



Stephanie Black

INTERVIEW BY KATHERINE MORRIS

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How did you first get started writing?

I've always loved books. My mother reports that even when I was tiny, I'd look at books for a long time (which was probably a nice break from my hanging on her leg and crying, a favorite activity of mine). As a child, I enjoyed make-believe games—my favorite game was playing Barbies with my sisters. We also enjoyed pretending we were Charlie's Angels or the Bionic Woman, and we would run around outside having adventures. For me, I

think writing is a grown-up version of playing Barbies or playing pretend—I outgrew the desire to play with a doll or pretend I was someone else, but I didn't outgrow the desire to make up stories about fictional people.

When we were kids, my sister and I wrote a couple of plays for ourselves and our younger siblings, and when I was twelve I won an award for a story I'd written. That was exciting—I think it helped give me an inkling that writing was something I was good at.

Tell us about the process of getting your first novel, *The Believer*, published. What did you learn about writing and publishing from that first experience?

When I was a senior in high school, I took a creative writing class. For my last short story assignment, I wrote a snippet of a futuristic thriller. On my story, the teacher wrote "Interesting—don't stop!" I didn't stop. I played with that idea for years, writing various scenes and thinking I wanted to write

a novel. Finally, I decided to actually try writing that novel, start to finish. I got a couple hundred pages into it and realized I had a plot going off in too many directions. At that point, I read my first fiction technique book—Jack Bickham’s *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)*. That book was an eye-opener for me; now I could see what I’d done wrong in my partial draft. I set that first attempt aside, hammered out a new outline, taking many ideas from the original story, and set to work again. This time, I completed the first draft of my dystopian thriller, *The Believer* (by this point, it bore very little resemblance to that original seed of an idea from my creative writing class). For years I worked on that manuscript, rewriting it. I read a lot of fiction technique books—there was far more to writing fiction than I’d realized when I first started working on a novel! I got feedback on the book from my family; I was far too shy to show my manuscript to anyone else.

After so many drafts that I lost count, I finally felt I was ready to submit my manuscript to a publisher. That first trip to the post office felt momentous—my kids even made a sign to stick in the window of the car, saying something like “World’s Greatest Writer.” Three weeks later, a rejection letter landed in my mailbox. Reality check! Intellectually, I knew that rejection was part of the business, but now I’d experienced it—the dreaded form rejection letter. I tried again, submitting the manuscript to another publisher. This time, it took over six months before I heard back. They liked it but were skittish about the science fiction elements of the story—science fiction can be a difficult sell in the LDS market. They also wanted it more directly targeted to an LDS audience.

I spent nearly a year rewriting the book to make it less futuristic and more LDS and submitted it again. What a great moment that was when I read the email telling me my book had been accepted for publication. My

dream was coming true! In January 2005, *The Believer* was released by Covenant Communications.

I learned a lot from that first experience, both about the work and the technique involved in writing a book, and about the publishing world. I fear it might unnerve new writers when I tell them how long it took me from when I started the first draft of *The Believer* to when it was accepted for publication (somewhere around ten years), but I wasn’t just writing a novel—I was learning *how* to write a novel. I also learned it wasn’t enough to write a good book—it had to be a marketable book, something the publisher thought could sell successfully in the current market.

You write mystery/suspense. What drew you to that genre? What have you learned about the genre since you’ve started writing in it?

I’ve long enjoyed reading mystery and suspense novels. When I was a young child, I loved Nancy Drew. When I was a little older, Mary Higgins Clark became a favorite. I’m not an adventurous person, but I enjoy the vicarious excitement of likable characters in danger and the satisfaction of a solved mystery or a thwarted evil plot (gotta have that happy ending!).

The Believer got great reviews, but sales were disappointing, and my publisher suggested I try writing in a different genre—something not futuristic. Since I’d always been a fan of contemporary mystery and suspense, it was a natural choice for me. I’d written the beginning of a suspense novel a few years back, so I took that beginning and set to work. That book was published in 2008 as *Fool Me Twice*.

