

Montserrat's Thelma Gage hopes first book leaves lasting impression

By **EDWIN L. MARTIN**

May 8, 2020



"I have other people's books. Now they can have mine," Thelma Gage says of her first book.

As a young girl growing up in Montserrat, Thelma Gage immersed herself in books. First it was the *Hardy Boys-Nancy Drew* mysteries and the *Bobbsey Twins*. She would check out five books (the maximum allowed) from the public library and read them in one night. The librarian would be stunned when the 11-year-old returned the following day to check out five more.

Over the years Thelma's hobby has not waned. She estimates that she has read more than 500 books.

And now, for the first time, she has written one.

Join me in the Break, which Thelma describes as a compilation of short readings that present a spiritual perspective on every-day incidents, was published in January, 2020.

"I have other people's books. Now they can have mine," Thelma says proudly. "I hope this can be my legacy to the world."

EARLY LIFE

Thelma grew up in a devout Seventh Day Adventist home. Her father was an Elder in the church and took his position very seriously. So starting at age 5, Thelma had to read daily devotionals during family worship. Those readings not only fortified her faith, they honed her reading skills and vocabulary. She learned to enunciate by focusing on every syllable of a word. So by the time she started school she wielded a distinct advantage over her classmates.

"They were teaching us that A is for apple, B is for bat, C is for cat," she says. "I used to get in trouble because I was so bored in school."

The teachers realized Thelma was advanced, so they promoted her several times. "By the time I was 10 years old, I was in Standard 7 with the school-leavers."

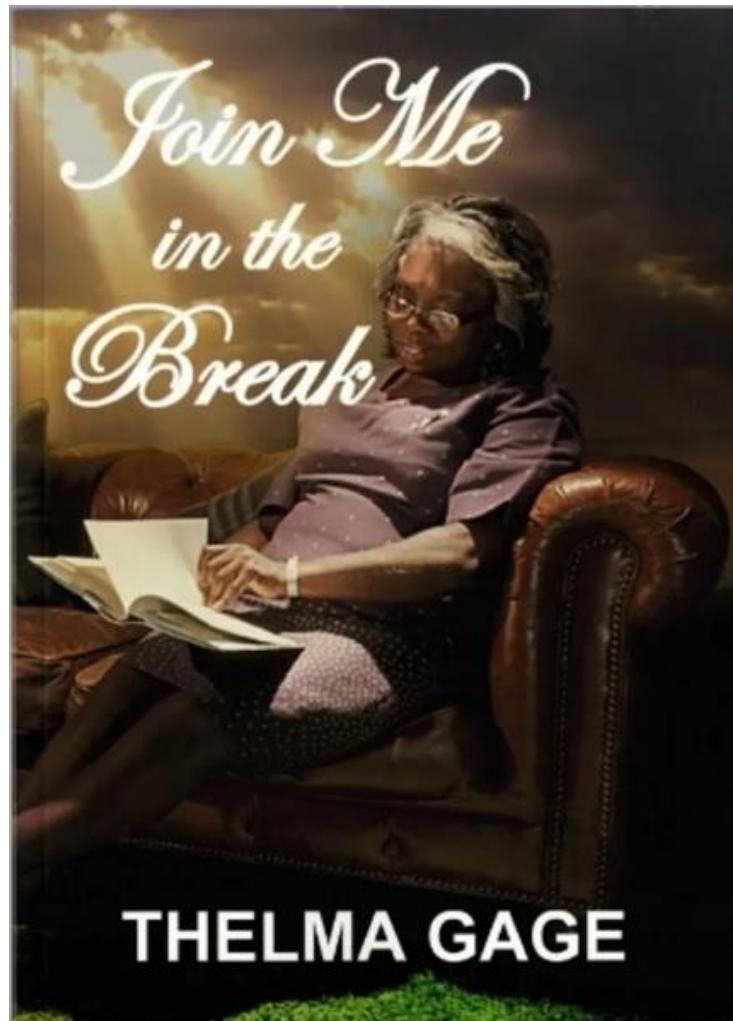
Thelma's story actually began in London. She is the eldest of four children born to Montserrat immigrants John "George" Gage and Sarah Gage (nee' Irish). The couple migrated to Britain during the height of the Caribbean exodus in the 1950s. But after enduring housing issues, the Gages returned to Montserrat in 1964. They lived in Cork Hill at the home of Mr. Gage's now-deceased parents.

