

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING . . .



Schuermann builds the reader's affections for the Bradbury characters in such a way that you should not be surprised to find yourself including some of these blessed souls into your own daily prayers, only to remember, embarrassingly, that these are not real souls at all. And yet, they are very real. The widows, the mother hens, the lonely singles, the gossips, the meddlers, the jilted—they are all around us. The names and faces are different, but the sins and the robe of righteousness that cover us all are the same.

—**Rebecca Mayes, housewife and blogger**

Katie Schuermann gets it! . . . not only what goes on behind the scenes—and the masks—in a congregation, not only how to negotiate the treacherous genre of Christian fiction, which is so often syrupy or contrived or idealistic, but, much more important: how Christ transforms real life in a still fallen—and frequently funny!—world.

—**Dr. Carl C. Fickenscher II, Concordia Theological Seminary**

There are a myriad of delightful qualities about this book: its humor, its bold witness to Christ, its gentle reminder of how deadly our pet sins are. One of its most endearing qualities—beyond masterful turns of phrases, twisty plot developments, and characters you are certain you have met in real life—is that it is true.

—**Adriane Heins, executive editor, *The Lutheran Witness***

A Lutheran Jan Karon? Yes, Katie Schuermann! Both are great wordsmiths crafting engrossing small town tales. Both focus on town and congregational life. Both have great character development and are enlightening, spiritual fun reads. . . . For your reading delight, for sharing, and for gifting!

—**Rod Zwonitzer, Director of Broadcast Services/KFUO,
Host of *BookTalk***

Anyone who has said of small town life, “You can’t make this stuff up” has been proven wrong by Katie Schuermann. If the people of Lake Wobegone were to fall in love with a book, it would be *House of Living Stones*, where the odors are strong, the pastor is good-looking, and the writing is all above average.

—**Rebekah Curtis, housewife, author, editor, and avid reader.**

A delightful homage, complete with colorful characters who break the eighth commandment like pros, a heroine both sinner and saint, and a portrait of small-town life that reads like a caricature but is all too real. Katie’s writing elevates “ordinary” life to the extraordinary, alternating whimsical hilarity with poignant real-life-under-the-cross moments that will have you laughing, crying, and wanting more.

—**Gretchen Roberts, digital marketer, pastor’s wife, avid reader of fiction, and *Anne of Green Gables* fan**

How refreshing it is to read for pleasure and then find it to be also wonderfully edifying time spent. This is Mitford plus . . . where Schuermann brings the reader into the joys and some serious challenges of a small town. You will love the writing, the story line, the characters, and the humor. Sit down with some Chamomile or Merlot . . . read and enjoy!”

—**Richard C. Resch, Kantor and Professor Emeritus,
Concordia Theological Seminary**

Katie Schuermann’s venture into fiction breathes a breath of fresh central Illinois air as her pen travels along a road less traveled. . . . Her tale of life and love, meddling and music, rebellion and reconciliation in the fictional college town of Bradbury, Illinois, is entertaining and insightful. . . . This is a delightful diversion and a helpful and practical account of living that I can’t help but recommend.

—**Rev. Mark A. Miller, president, Central Illinois District LCMS**

A charming story about life in a small congregation in rural Illinois, with the rare feature of a choir director as a main character. The view-from-the-pew (or choir loft) perspective is reminiscent of Mark Schweizer’s Liturgical Mysteries series, and the down-home Lutheranism of Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon. Schuermann’s tale is sure to draw knowing nods and smiles from readers.

—**Kevin Hildebrand, Kantor, Concordia Theological Seminary and
St. Paul’s Lutheran Church & School**

House OF Living Stones

KATIE
SCHUERMANN

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

*For my Michael,
who never fails to laugh in all of the right places.*



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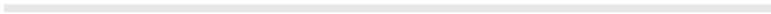
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*We are God's house of living stones,
Built for His own habitation.
He through baptismal grace us owns
Heirs of His wondrous salvation.
Were we but two His name to tell,
Yet He would deign with us to dwell
With all His grace and His favor.
(LSB 645:3)*

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CHAPTER ONE:

MRS. SCHEINBERG IS INCONVENIENCED

Mrs. Arlene Compton Scheinberg positioned herself advantageously behind the cherrywood desk in the front office of Zion Lutheran Church. The sign out front on the church lawn announced to all the world that the Reverend Michael G. Fletcher was Zion's divinely called shepherd, but every sheep in the flock knew that Mrs. Scheinberg was the self-appointed herd dog; and she did not care for the looks of the two wolves in wrinkled suits sitting expressionless on the chairs along her east wall.