In writing mystery/suspense, one thing I’ve learned is that readers like being surprised. They enjoy twists and turns, and they don’t want the solution or the course of the plot to be obvious—if they suspect whodunit early on, either you’d better make it tricky enough that they’re proud of themselves for nailing it, or you’d better toss things at them to make them question

their prediction. An obvious villain is disappointing to readers.

I’ve also learned that it can get tricky to plot new books after writing several of the same type of novel. I’ve published three suspense novels (*Fool Me Twice*, *Methods of Madness*, and *Cold as Ice*) and have a fourth scheduled for release sometime in late summer or early fall (working title is *Rearview Mirror*—I don’t know if that will be the final title). As I recently started brainstorming my fifth suspense novel, I was making lists of things I’d done before—this villain killed for revenge; that villain killed out of pride, or what have you. Reusing motives is fine—countless mysteries have the villain killing for, say, greed—but things need to be fresh with each new book.

You’re a stay-at-home mother with five children. When do you write, and how much writing do you get done on an average day? How do you balance your roles as a mother and as a writer?

When my children were little, naptime was my golden writing time. Once the littlest one was asleep, I’d race for the computer. My children were all good nappers, for which I’m very grateful—they’d take a long afternoon nap up until around age three, when they’d start to phase it out. I really treasured that naptime!

As the kids have gotten older, I can be more flexible in when I write. My youngest child is now in school all day, so I have more potential writing time than I ever could have dreamed of when they were tiny—but ironically, I struggle with productivity. With my first book, I was so excited about it and loved working on it so fervently that I didn’t need to discipline myself—the excitement carried me, and I would work on it whenever I got the chance. Now, I really need to develop writing discipline, and I haven’t achieved that yet. I find myself frittering away far too much time—Oh the lure of the Internet to distract me when I should be writing! I don’t have a set amount of writing time each day—some days

I make good progress and other days little or none. Which reminds me... I really need to get to work on that new novel...

Balance can be a struggle. When I'm excited about a project and things are going well, I can find it difficult to set the laptop down, even when I really need to focus on other things. And it's easy to use writing as an excuse to procrastinate—"Oh, I want to work on this first before I (fill in the blank with some task that I'm putting off)." The areas of discipline and balance are ones where I really need to improve.

What is the most common reaction you get when people find out you're a Mormon stay-at-home mom who writes mysteries and suspense?

Sometimes I get funny comments from people who've read my books—like the sister in my ward who said I must have a "dark side." It was all in good fun, but I think it does surprise some people at first when they find out what kind of chilling stories I can create (but bear in mind I'm not creating anything too horrible—this is LDS fiction we're talking about!).

So far, you've published exclusively in the LDS market. What do you like about writing for the LDS market and what are some of the challenges you've faced?

I like the comfortable feeling of being "at home"—I'm so accustomed to being in LDS settings that writing for an LDS publisher is a natural fit. I never have to worry that my publisher will wonder why I'm so strict about not including certain content that I'd find offensive. I'm grateful to be with my publisher, and I've had two editors who are both wonderful to work with.

Challenges? The vast majority of writing-related events in the LDS market take place in Utah, and I don't live there, so I miss out on some of that association with other authors and readers. While I don't feel this hurts my writing career, I do admit to jealousy (this sounds petty, doesn't it?). It would be fun to be able to more

