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the nativity story

One family. One journey.

One child who would change the world forever.



A NOVELIZATION BY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
ANGELA HUNT

BASED ON THE MOTION PICTURE WRITTEN BY
MIKE RICH

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The Nativity Story: A Novelization

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The Nativity Story: the novel by Angela Hunt from the screenplay by Mike Rich for the motion picture: based on the biblical narrative.

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LOOK!

The virgin will conceive a child!

She will give birth to a son
and will call him Immanuel—

‘GOD WITH US.’

ISAIAH 7:14

prologue



With one hand on her hip, Lavinia Dressler inhaled a deep breath and surveyed the spreading chaos. Two of the three wise men were pounding out “Heart and Soul” on the grand piano while one of the shepherds attempted to tie the belt of his bathrobe to the cow’s tail. The two halves of the cow, a freckle-faced ten-year-old and her equally speckled brother, shoved and pushed, refusing to stand near each other, while the lamb kept wailing that her costume made her nose itch.

Lavinia blinked at the commotion. Whatever had made her think she could pull this off with only one dress rehearsal?

She clapped for her cast’s attention, then nodded at a watching parent—Arlene Jessup, if memory served, mother to the wise man who kept trying to tickle Joseph’s neck with straw. “Can you help me establish order in here?”

Arlene rose from the front pew and snapped her fingers in her son’s direction. A couple of other parents followed Arlene’s example and waded into the confusion, pulling characters, animals, and angels into position.

Turmoil, Lavinia reminded herself, was the risk one took when working with children and animals . . . and probably why she had neither children nor animals of her own.

“All right.” She forced a smile as a headache began to tap on her temple. “When Mary and Joseph kneel by the manger, the rest of you

will come in humming ‘Silent Night.’ Once everyone is standing in the proper spot, we’ll sing. Everybody clear on that?”

She glanced at the three magi, who shuffled in the straw next to a band of bathrobed shepherds. Tommy Andrews, the tallest of the wise boys, lifted the lid off his mother’s crystal candy dish and sniffed.

“Tommy? Do you have something in your bowl?”

The grinning boy tilted the contents in her direction. “Want a Jelly Belly?”

“No, thank you. And I’m sure the wise men didn’t bring candy to the baby Jesus, so let’s lose the jellies before tomorrow night, okay? Parents? Can we make sure the wise men aren’t carrying any surprises?”

Arlene and the other adults nodded.

“Good.” Lavinia clasped her hands and gave the young thespians her brightest smile. “As you sing, children, I want you to look at the baby Jesus. Mary, I want you to hold on to the baby as if he’s the most important thing in the world. Can you do that for me?”

Jessica Harper, who’d been chosen to play the virgin, nodded, her blue eyes glowing. She tucked a strand of golden hair behind her ear, then clutched the doll to her chest as if he were the last available sweater at a Nordstrom’s 90-percent-off sale.

Lavinia sighed. Jessica meant well, but she’d had no experience with babies. Joseph looked as if he’d rather be out skateboarding than standing beside an overstuffed manger, the magi knew more about Nintendo than stars, and though the shepherds could operate a computer, they couldn’t find their way to the restroom and back without trailing straw down every hallway in the church.

But though her young actors may have lacked life experience, they knew this Christmas pageant. The holiday play had become a tradition at their small church; every year the pastor awarded the leading roles on the first Sunday after Thanksgiving. Christopher Stock, playing Joseph, had memorized the most Bible verses at middle school camp, and everyone quietly acknowledged Jessica Harper as the congregation’s prettiest fourteen-year-old.

“All right now. Everyone stand perfectly still.” Lavinia held up

her hands, framed the stage between her extended forefingers and thumbs, and for a moment was struck speechless at the charming tableau: baby, manger, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, magi, animals, and angels, all fresh faced, scrubbed clean, and ready to smile for the camcorders.

How had the story become so . . . attractive?

She lowered her hands as a more realistic image supplanted the artfully arranged actors: a reeking animal pen in the dark of night, crowded by livestock and rats. . . .

“Children.” The cast stopped fidgeting as Lavinia sank onto the stool in the center aisle. She took a moment to gather her thoughts, then looked out over the sea of immature faces. “I’m so glad you’re willing to be a part of our Nativity play. You know your lines; you know the story. Some of you have seen this drama a dozen times.”

