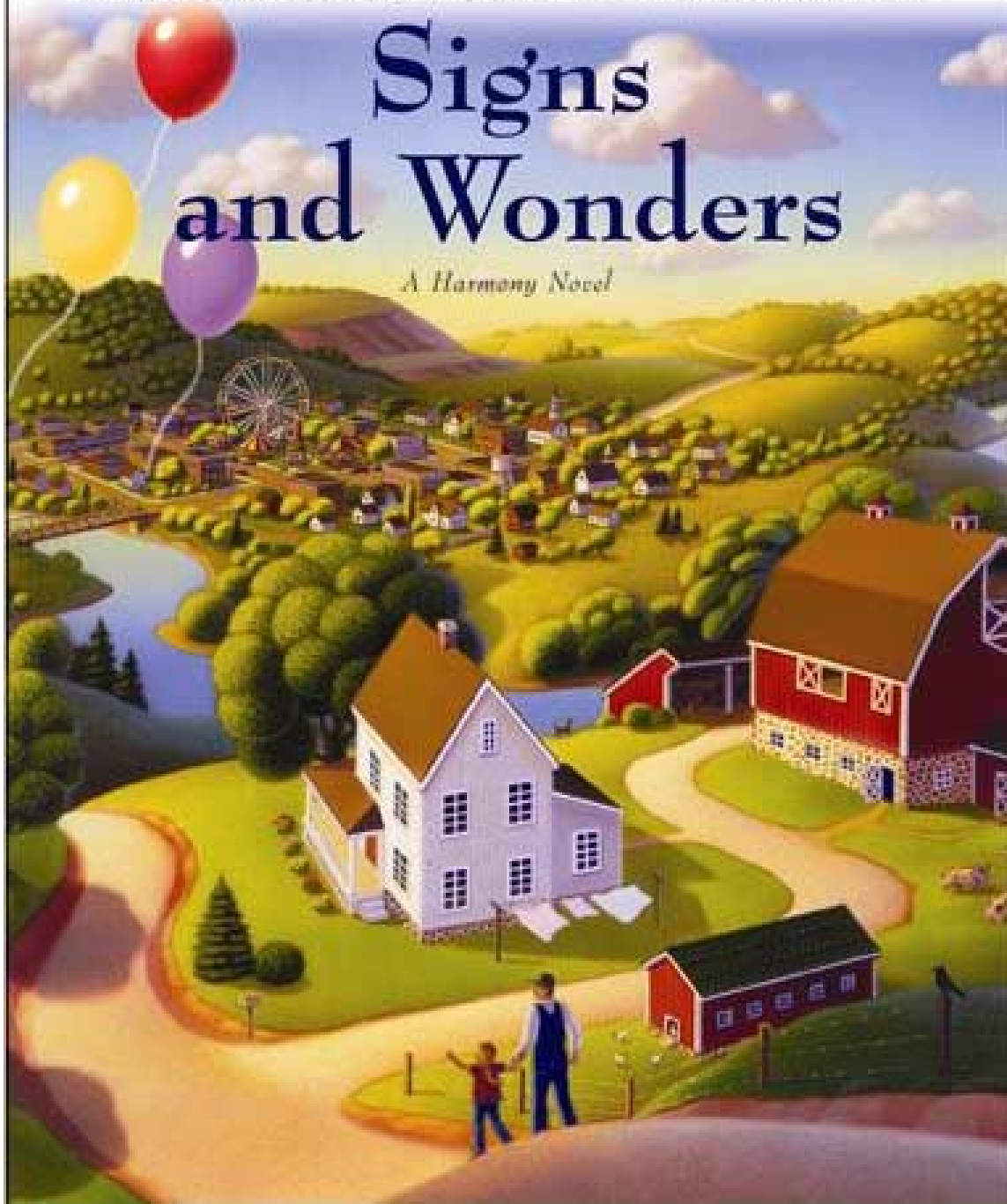


"... evoke[s] a convincing sense that there is at least a spark of goodness in almost everyone. . . . [A] wise and gentle book."—*Arkansas Democrat Gazette*

Signs and Wonders

A Harmony Novel



PHILIP GULLEY

Author of the Bestselling Just Shy of Harmony

Signs and Wonders

By Philip Gulley

The Tenderloin Queen

The summer Barbara Gardner turned sixteen, she was crowned the Tenderloin Queen by the Lawrence County Pork Producers. She received a fifty-dollar scholarship, twenty pounds of sausage, and a one-year subscription to the Hoosier Farmer magazine. Plus, she had her picture taken as the pork producers president placed the Tenderloin Queen crown on her head. The picture ran in the September 1977 edition of the Hoosier Farmer magazine, which she's saved in her hope chest.