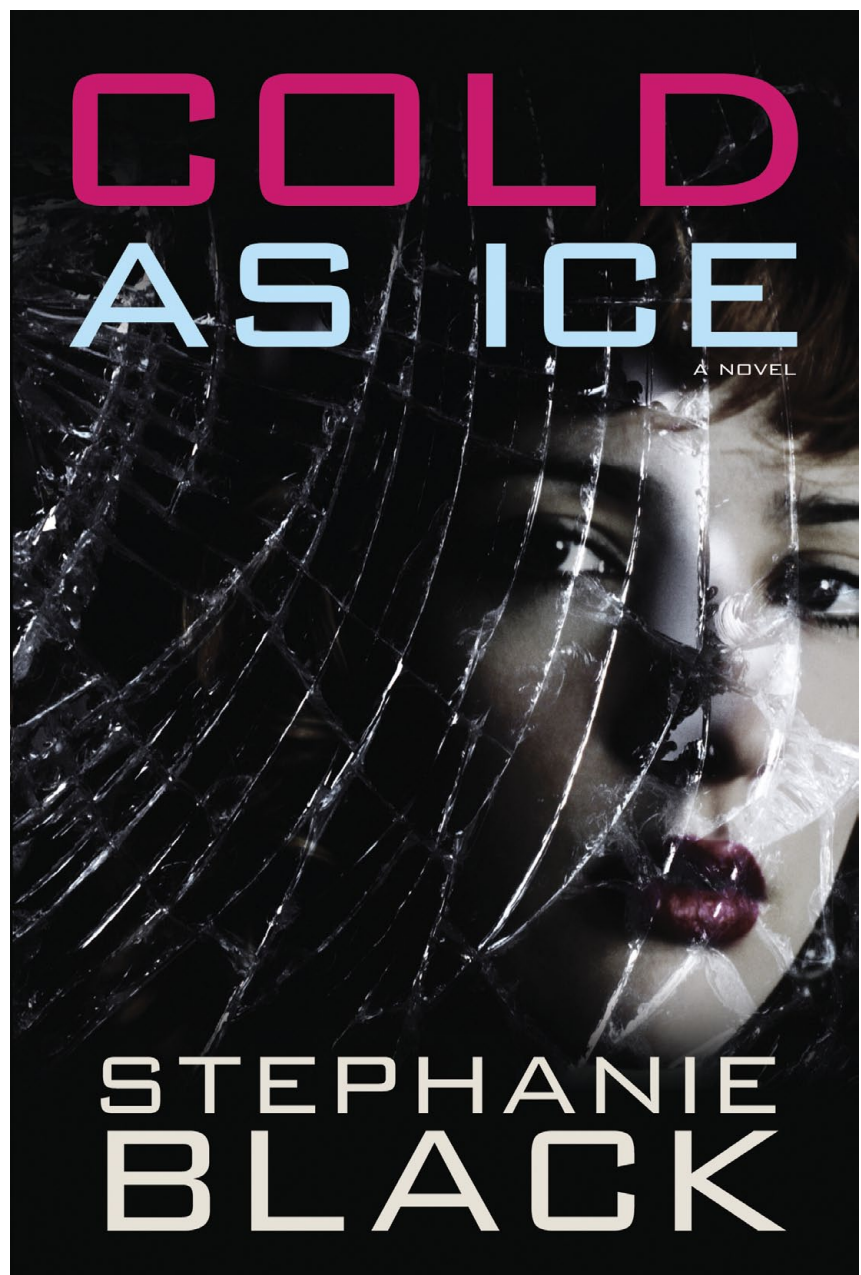


Image courtesy Stephanie Black

easily attend writing events with LDS authors and readers, like the recent Life, The Universe, & Everything symposium at BYU, or the LDS Booksellers Association Convention. The good news is that the Internet is such a blessing for networking with other authors and readers—even if I can only connect in person once or twice a year, I can build connections and friendships online.

I haven't gotten involved in my local writing community, fearing, I suppose, that I'd feel out of place and

self-conscious as an author writing LDS fiction, but intellectually I know I shouldn't be so shy—just because I write for a different market doesn't mean we're not all writers, and I really should get involved.

Talk about your process now that you've published four novels. How does an idea for a story start? How long does it take to write a first draft? How much research do you do? Do you outline, or are you more of a discovery writer?



Photo courtesy Stephanie Black

My first two novels grew from ideas that had been percolating for a long time. After I submitted my second novel, I faced a new and daunting challenge—starting a manuscript when I had *no idea* what it would be about. All I knew was that I wanted another contemporary suspense novel with a young female protagonist. From there, I started brainstorming. That’s how I started the books that followed as well—brainstorming. I type ideas into a brainstorming file, listing possibilities and working with ideas until finally, a story idea starts to take shape. Once I have enough of a plot to work

with, I try to create a rough outline. I need that outline to get me started, but it’s very broad. It contains the general story (though I might change my mind on some points later) but doesn’t contain details of how scenes will unfold.