Her gaze fell upon the blank-eyed doll in Jessica’s pale arms. “But our Christmas pageant tells only a small part of what happened in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph had experienced fear and exhaustion by the time they arrived in the city. The shepherds were the *last* people anyone expected to receive an invitation to visit the newborn baby, and the wise men traveled many dangerous miles to find the infant king.”

Lavinia shuddered, imagining the perils of a first-century journey through untamed desert territory. Then she lifted her gaze to find Mikey Jessup watching her. The pint-sized wise man’s eyes had gone as round as globes.

What was she *thinking*? These children were too young to hear about the terrors of travel and bloodthirsty tyrants. They didn’t need to learn about shame and scandal and oppression—not yet.

Never mind that the virgin mother had been about Jessica’s age when everything happened.

Lavinia shook off her thoughts, slipped from the stool, and lifted her hands. “On the last verse of ‘Silent Night,’ you wise men exit toward the piano, remember? Shepherds and animals, you follow them. Angels, hover around the baby Jesus until the music stops.”

As their pure, youthful voices rang among the rafters, Lavinia

shivered in another moment of vivid imagination. All was not calm on that long-ago evening in Bethlehem; all was not bright. For desperation shadowed the hearts of men, and evil fully intended to blot out the light.

chapter One



At the sound of voices, Mary pulled a square of linen over her hair, then scooped up the other three pieces of cloth and sprinted across the furrowed ground. All four girls had left their veils on a rock by the side of the road, certain they would be reaping alone in their families' fields. They had been left to themselves for most of the morning, but now the sun stood high overhead, and the voices that had reached Mary's ear belonged to *men*.

"Naomi!" she hissed, cupping her hand to her mouth. "Rebecca, Aliyah! Someone comes!"

The other girls, who had been laughing and calling to one another as they cut the tender heads of barley from the stalks, stopped and turned.

"Who comes?" Naomi wanted to know.

"I'm not sure," Mary said, tossing a rectangular cloth to her, "but they're men."

Rebecca and Aliyah left their rows and hastened to smooth their veils over their tumbling tresses.

With her back to the road, Mary felt for the edges of her own rough veil, then tucked a rebellious hank of hair behind her ear. No virtuous young woman would dare be so immodest as to publicly approach a man with her hair exposed, but each of the four friends had

only recently entered womanhood. The habits of freewheeling childhood clung to them like vines.

Rebecca smoothed her veil and wiped a trickle of perspiration from her forehead. "How do I look?"

"You'll look better without seeds on your brow." Mary reached up to wipe a speckling of barley from Rebecca's damp forehead, then nodded. "You look fine."

"I only hope whoever it is deserves the trouble we're taking," Naomi grouched, repositioning the leather strap of the bag on her shoulder. "If it's Josiah and his friends . . ."

Mary suppressed a smile as the girls moved toward the road. Naomi always made a fuss when Josiah came into view, and Mary suspected that Naomi complained far more than necessary. Surely it wasn't natural to spend so much time thinking about a boy unless you liked him more than a little.

Her thoughts scattered as a knot of young men crested the hill, Josiah among them. Mary saw Naomi blush when he looked her way.

"Greetings," Rebecca called to the group. "Come you to the fields to work or to play?"

"To work, of course." Josiah scowled in Naomi's direction. "As long as you girls don't get in our way."

Naomi stepped forward, her eyes blazing above a demure smile. "I do believe the four of us can work faster than the—" she paused to count—"six of you."

Josiah's scowl deepened. "Tend to your family's plot, woman. Your father sent me out here to keep an eye on you."

Naomi placed a hand on her hip as her lower lip edged forward in a pout. "And what business have you with my father? I can't believe he would speak to you, let alone permit you through our courtyard gate."

"He speaks to me often." Josiah left the other boys to step closer. "And he groans and moans most piteously because he has a headstrong daughter, one who will almost certainly never be married—"

"I will be married but certainly not to the likes of you!" Naomi's words would have stung if not for the smile on her lips and the challenge in her eyes.

Mary stood back, watching in amused wonder as Naomi took off across the field, barley spilling from her bag with every step.

