



Kendal Cliburn  
Marketing Manager  
[marketing@turnerpublishing.com](mailto:marketing@turnerpublishing.com)

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

## **A Q&A WITH CATHY RIGG, AUTHOR OF *THAT WHICH BINDS US***

### ***Tell us about yourself.***

Like my heroine, Elizabeth Evangeline Young, I'm a girl born of the mountains of Southwest Virginia. Unlike Elizabeth, I was fortunate to have grown up there at a time when I was afforded every opportunity. I had a happy childhood, a wonderful high school experience, then I left home for college at Clemson University where I had a grand time and graduated with a degree in English. I meant to become a journalist; I became a copywriter instead, and at 28 established a creative boutique called *C. C. Rigg's, an ad studio*. The company has just celebrated its 37<sup>th</sup> year in business and is today known as the brand marketing firm Riggs Partners. What a grand life I've lived in the flatlands of South Carolina, with a community I adore and a career I've loved! In recent years, I've stepped back from that work a bit to focus on some other creative interests, including writing this novel.

### ***Give a brief description of your book.***

*That Which Binds Us* is a story of five people whose lives intersect against the backdrop of the Civil War. It's study in the ways friends, family, and acquaintances affect each other—for better, for worse—and what happens when ordinary people are thrust into extraordinary circumstances. At the center is Elizabeth Evangeline Young, a smart, spunky girl who wants more for her future than the life the ancient Appalachians she's surrounded by can promise. She dreams big and loves hard; as one character notes when regarding Elizabeth, "She's all rough and tumble, that one, her spirit propelling her forward faster than common sense can regulate." As soon as she vows to escape, into Elizabeth's life come three people with dreams and secrets of their own. There's Marilee Kitchens, the sophisticated teacher who's come to this wild, western frontier hoping to save the poor little "unfortunates" through education. There's Patrick Hagan, Irishman, immigrant, attorney—a man who's recently settled in Hunter's Valley, who goes on to make millions in land deals and who builds the impressive estate, Sulphur Springs. And there's Ben Grubb, Elizabeth's forbidden love—a local boy and banjo prodigy whose passion and God-given gift is making music. Ben becomes an unwilling soldier, nevertheless, fighting for a cause he doesn't believe in, serving in a war that rips at the seams of the very way of life he's hoping to protect. *That Which Binds Us* is a novel about land and love and loyalty; it's about cultures that cross and clash; it's about people in a time of hateful war who find there's more that unites us than divides.

***How did you get the idea for this story? Is it from your family's history?***

One would think so, right? It's what I meant to do when I decided to write a novel of our mountains. But as I researched, it was Patrick Hagan who showed up. An immigrant and an attorney with a purported stellar reputation as a litigator and gentleman both—how had I never heard of him? Or of his elegant 19<sup>th</sup> century estate *right there* in Scott County, just across the ridge from my own childhood home? The mansion had 17 rooms, indoor plumbing, and hot running water—and this was at the time of the Civil War! It was unimaginable to me, particularly in our area, where so many made do with so little. And then I discovered this learned, sophisticated man who spoke with a lilt and who often referenced classical literature in his closing arguments and who became a land baron—Patrick Hagan married a local girl to whom he was, for more than 50 years, devoted—a girl who one census record listed as illiterate. *How did that happen?* I wondered. I wrote the novel to find out.

***The story is told via five first-person narrators. That's ambitious! When did you make that decision, and why?***

It's one of those things the story told me. I began writing the novel purely from Elizabeth's point of view. I was captivated by Patrick Hagan, but I was fascinated by Elizabeth, and since there was so little information about her, I had a wonderful time creating her character, identifying her motivations, developing the backstory of her family and upbringing. In fact, before I typed the first word of the novel, I wrote down the working title, *The Story of Elizabeth Young*. But when I got to Chapter Two, a different character stepped forward and insisted on speaking. The same thing happened as I began Chapter Three. I realized this was exactly as the story needed to be told. These are very different people with different voices and different backgrounds, certainly. But they also present very different points of view. I found the contrast—as well as the overlapping—an effective, if challenging, way to go.

***It strikes me there are several different themes in the book—home, land, family, honor, loyalty, legacy. Which of these is most significant, would you say?***

You're so right about that. And it's interesting. Just as with the multiple voices of the novel, it's the chorus of these themes that I think matters here. They represent the values of many people of Appalachia today, and they're the same values that have guided us for generations. As I look at this story in particular and at what Ben Grubb represents, they're the values that determined so much about how our communities responded to the reality of a Civil War. So many young men in Southwest Virginia fought not because they believed in the "southern cause," but because as members of the Home Guard, they were promised they'd never have to leave their mountain home. This of course proved not to be true.

***What was the most challenging part of writing this book? What did you love the most?***

I'll start with the "love" because that's easiest. I love the characters, and of course I particularly love Elizabeth. I love her spirit. I also love the letter Marilee wrote to Patrick at the end. Writing it came easily to me, as if I was simply transcribing, and it's always a joy and a surprise when that happens. I also really like Ben's letters during the war. They required a great deal of research, needless to say, but somehow channeling his emotions as he experienced such loss and so much boredom and also the horrors of war came naturally.

As to the challenges. Without a doubt, the most difficult aspect of writing *That Which Binds Us* was addressing the politics of the day and the politics of the war. There's little question but that Patrick Hagan was most surely a slave owner; it would stand to reason given his vast holdings and his allegiance to the Democratic Party of the day, even if I found little detailed evidence. Still I made for myself an argument in favor of "my" Patrick directing his political passions elsewhere. Given his character's escape from poverty and the Potato Famine (something purely fabricated by me, as the author), and given a noted devotion to liberty and to "fighting the tyranny of the majority in the oppression of the minority," it felt a reasonable case for the character I created.

***What other books have inspired you?***

Gosh, there are so many, but I have to start with Lee Smith's canon, and in particular her debut, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*. The slim novel was published in 1968, just after Lee graduated from Hollins College. Several years later I was a high school student with a summer job shelving books at the Lonesome Pine Regional Library in my hometown of Wise, Virginia. I loved that job. I'd study every cover, read most descriptions—it was fascinating to see what folks in my community were reading and found compelling. One day 15-year-old Cathy picked up *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, read the first page, and I subsequently announced to my parents: "I'm going to be a writer. And I want to write books like this." I mean...just consider the Lee Smith catalog and I'm hitting highlights here: *Fair and Tender Ladies*, *Oral History*, *On Agate Hill*, *Guests on Earth*, *The Last Girls*, *The Christmas Letters*, *Blue Marlin*, *Silver Alert*. Her short stories. Her essays, including the fabulous collection, *Dimestore*. How I love that book. I love everything Lee Smith writes.

***This novel, That Which Binds Us, is your debut, as well.***

It sure is, although instead of me being a recent college graduate or a feisty young woman with a fresh MFA, I recently became a grandmother. And I've just turned 65! (How did *that* happen?) Still my age serves only to make this publishing of my first book all the sweeter. This is a gorgeous, gorgeous time in life.