

Finding Deep & Wide

Stop Settling for the Life You Have and
Live the One Jesus Died to Give You

Shellie Rushing Tomlinson



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Introduction

I grew up taking long summer road trips with my parents and my two older sisters. My siblings and I were a backseat trio of discontented warriors, arguing, fussing, and whining, “Are we there yet?”

My papa was famous for his don’t-worry-be-happy responses. “We’re on vacation,” he’d say. “And we’re going to have fun whether you like it or not. You girls had best act like you’re enjoying yourselves!”

We girls were adept at complying because we really did know what was good for us, but we were actresses putting on a happy face because it was expected of us, not because we were truly joyful.

Believers often do this. While agreeing that living with God in our midst—in our very bodies, at that—should work us up into the type of daily celebration the prophet Isaiah spoke about when he said, “*Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!*” (Isaiah 12:6 NASB), we accept a sub-standard experience of what it means to carry the Hope of Glory around in these all-too-human vessels. We settle for only *acting* like having new life in Christ is something to shout about.

I call it “less-than” living.

I first met Jesus while seated in a little bitty chair in a small country church singing “Deep and Wide.” He was perfect, and I was nowhere close. (I figured that out early enough.) I loved everything they told me about Invisible Jesus. As I grew up, I decided I wanted to follow Him even though I wasn’t sold on living exclusively for Him. This translated into trying to appease God while I lived to

please me. I also understood rule-keeping, regardless of how often I failed at it. “If at first you don’t succeed,” right?

Even after I grew discontented with the distance between me and Jesus and decided I wanted to know Him like the Bible said I could, I kept trying to get there in the only way I knew—through my best efforts. It wasn’t a conscious decision. Raised on God’s Word and cathead biscuits, I knew I couldn’t “finish in the flesh” what the author of Galatians tells us “had begun in the Spirit,” but I soon fell into the wearying cycle of knuckling down to measure up, always trying to gauge how pleased God was with me to decide how welcome I was with Him. Performing exhausted me, and it didn’t lead me any closer to what had become my heart’s desire—knowing Him more.

Thankfully, I’m discovering the joy of dying to all that trying. These days, I’m learning to live in what Jesus has already done, and I’m finding that all Jesus promised lives at the end of me. It is the deep and wide life Scripture has always told me I could have.

And here’s the thing: quitting never felt so good! I haven’t mastered quitting. I should get that out there before we go any further. That said, I’m learning how to quit on me and live in Jesus, and our shared journey has become so fulfilling, so flat-out precious that I’d like to pause and invite you to join us. That’s what this book is all about.

I don’t have all the answers—not even close—but I can show you the way Holy Spirit has brought me: in learning to live dying, in denying my will and choosing His, in being transformed as I behold Jesus. All Jesus, no me. All grace, no merit. This glory, that Jesus does all the heavy lifting as we yield and keep our eyes on Him, is where I pray this book will lead us all—into the deep and wide life available in Christ Jesus. My not-so-secret goal is to make you crazy hungry for the way of life God wants for you, planned for you, and paid the ultimate cost to provide for you.

Our journey will take us through both the Old and New Testaments as we look at heroes of the faith who knew what it was to

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experience the deep and wide relationship with God that He intended all of us to have from the get-go. I'll show you why we so often miss it and discuss some healthy heart habits that will help us get back in on it!

Come with me. I dare you.

Shellie Rushing Tomlinson
January 2020

Chapter One

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Y'all Come Back Now, Ya Hear?

“Absolute seriousness is never without a dash of humor.”

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

I had just enjoyed a sanity-saving, soul-satisfying talk with Jesus on my lakeside dock when I checked the time. Bummer. It was getting late early. It's probably best if I don't go into why I'd lingered in prayer longer than usual, lest I scare you off in the first paragraph. But I can give you the condensed version: I had to stay after class for extra counseling on my attitude. It can get sideways on days that end in “y,” and I don't mind owning that I've discovered that Jesus is silky-smooth about helping a person straighten up and fly right. It's kind of like the family business for Him.

I had intended to take a morning kayak ride on beautiful Lake Providence, but the sun had climbed high in the sky, and everything

that needed doing before it set again ran through my thoughts. It made more sense to head to the shower—but things that make more sense seldom rule the day around here.

And that's how I came to be paddling down the lake mid-morning, even though our Louisiana summer was in full swing and it was already H-O-T hot. (My people would say "hotter than H-E-Double L," and that would not be cussing cause because they spelled it, but again, I'm trying to put my best foot forward in these early pages.)