Not willing to be dismissed, Josiah took off after her, catching the girl before they had run half the length of the field.

"I've seen her run faster," Rebecca whispered.

Mary laughed, and something stirred in her heart as Josiah caught Naomi by the waist and pulled her down.

"Should we . . . help her?" Aliyah asked, her voice small.

Mary kept her eye on the pair but shook her head. "They are only playing."

Rebecca turned, a look of wonder in her dark eyes. "Do you think he's really been talking to her father?"

Mary watched as Naomi and Josiah smiled at each other; then she shifted her gaze to the older boys, most of whom had already waded into their families' fields. "I think our fathers have begun to talk a lot about the future. We have begun our monthly courses, so we are old enough to make our fathers anxious about finding us husbands . . . and providing a dowry."

The three girls stood in silence under the cloud-heavy expanse of sky. Then Rebecca whispered what Mary had been thinking: "Sometimes I wish I could remain a child forever."

about the author



Christy-Award winner Angela Hunt writes books for readers who have learned to expect the unexpected. With over 3 million copies of her books sold worldwide, she is the best-selling author of *The Tale of Three Trees*, *The Note*, *Unspoken*, and more than 100 other titles.

She and her youth pastor husband make their home in Florida with mastiffs. One of their dogs was featured on *Live with Regis and Kelly* as the second-largest canine in America.

Readers may visit her Web site at www.angelahuntbooks.com.

about the screenwriter



Mike Rich's screenwriting breakthrough occurred in 1998 when his script for *Finding Forrester* was honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Nicholl Fellowship competition. He followed the release of that film with his screenplays for *The Rookie* and *Radio*. Consistently attracted to strong, character-driven pieces, Rich recently completed work on his adaptation of James Swanson's best seller *Manhunt*, a historical look at the search for Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth

discussion questions



1. Compare and contrast the film *The Nativity Story* with the novel. What advantages does film have over the printed page? What advantages does the printed page have over film?
2. What did you learn about life in first-century Judea from viewing the film or reading the novel?
3. Film relies on dialogue and visual images to tell a story; a novel must create dialogue and images with words. Did you find the novel as effective as the film in creating the mood and setting of the story? Was the film as effective as the novel in sharing facts of historical and cultural significance?
4. What are some of the major themes of the story?
5. Would you recommend the film and/or the novel to people who do not consider themselves Christians? What effect do you think it might have on them?
6. What did you learn about Elizabeth and Zechariah that you had not considered before?

7. Why do you suppose Herod the Great was so jealous of his position?
8. What did you think about the magi? Were they true spiritual seekers or merely curious astronomers? How do you suppose the journey to Judea changed them?
9. In Mary's hymn of praise, known as the *Magnificat*, she says, "Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior!" What does this tell us about Mary's view of herself?
10. Were you surprised to read of Mary's wish for other children? Did you know Jesus had half brothers and sisters? (His brothers' names are listed in Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3).
11. Is there anything in Mary's life to which you can personally relate? How is she like you? How is she different?
12. What do you think Mary saw as her biggest challenge? How did God prepare her for the task of mothering the Son of God?

an interview with
angela hunt



Q: Were you at all nervous about attempting to portray such a significant story?

AH: I'd use the word *excited*. I had Mike Rich's excellent screenplay to use as a basis for the novel, plus I had the Scriptures and dozens of reference books. I wanted to document as much as possible and create a story based on what we know about these historical characters who lived in first-century Judea.

Q: Of all the women in Judea, why do you think God chose Mary to give birth to the Savior of the world?

AH: While I can't presume to know the mind of God, I realized something while I was working on the scenes in which Mary traveled to see Elizabeth. In my first draft, I had Mary thinking the sort of thoughts *I'd* think if I were her: *Am I delusional? Was I hallucinating when I saw the angel? If Elizabeth really is pregnant, I'll know I didn't dream that encounter in the olive grove.*

I had to strike all those thoughts when I studied Elizabeth's response to Mary. Luke 1:45 tells us that when she saw her young cousin, Elizabeth said, "You are blessed, because

you believed that the Lord would do what he said" (emphasis added).