Research is not my favorite thing—it’s plain that I’ll never be a historical fiction writer! For instance, I always set my novels in fictional locations. Suspense readers won’t care that the town doesn’t really exist, as long as the feel of the area is right; and with a fictional location, I don’t have to worry about making every detail of the town

match reality. For instance, I used to live in a small town in Massachusetts, but when I wanted a Massachusetts town for my story, instead of using that real town, I invented one. That gives me maximum flexibility. Do I need a hill leading down to a pond? Here it is. A dark, winding back road? I can invent one—I invented the town. The Internet is a fantastic resource for a writer. And people with expertise in various subject matters have been a great help to me—my daughter knows a lot about police work, and I’ve asked her countless questions on police procedure.

A writer friend who worked in a bookstore answered my questions when I created a protagonist who owned a bookstore. A kind ward member gave me many helpful details for creating the college professor in my upcoming release. And so on.

I'm a combination of outline and discovery writer. I need a broad outline to get me started, but I won't know the details of the story until I actually write the book. There's no way I could come up with all those details and twists and turns in an outline—my brain doesn't work that way. My first drafts are an inconsistent mess as I work my way through creating the story, and I brainstorm a lot along the way. If I change my mind about something I've written earlier in the draft, I usually don't go back and fix it—I'll leave myself a note, but I want to push through to the end of the draft. I'd much rather have a draft to work with than a blank screen! How long it takes me to draft a book will depend on the book and how fast I'm working on it—I think my last one took me just under seven months to draft. And it was another seven months before I finished revising it.

Writing mysteries and suspense requires you to weave together some pretty complicated plots. How do you keep yourself consistent and make sure that the threads tie up nicely in the end?

I do a lot of rewriting—going through the story multiple times. In fact, I love revising a manuscript; I enjoy revising more than drafting.

On my recent manuscript, one of my test readers pointed out that I'd never resolved a red herring issue that I'd raised. I'd completely forgotten about it! Thank heavens for test readers.

What kind of feedback has been the most useful to you as a writer (from readers and from reviewers)? How do you take criticism? What is the biggest compliment you've ever received?

The most useful feedback has come to me from my test readers, my publisher's readers, and my editors. Specific feedback is by far the most helpful, such as pointing out where a character needs work, or when something is unclear or not credible or repetitive. When I get feedback, it can be daunting to dive in and see what my reader/editor said needs to be addressed, but once I read the feedback, get over any initial discomfort, and start seeing ways I can improve the book, it's exciting—I love to see a book getting better, and I'm glad to get honest feedback that allows me to strengthen a book before it goes to press.

When a reader or reviewer criticizes a book after publication, it does sting. As a writer, you need a thick skin, but I'm not sure many of us actually develop that defense. You pour so much into writing a book that when someone posts a negative comment or review, it hurts, even though you know no author has ever written a book that every reader likes. Readers and reviewers can have such vastly different opinions on the same book that if you took every bit of criticism to heart, you'd drive yourself insane. Some people simply won't like your style, or your story, or your characters or what have you. You can't please everyone.

It would be impossible to single out one particular compliment as the biggest I've ever received. One thing I've discovered since being published is how much I appreciate it when someone takes the time to say, "I loved your book." I'm delighted when a reader tells me my book kept him up late, or distracted her from other tasks because she just *had* to finish it—I figure if the reader is that involved in the story, that's definitely a good sign!

Tell us about your involvement in LDStorymakers. What have you gained from your participation there, and what suggestions do you have for new writers who are thinking of attending?

I joined LDStorymakers a few years ago and am so glad I did—it's a

marvelous organization. The support and camaraderie in Storymakers is amazing. We cheer each other on, help answer each other's questions, commiserate when someone gets bad news, and generally uplift and support each other. The LDStorymakers Writers Conference is a superb event, and I've enjoyed the opportunities I've had to participate in the conference as an attendee, a workshop presenter, a panelist, and a "boot camp" instructor. I'll be attending the conference for the third time this year, and I hope I can attend every year. The conference is top-notch, with fantastic workshops filled with information for both aspiring and established writers. It's also a great chance to network with other authors and industry professionals. In addition to the workshops, the conference organizers offer pitch sessions with agents and editors, both LDS and national market. I just can't say enough good about the conference—I highly recommend it. If you're a new writer thinking of attending, my advice is—go for it! You'll have a great opportunity to both develop your craft and network with a wonderful group of people who love writing as much as you do. And at the conference, don't be shy—introduce yourself to people and have fun.