Thelma attended Cork Hill Primary School and later the Montserrat Secondary School, where her love for reading evolved. She became hooked on medical detective novels. That encouraged her to study nursing and other aspects of health, a career that has spanned almost 40 years and seen her practice in Montserrat, Britain and Anguilla. She is certified in Health Service Management – among other ancillary fields – and holds a Masters of Business Administration. She is also a qualified midwife.

In the 1980s, Thelma got married and returned to England with her husband as both pursued career opportunities. Thelma registered with the General Nursing Council (now the Nursing & Midwifery Council) before going on to train and work as a Health Visitor – supporting families in the community. Less than a decade later the couple returned to Montserrat. Thelma served as Health Services Manager at Glendon Hospital and oversaw the facility's relocation from Plymouth to St. John's during the volcanic crisis that began in 1995. She later accepted a role of Health Services Administrator in Anguilla. By this time her marriage had ended. When her contract in Anguilla expired she returned to England and settled in Milton Keynes, about 50 miles northwest of London and resumed health visiting. She has resided there ever since.

Thelma progressed to managerial roles including practice education. She continues to work in the NHS as a specialist practitioner for safeguarding

children. She also helps to take care of her elderly mother, who lives in London (Thelma's father passed away in 2010).



A look at the cover of Thelma Gage's first book.

'OPEN OUR SPIRITUAL EYES'

Throughout her career, travels and education, the one constant in Thelma's life has been faith. She frequently quotes Bible scriptures and recites Bible stories as if the material is second nature. Spirituality transcends every aspect of her existence and is also a vital component in her work.

"As a nurse we get taught that health is a state of physical, social, mental and spiritual well-being," she says. "But I notice we don't do the spiritual part unless someone is near death's door. We need to open our spiritual eyes."

Thelma says the objective behind her first publication is more conversation than conversion. But if she can help someone form a relationship with God, it'll be a bonus. She says the premise of the book is forming "a connection between the mundane and the divine."

She also wants to reinforce that the book is not targeted only toward people of faith. "I suppose a person of faith will have some understanding of the background and Biblical connect (**would 'content' be a better word?**)," she says, "but I use instances that all people can relate to."

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One subject that is covered is "Bargains and Promises" – the common concept where people make promises to others or to the Almighty when they are faced with an emergency. Most people end up breaking those promises. Thelma gives examples and explains the consequences of promises.

FAITH AND COVID-19

Despite her deep faith, Thelma acknowledges that being spiritual and being wise should never be mutually exclusive. A popular American pastor recently flouted social-distancing laws amid the Covid-19 pandemic and held a church service,

stating that the Lord would protect him. The pastor later contracted the virus and died, and several members of his family also fell ill.

“There’s faith and there’s folly,” Thelma says. “The same God you’re preaching about gave man the wisdom to identify disease and give instruction on how to stay well. I don’t wish anyone ill but that is the height of folly.”

Although she is no longer on the front line, she has a profound appreciation for what practicing nurses have endured amid the pandemic.

“If I didn’t have to take care of my mother I would definitely be still working in the field,” she says. “But I can’t compromise her. I’m glad I don’t have to make that choice.”

Thelma Gage, the intrepid, outspoken little girl from Cork Hill, has achieved many academic and career accolades. She admits that her life may have been different if parents stayed in England; but she cherishes her upbringing in Montserrat and the life skills she learned growing up there, as well as the ability to appreciate and value the little things in life. She has worn many hats, and now she can add a feather to her cap: author. She has dedicated her life to public service. And as for her book, she has dedicated it to the two people responsible for her journey: her parents, John and Sarah Gage.



Thelma and her parents, Sarah and John "George" Gage, in 2009.

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