While I'm sure Galilee was filled with virtuous young virgins who loved and followed ADONAI, I'm not sure there were many who had Mary's pure faith. She went to see Elizabeth not to test the angel's word but fully and happily expecting to find her aging cousin six months pregnant.

Mary provides a stark contrast with Zechariah—the priest doubted the angel, but the young girl accepted Gabriel's word with unquestioning faith and obedience.

Q: Your depiction of the magi might lead someone to think you are endorsing astrology. Are you?

AH: Absolutely not. Scripture expressly forbids the worship of the sun, moon, or stars (Deuteronomy 4:19). We can certainly study the stars as an astronomer might, but we are not to place our faith in them or believe they hold the key to our future.

The magi from the East (probably Persia or Babylonia, but no one knows exactly where they came from or how many magi made the journey) had more in common with the Jews' religion than any other nation. Though they did not worship Jehovah, they believed in one true God, they did not worship idols, and they considered light the best symbol of God. They had heard of the Hebrews; they were probably familiar with Daniel, the great rab-mag who had interpreted puzzling dreams while in captivity in Babylon; and they recognized that the order and design of the universe demanded a Creator.

In *History of the Christian Church*, Philip and David Schaff propose that God "condescended to the astrological faith of the Magi, and probably made also an internal revelation to them before, as well as after the appearance of the star."*

* Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

While several theories attempt to explain the star of Bethlehem, Mike Rich and I chose to use a combination of natural and supernatural methods. The star was a heavenly body or a conjunction of heavenly bodies, but as the magi's caravan approached Bethlehem, the star moved in an explicit way that both surprised and delighted the magi (Matthew 2:9-10). Since the star actually moved and stood over the house where the child was, I envisioned it beaming a light rather like the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness. This was definitely a supernatural effect.

As we consider the magi, let's not forget that *all* of creation testifies to God's creative power:

*The heavens tell of the glory of God.
The skies display his marvelous craftsmanship.
Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they
make him known.
They speak without a sound or a word: their voice is silent
in the skies;
yet their message has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to all the world. PSALM 19:1-4*

If the heavens do all of the above . . . why shouldn't God send a star to announce his Son's birth?

Q: Speaking of the magi, *when* did they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby? The film and novel depict them arriving on the night of Christ's birth, but some experts say it may have taken them as long as two years to find Jesus.

AH: No one knows exactly when the magi arrived. If you accept that the Bethlehem star might have been a conjunction of stars the magi would have recognized and anticipated, it's possible they arrived very soon after the baby's birth.

Others have theorized that the magi didn't see the star until after Jesus' arrival, so they took as long as two years to make their way to Bethlehem. Scripture does say they found Jesus in a house, not a stable, though the stable might have been attached to a house.

The Greek word for the Christ child in Luke 2:16, when the shepherds found him, is *brepbos*, the word for "infant;" the word for the Christ child in Matthew 2:9, when the magi arrived, is *padion*, a word usually reserved for a child of about eighteen months. It is hard to imagine, though, why Mary and Joseph would have lingered in Bethlehem for eighteen months.

Q: So when did Herod slaughter the children of Bethlehem?

AH: For the novel, I wanted to include the biblical scenes of Mary's purification in the Temple, a rite that would have taken place forty days after her baby's birth. I believe Herod's bloody assault could not have occurred until some time after Mary and Joseph's visit to Jerusalem.

Q: One more thing—I was a little confused by the terms *rabbi*, *priest*, *Levites*, and *tzaddik*. Aren't they all the same thing?

AH: No. The Levites, descended from the tribe of Levi, were set apart to serve in the Temple. Each man had to serve a set "course," or term, and fulfill his duty in Jerusalem.

The descendants of Aaron, the *cohanim*, were a subgroup of Levites who served as priests. The priests offered sacrifices and participated in holy rituals; the other Levites served as singers, musicians, worship leaders, and support personnel. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.

A rabbi is a person qualified to teach about Jewish law. The teacher in a village synagogue would be a rabbi. A rabbi

is not necessarily a priest, for a priest, or *cohen*, must be a descendant of Aaron. A priest can be a rabbi, but not all rabbis are priests.

The word *tzaddik* literally means “righteous one.” Like Simeon, this could be a priest or rabbi who has great spiritual wisdom or power.

I hope you enjoyed reading the story as much as I did writing it!

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