Backstory? My custom is to give the aged cypress trees lining the lake banks a healthy berth because God could've wiped snakes off the planet back in the Garden, but no, He chose to let them live (flourish even, at least here in the Louisiana Delta), and I've grown up hearing stories of snakes falling out of trees and into the boats of the unsuspecting. It happened to my late Papaw once. He and his good friend Marvin Nichols were fishing one day when Papaw's buddy up and jumped straight into the water and began swimming for shore with Olympic speed.

"What in tarnation are you doing?" Papaw yelled.

Mr. Nichols hollered over his shoulder without losing a beat in his breaststroke, "Snake in the boat! Snake in the boat!"

I must commend Papaw. He forgave his buddy for going with the "each man for himself" philosophy. He and Mr. Nichols went on to fish together many a day. Let the record show, if something like that ever happened to me, I'd try walking on the water, *à la* our biblical friend Peter.

Yet, despite this well-documented snake phobia of mine, there I was hugging the tree line closer than usual because, again, Louisiana summer heat and possible shade. It's the only reason I heard that first weak whimper.

It was a hoarse cry, so faint it took me a second to locate the source. But once I did, I found a heart-wrenching sight. A foot or so from the lake bank, a small white dog was balancing on a knot of several cypress knees and whimpering for help. (It may seem strange

to refer to the knee of a tree, but it's a common reference to the root-like structures that form around our bald cypress trees. They resemble cones and tend to grow in clusters.) Behind the desperate canine were the remains of an old sea wall from which he had undoubtedly fallen. As I took in the scene, the puppy's wails grew louder and more insistent. He turned, scratched at the sea wall, and looked back, as if to say, "See? I can't get up!"

Indeed, regardless of how high he stretched, the puppy's reach fell about two feet shy of the wall's top shelf. It'd be impossible for him to gather his feet under him and jump to freedom. I studied his predicament and stalled for time. Who knows how long he'd been marooned on that knot of cypress knees? I mean, he was thin as a rail, but that can happen to a puppy that goes without food for even a day or two.

Clearly, this guy's problem had now become my own, and I didn't like where things were headed. The pitiful puppy wasn't stranded at the edge of someone's yard. That would've been too easy. Puppy was marooned in what I refer to as alligator land, a swampy run of lake bank with wild overgrown brush, most likely harboring every species of snake in Louisiana. (Not to belabor the point, Lord, but we do have more than our fair share.)

Going in after the distraught puppy would require maneuvering around the rusty, nail-studded remains of a dilapidated dock and under the overhanging vines and drooping limbs of a group of cypress trees. Oh, joy.

I pulled out my smart phone for a quick picture and put it away just as quickly. I wasn't in my customary "I must document this for social media" mode—a fact that amazes my husband and kids to this day because they contend I don't let a moment of our lives go undocumented. While they may have a collective point, I feel they should be more grateful and less snippy about my commitment to the role of family historian, so there you go. I simply knew the image would fail to do the scene justice. It'd be hard to grasp the depth between

the trees, those snaky-looking vines, and the lake bank without being there, but trust me. It was creepy times two.

I briefly tried to cajole the panicked puppy into swimming toward me. Dear reader, I imagine your eyes rolling here, but desperate people don't always think clearly. That said, Puppy would have agreed with you. He wailed even louder. I interpreted his response as something like, "Silly woman, I'm not about to get in that water!"

Confession. The following question crossed my mind: "What would Red and Carey do?" That would be my best friend (Red, aka Rhonda) and my daughter-in-law. They're both big-time dog lovers. I felt sure neither of them would be hesitating like yours truly was doing. However, in my defense, my thought process wasn't nearly as lengthy as it sounds. It only took a minute or ten to convince myself that, deep sigh, I was going in after the stranded puppy. God has this way of bringing Scripture back to my mind at *just* the right time ...

Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12 NIV).

Without hope. That was Puppy.

The rescue was even more difficult and scary than I imagined, and I had the makings of a bad movie going on in my head. As the canopy of limbs grew thicker above me, it's possible I began beseeching Heaven with considerably more passion than I had during my earlier devotion. I was suddenly a world-class prayer warrior. "*Oh, God, puullleeeasse don't let a snake fall in this kayak with me, please, please, please, please ...*"

All the while, I was drawing closer to the frantic puppy—whose cries had risen in direct proportion to my proximity. I don't know what I expected his reaction to be in response to my compassionately courageous and heroically self-sacrificing rescue efforts. (Too thick?) I can only assure you I was not at all prepared for what happened. Would you believe the hairy little refugee was so out of his mind with

fear that once I finally drew near enough to reach for him, he tried to bite me?! Me! His brave belle in the sweaty tank top!