Her reign as Miss Tenderloin led to a fascination with contests, and since then she'd entered every one she could. She'd won two free windows, a year's supply of Grape-Nuts cereal, and carpet cleaning for three rooms. But she hadn't won anything lately and believed she was overdue for a victory. So when she was shopping at the Kroger back in March and saw the disc jockey from WEAQ selling raffle tickets for a Caribbean trip, she bought ten chances at a dollar each.

Ordinarily, Barbara never paid money to enter a contest, but it was for a good cause. They were raising money to help Wayne and Sally Fleming pay the hospital bills for Sally's leukemia. It was just one of the many fund-raisers held for Sally. A lot of people worked a goodly number of hours to raise money, only to have Sally healed by the Reverend Johnny LaCosta over the television airwaves. A few people complained that maybe the Reverend could have been more considerate and healed her before they'd gone to all the trouble of having the fund-raisers.

When Barbara filled out the raffle tickets, she had a premonition she'd win. She was so confident she went to Kivett's Five and Dime and bought a new bathing suit she'd seen on the mannequin in the front window the day before. Ned Kivett had ordered the mannequin all the way from New Jersey. His old mannequin had worn out after thirty

years. Kids drew mustaches on her, and she'd been kidnapped twice at Halloween. Ned wasn't all that keen about letting her go, but her arm had fallen off, and her hair was so sparse it looked like rows of corn.

The new mannequin came in early March. She arrived in a long box delivered by the UPS man on a Monday afternoon. She didn't look anything like the old mannequin. She looked real. When Ned opened the box, he saw her lying there naked on a bed of Styrofoam peanuts and turned away, embarrassed. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said quickly. He averted his gaze as he helped her from the box, then draped her with a bedsheet until his wife could dress her in a bathing suit. The sheet only made things worse, emphasizing the very features he wished to conceal. He kept her in the back room for a week before working up the nerve to bring her out in public. It was awkward carrying her -- he wasn't sure where to put his hands. So he put her in a cart instead and wheeled her through the store to the front window, where he set her in a lawn chair.

That's where Barbara saw her as she was walking past on her way home from the Kroger. She stopped and looked. It reminded her of herself, back when she was the Tenderloin Queen. She bought the bathing suit, took it home, tried it on, and looked at herself in the mirror. If she stood sideways, she could barely make out the faint web of varicose veins. At least her thighs didn't touch, which wasn't bad for a woman with two kids. Not bad, she thought. Not bad at all.

Barbara's been exercising. Every afternoon she walks with Mabel Morrison a mile out into the country, then back home. It was Mabel's idea. She had turned seventy-five back in February, and Doctor Neely had told her she needed to exercise, so she'd asked Barbara to walk with her. It's been good for Barbara, too. Being the pastor's wife, she can't talk with just anyone for fear what she said would get around, and Mabel isn't prone to gossip.

Mabel used to be Catholic, but got mad that they didn't allow women priests, so she quit going. But she's good at keeping secrets, so Barbara tells her a lot of things, mostly about her marriage with Sam.

"He never talks. He comes home and flops down in his chair, then eats supper, and then is back out the door to go to some church meeting. I'm getting kinda tired of it."

"That's how my Harold was. He was either at the store or sleeping. We never even went on a vacation. Twenty-one years straight we went to St. Louis for the International Shoe Company's customer appreciation dinner. That was it. Some years, we wouldn't even stay the night. He'd make us drive back that night so we could be at the store the next day."

They talk about other things, too. They discuss theology. Mabel's been reading books written by a liberal Episcopalian, and she thinks he might be onto something. He believes the Apostle Paul probably never said for women to keep silent in church, that some male chauvinist probably snuck that in later. Mabel's been writing to the Unitarians and is thinking of starting a Unitarian church in Harmony. "Somewhere where you can think things about God without someone telling you you're wrong," she told Barbara.

They discuss politics. On the last Election Day, Mabel went to the meetinghouse to vote, and when she asked for a write-in ballot, Dale Hinshaw wouldn't give her one. "Don't rock the boat," he told her. "Just vote for the Republican. That's what Harold would have wanted you to do."