The man on the left with salt-and-pepper hair wore a blue suit coat but no tie. Mrs. Scheinberg scrutinized the exposed top button of the man's shirt over her gold-rimmed glasses while simultaneously editing the bulletin for the upcoming Sunday service. *A man should finish dressing before leaving the house*, she grumpily thought.

The young man on the right appeared to be growing a beard for the first time. The blond hair on his chin, however, was growing much faster than the hair on his red cheeks, leaving him looking oddly like a rooted sweet potato. "A job half done is

a job undone,” she quipped under her breath. She picked up her red pen and made a large, annoyed check on the bottom of page 2. Pastor Fletcher would expect the bulletin to be finished for printing by four o’clock that very afternoon, and Mrs. Scheinberg was not about to let these two sojourners distract her from her service to the Lord—not, at least, while so many other generous women in the congregation waited in line to steal her blessing.

Just last year, Miss Geraldine Turner, after catching a misplaced appositive in the bulletin announcements two Sundays in a row, made a point of suggesting to Pastor Fletcher that perhaps Mrs. Scheinberg would appreciate some help proofreading the bulletin every Thursday afternoon, between three and four o’clock to be precise.

“As the English Teacher Emeritus of Bradbury High School,” Miss Turner had quipped in that tight, queenly way of hers, “I would be most happy to be of service.”

Mrs. Scheinberg had kindly reminded Pastor Fletcher that the trustees had thought to provide only one chair behind the front office desk, and unless he could spare his own chair between three and four every Thursday afternoon, the benevolent Miss Turner would have no place to sit.

Miss Turner hadn’t been her only critic. This past December, Mrs. Thomas Edison Bradbury III had dropped by the church office one Monday morning to express her sorrow and regret at the misspelling of her husband’s ailing mother’s maiden name in the prayer requests. She had even provided her own marked copy of the bulletin for Pastor Fletcher to keep, and she meaningfully handed Mrs. Scheinberg a copy of the Bradbury County Home Extension Office’s recent publication, *The Life and Times of Bradbury: A Complete History*.

“Oh, no, I insist you keep it for free,” Candice Bradbury had fluttered, her counterfeit smile pushing sideways against her ample cheeks. “You will find it to be a useful resource in the future. The *correct* spelling of every name of every one of my husband’s relatives is in there. I know. I edited the book myself.”

Mrs. Scheinberg had made sure to tie a festive, red-and-gold ribbon around Candice’s miserable book before giving it to Pastor Fletcher as a Christmas present.

Even the sweet widow of the deceased Pastor Gardner had offered her proofreading services just last month. “Arlene, dear,” Alice had crooned, “I couldn’t help but notice the heading in last Sunday’s bulletin about the fundraiser for the food pantry on Washington Street.”

Mrs. Scheinberg had not bothered to look up from the magazine she was perusing. “I double-checked the date and time, Alice. It’s correct.”

“Well, dear,” Alice stumbled, “it’s not the date and time to which I’m referring.”

Mrs. Scheinberg wondered why a faithful servant of the church could not be allowed even one moment’s peace in which to properly view the new line of sport coats featured in the JCPenney summer catalog. She sighed from her hips, put her glasses on top of her head, and gave Alice an eyeful of feigned civility.

“You see,” Alice blushed, holding out the bulletin in question, “it says, ‘Come and support our tasty food *pantry*.’”

Mrs. Scheinberg hadn’t missed the masculine chuckle—quickly stifled and masked as a cough—that escaped from behind the door of Pastor Fletcher’s study. Even now, she scowled at the memory, her ears taking on the shade of her new, melon-colored blouse. “Everyone’s a critic,” she muttered aloud, causing the two dark suits to look up expectantly from their

perches against the wall. She glared at them over her glasses, daring them to breathe, before slowly returning her attention to her bulletin.

The front door to the office opened just then, letting in a gust of warm air that smelled of sunned boxwood and potting soil. A young woman with rosy cheeks and serious, brown eyes floated in on the breeze. She wore a gray pencil skirt, white blouse, and quarter-length pink sweater. Her dark-blond locks were cut short and stylishly curled around her forehead and cheeks. The two suits turned curious gazes toward the newcomer, and Mrs. Scheinberg felt oddly grateful to the young woman for the distraction. Uncharacteristic feelings of goodwill and hospitality for the ingénue stirred in the older woman.

“May I help you?” Mrs. Scheinberg smiled generously, though a bit unnaturally. She was out of practice.

“Yes, my name is Emily Duke. I have an appointment with Reverend Fletcher, though I think I may be a bit early.”