I am trying to save your scrawny neck here, I thought to myself. Work with me, Puppy!

“My people are bent on turning from me.” (Hosea 11:7 NASB)

Now, the thing about a half-dead puppy balanced on cypress knees is that it can't actually be balanced. It was easy enough to distract the angry mutt—I mean, the poor darling—with one hand long enough to snatch him up by the nape of his scrawny neck and deposit him in the kayak with the other.

Grateful he was not.

The drenching wet sack of bones assumed a defensive stance and commenced to growling and baring his pearly-white puppy teeth with as much aggression as he could muster.

You're quite welcome. It was nothing. No, really.

I had no choice but to ignore my hysterical passenger as I tried to back my kayak out of swampy alligator habitat and snake land and point it toward home. Meanwhile, my guest chose to crawl to the front of our vessel and bury his face as far in the hull as he could stuff it.

As I paddled home, I began soothing the little guy in that voice we all use with babies and puppies. His response was to tuck his tail beneath his body and wedge himself even further into the hull.

Fine, then.

I abandoned the sweet talk and began to sing over him. I'll admit my vocals have never calmed a single despondent human, but they seemed to work reasonably well on my new canine friend. At the very least, he quit whimpering. So I sang, paddled, and thought of an Old Testament verse that depicted God singing like me.

The Lord your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17 NKJV).

Some twenty minutes later, as we neared my dock, Puppy and I faced the next challenge in our shaky relationship in the form of

Dixie Belle, my beloved chocolate Lab, who was already barking loud enough to wake the dead, as my people say. My self-appointed guardian had long gone on record as being uncomfortable with my early-morning kayak rides, and now I was returning with a soaking wet puppy that looked more like a scared possum. (Dixie has since gone to Heaven because all dogs do, but I'm still not over her. So that's all we'll say about that.)

I whispered yet another prayer for divine assistance. The last thing I needed was for the traumatized puppy in my kayak to dive overboard trying to get away from Dixie and create yet more drama for us all. For once, Dixie complied when I quieted her. (I still think that qualifies as an official miracle.) I wish I could say the puppy was as cooperative about transitioning to the dock. Negative. I was forced to proceed to plan B once it became obvious he wasn't budging from the hull without burying his sharp baby teeth in my hands. After manhandling the kayak, puppy and all, out of the water and onto the dock, I pulled the vessel up our sloping back yard and parked it under the oak tree.

I spent the next few minutes doing more of the soothing-voice thing. This got me exactly nowhere, although the refugee did turn and look at me over his shoulder several times as his eyes grew noticeably heavy, suggesting the sole thing he wanted after his harrowing ordeal was a good long nap. It sounded good to me, too, but work was calling.

I rustled up some dog food, poured a little water in a bowl, and put the nourishment near the puppy in the kayak, figuring once I was out of the picture, he wouldn't have to venture more than a few inches if he chose to eat. Satisfied I'd done all I could, I headed inside to shower and get my day started.

I thought about Mercy while I was getting dressed. By now, I had given him what I considered to be the most obvious name under the circumstances, because nothing but M-E-R-C-Y could have prompted me to go where I went to rescue him. (And yes, I do realize "Mercy" sounds more like a girl's name, but it fit.)

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to his mercy ... (Titus 3:5 NASB)

By the time I'd completed my extreme makeover—another story we don't have time for—I had decided Mercy was a gift in disguise. Dixie Belle was getting older than I wanted to think about, and this puppy would always remind me of God's great mercy. (Doesn't that sound neat? I thought so, too.) Imagine my surprise when I slipped back out to check on Mercy and found he had disappeared. A bite or two of food was gone, and so was my refugee!

Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" (Luke 17:17-18 NASB)

I thought about Mercy the rest of that day. I looked for him on my trips to and from town, hoping I wouldn't find his lifeless little body on the road. I was convinced Mercy was gone for good, but the very next morning, he showed up on our back porch around the same time I'd rescued him the day before. He was still whimpering and covered in fleas. He may have been covered in fleas the day before, but if you'll recall, I wasn't allowed to examine him before he made his great escape.

