

The best of summer reading: Christian fiction with Father Tim and Mitford by Jan Karon



Jan Karon, author of the Mitford series and the Father Tim books (Photo by her daughter, Candace Freeland)

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“Everywhere I have sought rest and not found it, except sitting in a corner by myself with a book.”

-Saint Thomas à Kempis
(Quoted in *In the Company of Others*)

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Summertime is the best time to get lost in a book. Whether you are curled up on your favorite chair at home or on the beach, a good book can make all the difference in the quality of your relaxation. When coupled with inspiring thoughts and good characters, reading can lift your mind and heart, and even change the way you think and act.

Last September, one of my Florida neighbors gave me a much-loved, tattered paperback and told me that I was in for a treat. Bill and his wife Chris sang the praises of the author, Jan Karon, and her many books. This particular copy of *At Home in Mitford* was obviously read, reread, and shared many times. I was intrigued and soon after I started chapter one, I was hooked.

Published in 1994 by Christian fiction author Jan Karon, *At Home in Mitford* is the first in a series of nine books set in the small town of Mitford in the western hills of North Carolina. Father Tim Kavanagh, the main character, is a 60-plus year old Episcopal priest who had been never married and who has devoted all his time, energy, and prayers to his small parish and all the people of their village and its surrounding environs.

The first book is a delightful, easy read, as we learn about this sweet town, its people, their families and gardens, the businesses of Main Street where their day to day interactions take place, and the great big dog who showed up and “adopted” their favorite rector.

You will surely love their adventures... from the villagers who share easy camaraderie (for the most part) with their neighbors, to the terribly tragic plight of their mountain poor and homeless.

Interspersed with some joke-telling from one of their favorite seniors, garden tips for growing the best flowers in the region, and home-cooked favorites, as well as Esther's famous orange marmalade cake, *At Home in Mitford* will keep you alternately smiling, then wiping away a few poignant tears, and then smiling again as the lives of Father Tim and his neighbors grow on your heart.

"One ought, every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words."

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
(Quoted in *In the Company of Others*)

When I finished reading this first Mitford book, I reflected on the beautiful manner in which prayer and Scripture were easily used throughout daily interactions, and how natural it was for Father Tim and his neighbors to talk about God's presence in their lives. A huge emphasis was placed on relying on God's help, as promised in Philippians 4:13: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* Yes, it truly inspired me.

And I surely loved the way this gentle rector, a voracious reader of poetry and quality nonfiction, was always recording his favorite quotes in a notebook. In fact, the many beautifully cited and well-placed quotes gave me much food for thought as well, and I often found myself tweeting them out or posting them on Facebook.

I was hooked and read the next eight books in the Mitford series in rapid succession. Among the topics that were addressed so eloquently were:

- "the beauty of ordinary people living ordinary lives;"
- trusting in "the prayer that never fails" (Do you know which one?);
- falling in love and the difficulties involved in making a commitment;
- discerning marriage later in life;
- the evolving role of pets in one's life and home;
- living with a chronic illness;
- the reluctant adopting of changing forms of technology, including cell phones and email, to keep up with the times;
- fostering good ecumenical relationships with the other church communities in Mitford;
- providing foster care for an abused mountain child;

- to retire or not to retire?
- the politics involved when big business wants to move into a small town;
- being forced to do things differently when you dislike any kind of change;
- battling depression, alcoholism, and other at-risk issues;
- seeing clergy as real people with real struggles and an equal need for God's mercy;
- bringing people into relationship with God after they come to know Him;
- and much, much more.

"There are three stages in the work of God: impossible, difficult, done."

-James Hudson Taylor

(Quoted in *Light from Heaven*)

The Father Tim books:

After writing the nine Mitford books, Jan Karon decided to take the now-retired Father Tim away from Mitford, as she started to write about his adventures in other places. Interviews with Mrs. Karon find her reflecting on the decision to move away from the mountain town and its residents, taking Father Tim back to his Mississippi hometown after more than 30 years away in *Home to Holly Springs*. There he recalled the transformational moments of his childhood and those who most influenced him in his early years, as well as uncovering family secrets that would change his life forever.

Next, Karon writes about Father Tim traveling across the Pond to introduce his wife, a famous children's author and illustrator, to his ancestral roots in County Sligo, Ireland in *In the Company of Others*.

Candidly, these first two volumes of the Father Tim books were especially intense for me to read. As we know, life is not always easy and Jan Karon did not shy away from the tough topics. Both books included detailed accounts of family trials, including the back story of what led to the cold, abusive personality of his father in *Home to Holly Springs*, and later in Ireland, the discovery in the fishing lodge's library of a century-old family journal that gave insight into the complex relationships of the multi-generational innkeepers' family (*In the Company of Others*).

Never give up...

I was so glad that I did not give up reading these volumes—tough as some of the tales were—especially *Home to Holly Springs*, which was so difficult for me to read. In retrospect, I found that both volumes taught so much about the consequences of

uncovering of family secrets, as well as the sacred power of both interpersonal and divine reconciliation.

I am now happily reading the third of the Father Tim books, *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good*, which takes us “back home” again to Mitford and its neighbors, with their new adventures. The delicate circle of life goes on, acknowledging that over the years some of our most beloved characters have died, leaving their marks on the town and its people.

I look forward to reading the fourth book in this Father Tim series, *Come Rain or Come Shine*, just released in paperback in May, which promises to take us to the blessed joining of two lives in matrimony, characters whom we have seen grow up through the course of these beautiful novels.

Hopefully, Jan Karon will continue writing for a long, long time!

“Lord, make me a blessing to someone today.”

— Father Tim, *At Home in Mitford*

Does your reading make you want to be better and do better?

It is my hope that the books you are reading leave you inspired and refreshed as all the beautiful books by Jan Karon have left me. If your reading makes you want to be a better person and keep your relationship with God centered forefront in your life, then you have found a great gift indeed.

What are you reading this summer?

Have you read any of Jan Karon’s books?

Tell me about your favorite characters and how you were inspired.

Or recommend something for me to read next.

Drop me a line on Facebook or email me at: pattimurphydohn@gmail.com.

A Guide to the Books of Jan Karon:

The Mitford Years:

- *At Home in Mitford* (1994)
- *A Light in the Window* (1995)
- *These High, Green Hills* (1996)
- *Out to Canaan* (1997)
- *A New Song* (1999)
- *A Common Life: the Wedding Story* (2001)
- *In This Mountain* (2002)

- *Shepherds Abiding* (2003)
- *Light from Heaven* (2005)

Father Tim books:

- *Home to Holly Springs* (2007)
- *In the Company of Others* (2010)
- *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good* (2014)
- *Come Rain or Come Shine* (2015)

Children's books:

- *Miss Fannie's Hat* (1998)
- *Jeremy: The Tale of an Honest Bunny* (2000)
- *Jan Karon Presents: Violet Comes to Stay* (2006)
- *Jan Karon Presents: Violet Goes to the Country* (2007)

Christmas books:

- *The Mitford Snowmen* (2001)
- *Esther's Gift: A Mitford Christmas Story* (2002)

Non-fiction:

- *Patches of Godlight: Father Tim's Favorite Quotes* (2001) – religious quotes used in the Mitford series
- *The Trellis and the Seed: A Book of Encouragement for All Ages* (2003)
- *Jan Karon's Mitford Cookbook and Kitchen Reader* (2004)
- *A Continual Feast: Words of Comfort and Celebration, collected by Father Tim* (2005)
- *The Mitford Bedside Companion* (2006)

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