“Won’t you have a seat?” Mrs. Scheinberg gestured to the empty chair sandwiched between Neiman and Marcus. The young woman hesitated, scanning the room for an alternative that imposed a little less intimacy upon three total strangers. Mrs. Scheinberg followed her gaze to the rickety, three-step footstool near the floor-to-ceiling bookcase and the brass plant stand supporting an overgrown asparagus fern in the corner. Evidently finding nothing more suitable, Emily Duke lowered herself carefully onto the seat that had been proffered and hugged her elbows to her ribs in an obvious effort to keep from touching the two men.

Mrs. Scheinberg creaked back comfortably in her executive leather chair and resumed her editing, though not before taking note of the fact that the young woman now seated in the waiting room appeared refreshingly modest and pressed for a woman of

her generation. She even sat with her ankles crossed. And wore hose. *Naked knees are for young children and harlots*, Mrs. Scheinberg thought with satisfaction. As far as she was concerned, Emily Duke's honor and reputation were forever secured right then and there by a simple pair of nylons.

The door to the left of her desk opened, and out stepped a man in a clerical collar. He had an ordinary face and an unassuming manner, but his dark eyes were bright with intelligence and looked as if they could crinkle into a smile at any moment, a characteristic that endeared him to everyone in his flock but the church secretary. "Mrs. Scheinberg," Pastor Fletcher said, "would you please invite Mr. Norton into my office?"

As faithful and as nice as Pastor Fletcher might be, Mrs. Scheinberg couldn't bring herself to forgive him for being under forty. It was not his fault, to be sure, but it was a fault all the same. She took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose, careful not to leave the comfort of her own chair. "Mr. Norton," she called across the room, "the Reverend Fletcher is ready to meet with you."

Pastor Fletcher's mouth twitched and his dark eyes twinkled, a sight that irritated Mrs. Scheinberg to no end. How she wished these young pastors' mothers had taught their sons to smile a little less and to comb their hair a little more! A lesson or two in ironing would have been in order as well. Why, in thirty years of faithful service, she had never once seen Pastor Gardner, may he rest in peace, step out of his home without a starched clerical on his back and a blazing white part in his hair, but this Michael Fletcher barely remembered to cut his mop of curly hair, let alone tame it; and by the end of the day, the wrinkles in his clerical wiggled and squiggled across his back like a sloppy community garden whose rows had been hoed by a five-year-old. What were the seminaries teaching these men anyway?

For the next forty-five minutes, Mrs. Scheinberg wrangled with the third page of the bulletin while simultaneously listening to the muted interviews behind Pastor's closed door, first with the unbuttoned Mr. Norton and then with the half-bearded Mr. Simmons. (She found it satisfying to discover that Mr. Simmons's voice was higher-pitched than her own. She had guessed as much.) Then, there was also the matter of Emily Duke, who was patiently waiting for her turn. As hard as Mrs. Scheinberg tried, she could not help sneaking glances at her. The young woman had a curious yet charming tendency to sway her head back and forth ever so slightly as if listening to music that no one else could hear, and she pursed her lips and furrowed her brow like a little girl who had lost herself in her thoughts. She could not have been a day over thirty, but even from across the room, Mrs. Scheinberg saw that there were faint lines etched around her eyes and mouth as if they were lingering shadows of laughter and smiles from years past. Disarmed by Emily Duke's mannerisms, she caught herself staring at the young woman.

Each in his turn, Mr. Norton and Mr. Simmons exited Pastor's study and, subsequently, the office door. Mrs. Scheinberg celebrated the return of peace to her pasture with a desk picnic of four peanut butter cookies and one canning jar of iced peach tea. She brushed the incriminating cookie crumbs off the front of her blouse just as Pastor Fletcher ambled out of his study on his long legs. "How is the bulletin coming?" His tone was friendly, and his hands were in his pockets. Put off by his casual manner, Mrs. Scheinberg sniffed and made a large, visible check on the third page. "It would go a lot faster if there were not so many people requiring my attention and skill this morning. You *know* Thursdays are my busy days."

"Duly noted, Mrs. Scheinberg." Pastor Fletcher turned to smile warmly at the young woman. "You must be Dr. Duke."

“*Doctor*” Duke? Mrs. Scheinberg thought with approval, though she was suitably rankled to be hearing of the young woman’s title for the first time. For some reason known only to Pastor Fletcher, she had not been privy to the résumés of the candidates ahead of the interviews. And that was another thing about these young pastors. They locked their filing cabinets every evening. Pastor Gardner never would have done such an untrusting thing.