Day Two found Mercy a tad more willing to make nice than he was at our first meet and greet. He still nipped at me, but with a tad less aggression. Slowly, I earned his trust enough to feed him. That was a scene, but once I pried his mouth open and put a finger dripping with the dog-food gravy directly on his black and pink tongue, we began to make progress. Mercy licked his lips and looked at me with something approaching appreciation, or at the very least, concealed distrust.

Soon my little refugee was allowing me to run my hands over his body to check for injuries. From there, he found himself getting dipped for fleas and being forced to undergo an ear rinse with Dixie's ear-mite meds. Once again, he opted for a post-drama nap. I had no idea what the next day would bring, but at least for that moment, Mercy was safe and sound.

Mercy's arms-length appreciation spoke to me. As I watched him curl into an ultra-sensitive ball of fur, my thoughts turned to God's amazing grace and how He lovingly pursues us. I remembered how willing I once was to grasp the eternal redemption God offered while being wary of what else He might expect of me. I grabbed at the forever home He held out, but I hesitated to embrace His invitation for deeper relationship. For starters, I had no idea how to take Him up on it. But that's the sanitized version. The whole truth? I didn't care to try.

Living the Lie

Oh, I'd been in church all my life. I knew I wanted to be on God's good side come Judgment Day, but I spent years feeling like I was devoting enough time to Him in the pew and in my daily Bible reading (extra points, y'all!) without having my entire life absorbed into some kind of sub-par religious pursuit where I thought I'd have to give up all hope of getting what I thought I wanted out of life and forfeit all the fun stuff.

Did you hear a lot of "me, myself, and I" there? I'm sure God did, too. It's ugly but true. Conflicted as to what a present-tense, ongoing relationship with God might require of me, I came and went to His throne like Mercy the Refugee, trying to get my needs met without giving up my independence. Today, I'd tell you my deepest fulfillment has been discovering He is my greatest need.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. (Matthew 16:25 NASB)

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As I watched this traumatized stray quivering in his sleep, his wariness tugged at tender places in my heart. I knew I wouldn't be able to love Mercy the way I wanted to if he insisted on running away. I also knew I'd love him more than he could possibly imagine if he chose to stay.

The chasm between my love for Mercy and his inability to return it was all too familiar. But I'll leave the analogy there and pray it's served its purpose. The journey I'm inviting you to share is an ongoing story about what begins to happen once we quit treating God like a halfway house. There'll be plenty of hard-earned, transparent, and ongoing experience from me, but I believe there's also life-transforming value here for you.

For indeed, I did quit running back and forth to God. Eventually.

The season came when I began to long for more than just believing in God and knowing *about* Jesus. I wanted the relationship the Bible said was available. The goal lines of my life were moving. Ironically, I'd need to learn a lot more about quitting as I raced toward Jesus, for a whole new trap had been set for me—and for the longest time, I was clueless as to why I kept tripping!

But we'll get to that soon enough. For now, I think it's more important for us to unpack the big lie that kept me holding God at what I thought was a comfortable distance for so long. Why? Because I had bought the big lie, and you may have, too.

Questions for Group Study or Private Reflection

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1. On a scale of 0-10, how satisfying is your faith walk?
2. What could it mean to treat God like a halfway house?
3. Shellie admits to buying a big lie. Before you turn the page, take a guess at the nature of the lie. (There are no wrong answers!)

