Click here for full descriptions and ordering information](#)

SEVEN BOOKS TO BREAK A READING SLUMP

Seven moods. Seven great reads. Find the one that calls to you.

	I NEED TO LAUGH.		A Walk in the Woods — Bill Bryson Part travel adventure, part stream-of-consciousness ramble, this hilarious account of hiking the Appalachian Trail is the perfect tonic for a reader's rut.		HUMOR / TRAVEL
	TELL ME A WONDERFUL STORY.		West with Giraffes — Lynda Rutledge An unforgettable journey across Depression-era America with two giraffes—and the people whose lives change because of them. Heartwarming and beautifully written.		HISTORICAL FICTION
	I WANT A PAGE-TURNER.		The Client — John Grisham A scared eleven-year-old. A ruthless mafia. A lawyer with everything on the line. Fast-paced, compelling and impossible to put down.		LEGAL THRILLER
	GIVE ME A PUZZLE TO SOLVE.		The Murder of Roger Ackroyd — Agatha Christie A classic for a reason. Clever clues, unexpected twists, and one of Christie's most ingenious endings.		CLASSIC MYSTERY
	I WANT SOMETHING LIGHT AND ROMANTIC.		The Bodyguard — Katherine Center A bodyguard. A movie star. A fake relationship. Smart, funny, and full of heart—just the kind of escape we all need sometimes.		ROMANTIC COMEDY
	GIVE ME SPIES AND INTERNATIONAL INTRIGUE.		The Kill Artist — Daniel Silva Art, espionage, and a race against time. The first book featuring Gabriel Allon is stylish, sophisticated, and full of nonstop action.		ESPIONAGE / SPY THRILLER
	KEEP ME UP PAST MY BEDTIME.		The Woman in the Window — A. J. Finn A reclusive woman. A disturbing secret. A thriller that will keep you guessing—and turning the pages—until the very end.		PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

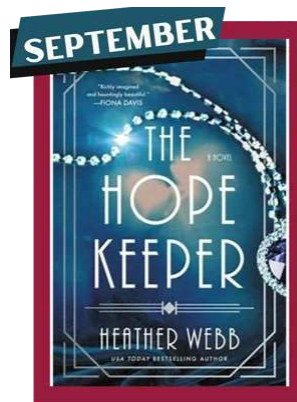
#ReadWithSharon

Historical Fiction Book Club

On Thursday, September 25 at 7pm eastern, we will discuss, *The Hope Keeper* with author Heather Webb who will be joining us.

One of the things I love most about this book is how it took us behind the photographs and headlines. Evalyn McLean was a fascinating real-life figure, and through Elisabeth's fictional story, Heather gives us a window into a Washington society filled with wealth, ambition, and secrets.

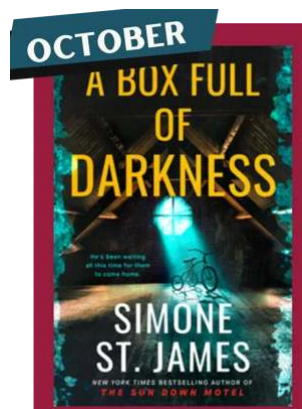
If you haven't got your copy of *The Hope Keeper* yet, you can [use this link](#) to buy it.

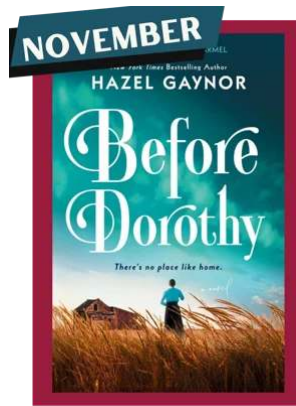


Enter to win a copy of *The Hope Keeper* and a signed copy of *Bargains of Fate*!

Enter Here!

The **#ReadWithSharon** book club only reads current-release historical fiction, and I do my best to pre-read every selection before making the pick. Most months, the author joins us via Zoom, and you are able to ask questions during the discussion. You can sign up for free [HERE](#)





A Question to Leave You With

Last month, I asked what you would miss most about summer...

Lesa said, "coffee, reading, and listening to the robins sing their songs."

Karin said, "a break from chaos."

Kari said, "hydrangea and peonies."

Jan said, "the sound of cicadas."

Jill said, "hanging out poolside with good friends and good wine."

Mel said, "catching fireflies with my grandkids."

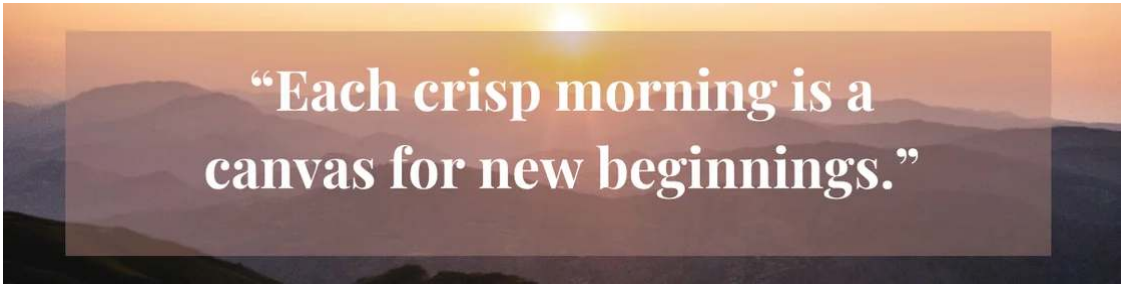
Sue said, "the kids being home, no schedules, and barefoot at the beach."

Reta said, "sitting by the pool, blush-colored sunsets, summer frogs, birdsong, and feeding the deer at the edge of the woods."

This month, you can help me as I put together a child's reading gift list this holiday season. Just click the link below to tell me your favorite!

What book did you love most as a child?

Click here to send me your favorites.
I'll use them to help develop my holiday recommendations--
And share them in next month's newsletter!



**“Each crisp morning is a
canvas for new beginnings.”**

Turn the page. September is a lovely time to begin again!



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