“Yes,” the young woman said, her smile lines blossoming in full glory. She stood and shook the reverend’s hand and then walked before him into his office at his gestured invitation.

Pastor Fletcher lingered for a moment next to the secretary’s desk. “Mrs. Scheinberg, would you please include a congratulatory note in the bulletin this week for Pastor Douglas? He retires a week from this Sunday.”

“But he is not a member of this congregation.”

“His grandchildren are.”

She made a show of exchanging her red editing pen for the green writing pen in the top drawer of her desk and then looked over her glasses at the clergyman. “It seems to me that the proper place for an announcement regarding Pastor Douglas’s retirement would be in his own church’s bulletin. Would you like me to go ahead and call the other churches in the county to see if they have anything they would like to add?”

Pastor Fletcher, eyes sparkling, appeared as if he was resisting the urge to plant a patronizing kiss on the top of her gray head, but, apparently, even youth has its wisdom. He simply stepped into his study.

“And what exactly am I supposed to say in this congratulatory announcement?” she called loudly into the great wide void.

“How about, ‘We wish Reverend Douglas many blessings in his retirement,’ ” was the faceless reply.

Pastor Fletcher, as was his custom when meeting alone with a woman, left his door respectfully ajar a few inches, and Mrs. Scheinberg, as was her custom when sitting alone behind her desk, angled her chair and scooted a few feet closer to the door of the study to better hear every word. Although she could not see him, she could hear Pastor Fletcher sifting through the open file on his desk.

“Your résumé is impressive, Dr. Duke. I can’t help but wonder why someone with your credentials would even want to interview for our part-time church choir director position.”

“Thank you. I’m interested because I want to make music in a church.”

“Any particular reason why you want to make music in *this* church?”

“I am a baptized Lutheran, and this is the only Lutheran church in town.” Mrs. Scheinberg heard, rather than saw, Emily Duke smile.

Pastor Fletcher chuckled. “Actually, it’s the only Lutheran church within thirty miles of town. What brings you to Bradbury?”

“Bradbury College hired me to teach their Survey of Music History courses this year.”

More shuffling of papers. “Are you currently living in Bradbury?”

“Not yet. I plan to relocate from St. Louis.”

“I see.” Pastor Fletcher paused. “Dr. Duke, what exactly do you expect of a church choir? I mean, what situation are you used to in St. Louis?”

“Well, I’ve served the last three years as the senior choir director at St. Paul’s in Crestwood. We average between twenty-five to thirty singers every Sunday, and we sing at both the early and

late services three times a month with every fourth Sunday off. We also sing on festival Sundays and midweek services.”

Pastor Fletcher’s response was honest and matter-of-fact. “We have not had a consistent choir director in our employment for the last fifteen years, and we hold only one worship service every Sunday morning. It’s a good week if ten singers show up for a Sunday service. I would understand if you don’t find that scenario appealing.”

Emily Duke’s response was just as matter-of-fact. “I don’t know that size is a deal breaker. ‘Where two or three are gathered in My name . . .’”

Mrs. Scheinberg heard Pastor Fletcher tap his fingers on his desk, and she knew that meant he was excited. “Have you had any theological training?”

“I took a Bible and Culture class in college, but I think it hurt my theology more than helped it,” Emily Duke confessed. She laughed, and the musical sound reminded Mrs. Scheinberg of a favorite wind chime her grandma used to hang on her front porch every summer.

“Honestly,” Emily Duke continued, “the best theological training I ever had was in Sunday School. My teachers made sure I knew every article of the Apostles’ Creed and their meanings before I finished second grade.”

As she listened to the silence, Mrs. Scheinberg knew Pastor Fletcher was digesting Dr. Duke’s remark. “Can you tell me a little bit more about the specific role you see the choir playing in the worship service?”

“At St. Paul’s, we often sing the Alleluia Verse, sometimes the Gradual, and at other times the Psalm. Personally, I always like having the choir sing a meditative anthem or hymn during distribution or the offering.”

“What are your feelings regarding traditional and contemporary styles of worship?”

Mrs. Scheinberg held her breath. One misstep here, and her good opinion of Emily Duke, nylons and all, would go the way of the sewer.

“I try *not* to have feelings on the subject,” was Dr. Duke’s simple reply.

Pastor Fletcher laughed. “I can appreciate that. However, what do you *think* about it?”

“Well, as a church musician, I appreciate that which promotes good order for the congregation. As a Christian, I want the music to serve the Word.”

Mrs. Scheinberg let the air out of her lungs in relief.