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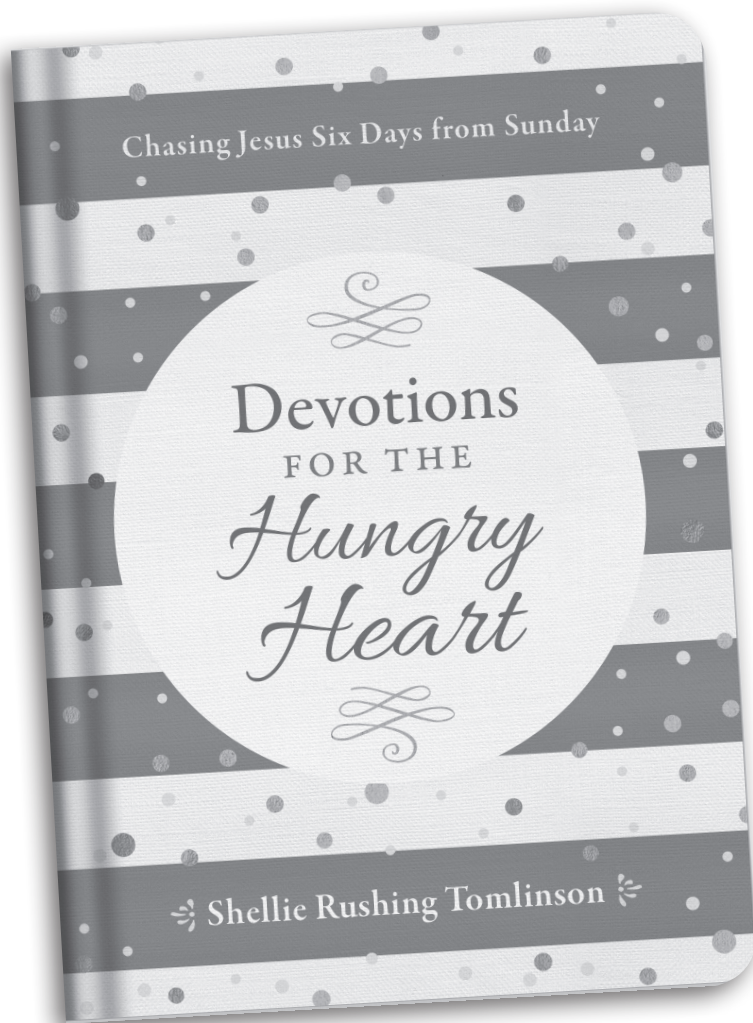
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If you've enjoyed *Finding Deep and Wide*, would you consider reviewing it on a site like Amazon, Goodreads, or Christianbook.com? Those reviews help share the message more than you can imagine. Many, many thanks! Let's stay in touch and keep seeking this Jesus together, forever. He is worthy.

Hugs,
Shellie

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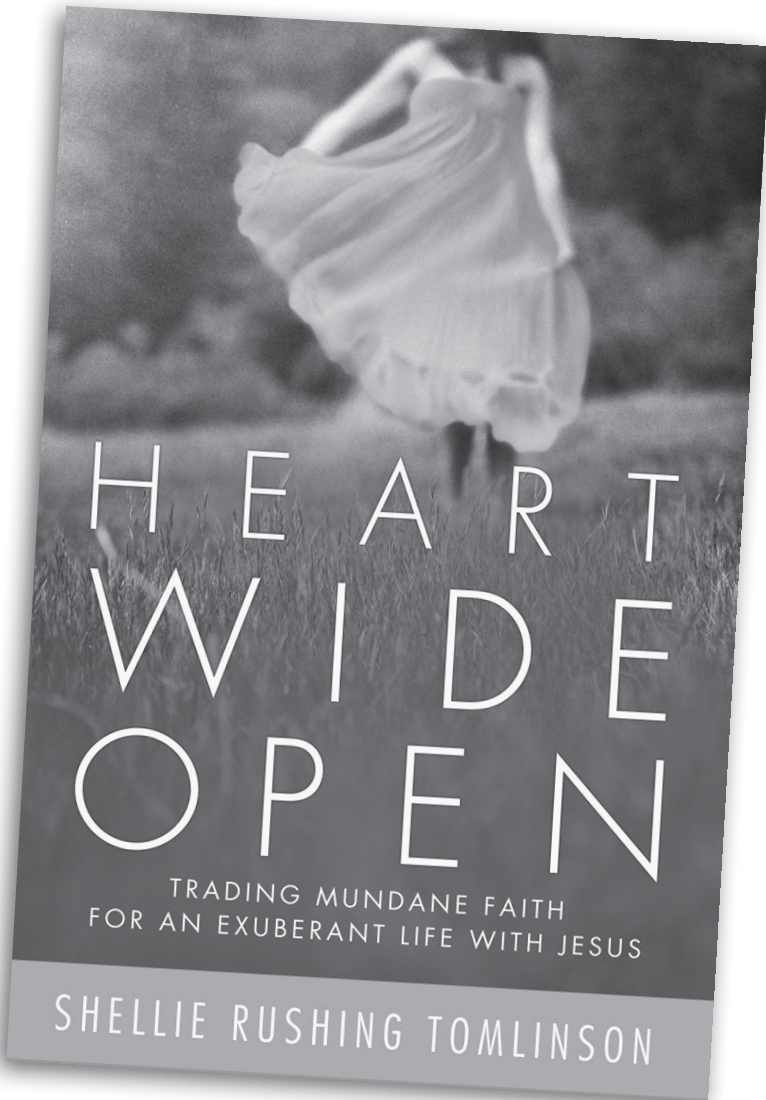