“And what do you think as a Lutheran?” Pastor Fletcher asked, tapping away on his desk.

“I think that—”

Suddenly, the phone rang, causing Mrs. Scheinberg to drop her pen on the carpeted floor. She scrambled to pick it up and used the soles of her new Dr. Scholl’s to scoot herself and her hooded, double-wheel casters back to the desk. She picked up the phone on the third ring.

“Zion Lutheran Church. This is Mrs. Scheinberg speaking,” she panted.

“Oh, good, Arlene, I’m so glad I caught you,” was the anxious reply. “This is Beverly. You won’t believe what Irv did this morning! He dropped by the church just after breakfast to check on the leaky toilet in the men’s bathroom, and he left his wallet on the counter of the sink. He told me that he set it down with his hat before going into the stall and then picked up only his hat on the way out the door. Can you go check for me real quick and see if it’s still there? If it is, I can swing by and pick it up on my way to my hair appointment in town this afternoon. Seriously, I

don't know what I'm going to do with that man! Just yesterday, he took one of my white dish towels out to the pig barn and . . .”

Mrs. Scheinberg rolled her eyes. Beverly Davis was the Lance Armstrong of windbags: the woman could talk longer and faster than anyone else she knew. This was going to go on for a while, so she laid the receiver down on her desk and made her way to the men's room. “As if I don't have anything better to do today,” she grumbled under her breath. Adding to her irritation was the fact that she was missing precious minutes of Emily Duke's interview.

Pushing open the door to the men's restroom with her hip, she could see Irv's wallet sitting on the counter in the dark without even turning on the restroom light. She snatched it up, grumbling to herself about germs, and headed back to her office. She swung a little wide, closer to Pastor Fletcher's open office door, taking time to resituate herself comfortably at her station and rub an ample portion of antibacterial gel on her hands before picking up the phone receiver.

“ . . . and would you believe that he ate half of the batch before I even came back to the kitchen? Now I'm out of butter and have to think of something else to make for the VBS cookie train!” Beverly paused to take a breath, and Mrs. Scheinberg jumped at her opportunity.

“I'll be sure to keep Irv's wallet safe for you to pick up this afternoon, Bev.”

“Oh, thank you, Arlene! I knew I could count on you. You're a gem! One of these days, we should—”

“I'll give you a call if there's any trouble,” she barreled along. “Otherwise, plan on stopping by before three. Bye, Bev.”

She hung up the phone just as Pastor Fletcher and Dr. Duke walked out of the study. Mrs. Scheinberg was so disappointed at having missed the rest of the interview that she seriously con-

sidered running Irv's nuisance of a wallet through the paper shredder.

Pastor Fletcher stopped at her desk and picked up the dog-eared church directory. He quickly found a phone number and wrote it down on the pad of paper that was kept at the ready on the corner of her desk. Tearing off what he had written, he handed it to Dr. Duke.

"Here is Alice Gardner's phone number. She owns a small rental house just down the street from here. You'll find her to be an honest and kind landlady. She may even be home this afternoon if you want to see the property before you drive back to St. Louis."

"Thank you," the young woman replied, sticking the piece of paper in her purse. "I appreciate the contact and the interview, Pastor Fletcher. Thank you, both of you." Dr. Duke beamed a sunny smile that fell directly on Mrs. Scheinberg.

"Be careful of the coffee at the Casey's on your way out of town," Mrs. Scheinberg impulsively warned. "I don't trust those teenagers who work the register to make it correctly."

Emily Duke thanked her again, letting in another fresh summer breeze as she opened the door on her way out. Mrs. Scheinberg felt oddly disappointed when the door closed behind her. She swiveled in her chair to face Pastor Fletcher's profile and said, "Please tell me that you're planning on recommending her to the council instead of one of those two gangsters."

"I am," Pastor Fletcher replied, somewhat absently. Mrs. Scheinberg noted that he was still staring at the door through which Emily Duke had left. "I already invited her to come to church this Sunday to meet Evan."

She sighed mightily, quickly regaining her natural optimism as she returned to her work on page 4 of the bulletin. "Well, I guess we can't hide him from her. God have mercy on her soul!"

“God have mercy on us all,” Pastor Fletcher said as he stepped back into the quiet of his study and softly shut the door. He did not fully understand what had just happened, but he knew that half of his body wanted to jump up and holler while the other half strangely wanted to sit down and cry. Since Mrs. Scheinberg was sitting just five feet away on the other side of the closed door, he did neither. Instead, he walked over to the window and stared unseeing at the north green lawn of the church property, quietly pondering all things intelligent, brown-eyed, and Emily Duke.

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