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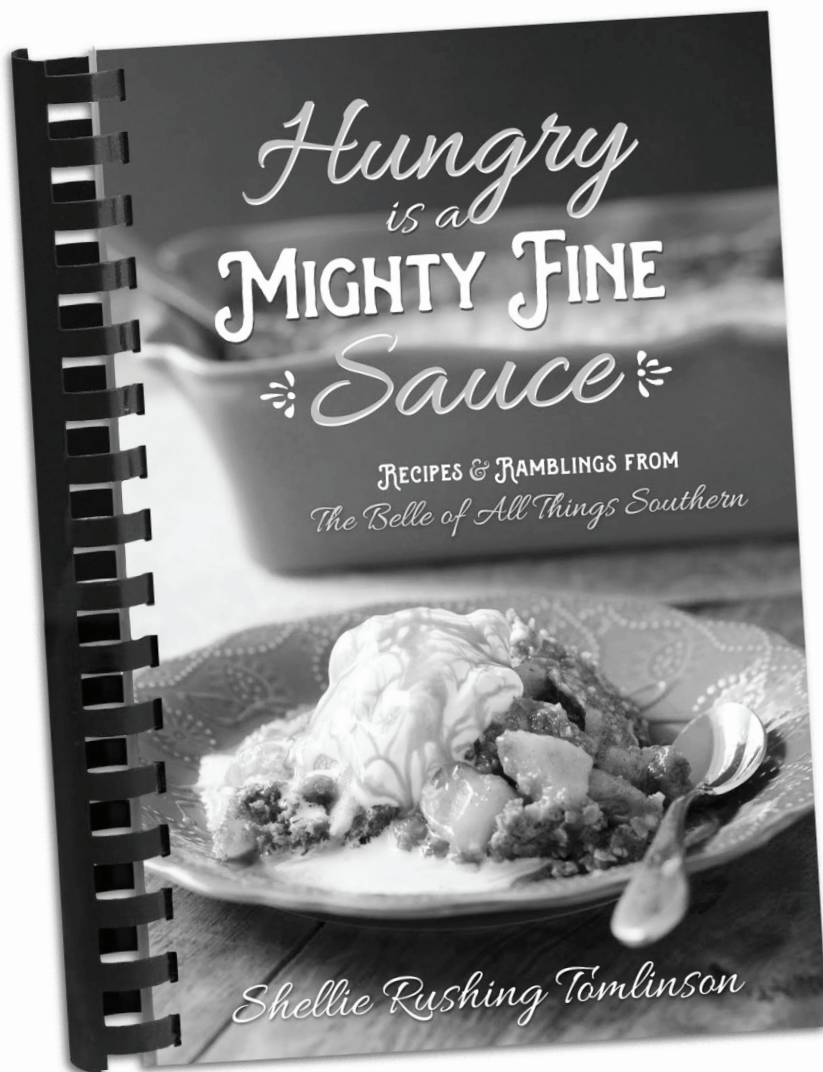


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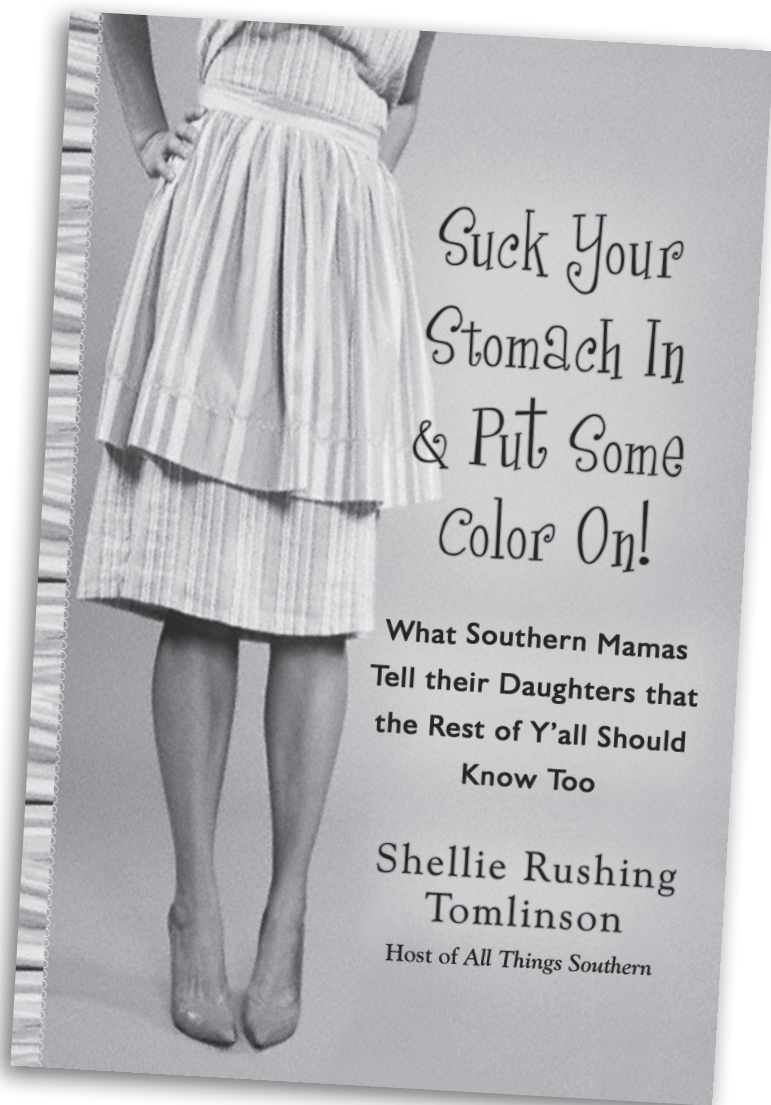


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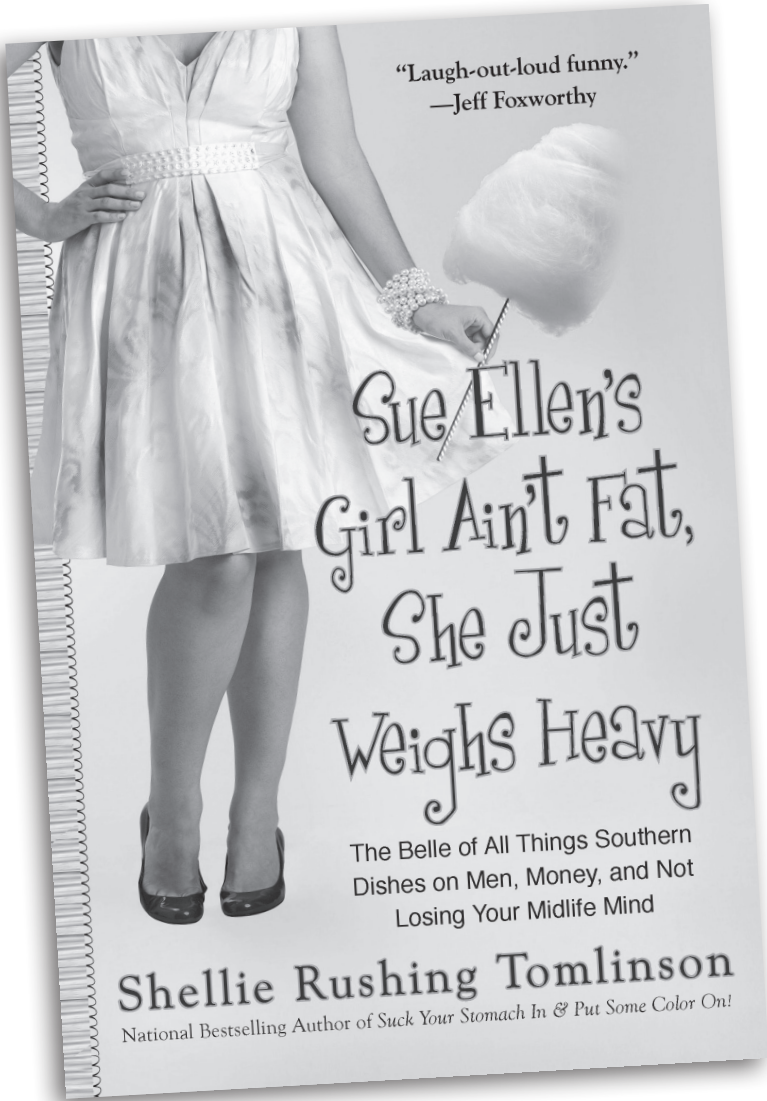


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