You've won two Whitney Awards for your novels *Fool Me Twice* (2008) and *Methods of Madness* (2009). What has that meant to you as an author?

Insecurity is a common ailment for writers—you worry if a book will be accepted for publication, worry what readers will think of it, worry what reviewers will say and what sales numbers will be, worry if your next book will live up to your last one or if fans will be disappointed, and so on.

Winning two Whitney Awards was an incredible dose of validation—a group of industry professionals thought my books were award-worthy! That means so much to me, to know they thought well of my work.

Talk about what you have done to promote yourself, particularly through your website and through your group blog, *Six LDS Writers and a Frog*.

My website contains news announcements and information about my books, including sample chapters. At *Six LDS Writers and a Frog* (www.sixldswriters.net), we have a great group of authors—Jeffrey Savage, Robison Wells, Julie Bellon, Kerry Blair, and Sariah Wilson. I blog on Wednesdays, sometimes on writing-related topics, sometimes on what's going on in my life.

Unfortunately, I am the world's slowest blogger—it takes me a *long* time to write a single blog post (heck, it can take me forever to write an email), so once-a-week blogging is all I can handle. Being part of a group blog is perfect for me—I only have to cover Wednesday. I'm also on Facebook and Twitter.

What are you working on right now?

I'm in the brainstorming phase right now, trying to create the basics of the plot and characters for a new suspense novel. I hope to be ready to start writing the story very soon.

What are some of your long-term writing goals? What are some things you hope to accomplish through your writing?

I'd like to write a novel for the national market someday—I have an idea for a science fiction story. It would be fun to stretch and try something new.

Through my writing, I hope to tell good, clean, engaging, suspenseful stories. I've always enjoyed reading novels that grip me so hard that I don't want to put the book down, and I hope to write stories that will grip my readers, giving them characters they want to root for and plots that keep them turning pages.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers, particularly those who are looking to be published in the LDS market?

Study fiction technique. There are tons of fiction technique books available. Two of my favorites are the aforementioned *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)* and *Scene and Structure*, both by Jack Bickham. There are books on dialogue, books on self-editing, books on description, and so on. Study, study, study!

Read a lot of fiction. Become familiar with the market you're targeting and what's being published in that market. Research publishers—which publishers would be the best fit for your book? If you're targeting the LDS market, you don't need a literary agent; publishers deal directly with authors. If you're targeting the national market, research agents and figure out who would be a good fit.

Revise your manuscript. Polish it. Get outside feedback. Some writers find critique groups extremely helpful. I call on "test readers" to read my manuscripts and let me know what's working and what isn't. Make your manuscript the strongest it can be before you submit it.

Writer's conferences can be very helpful as well as provide great opportunities to network with other authors and publishing professionals. And you can easily connect with other authors online and start getting established in the writing community—you don't need to wait until you have a book published.

Be prepared to be patient and flexible and to persevere when things get tough. The path to publication—and after publication—can be rocky. But if you love to write, it's worth it.

What do you think are some of the greatest strengths of the LDS market as it is right now, and what are some changes you would like to see in the future?

The LDS market fills the niche of offering books specifically targeted to an LDS audience—books with LDS characters or LDS themes, as well as books that are simply clean reads, devoid of offensive content. A variety

of fiction in many genres is now available from LDS publishers, and the amount of LDS fiction available has vastly increased over the last couple of decades.

In the future, I'd love to see the LDS market continue to grow and for the genres available to continue to expand—I'd enjoy seeing more science fiction.

I'd like to see LDS fiction become more widely known in areas where LDS brick-and-mortar bookstores aren't available (which is most of the world). With the Internet, that's a greater possibility than ever before.

I'm excited to see LDS publishers getting involved in the e-book market—my recent novel is available for Kindle. Even though I don't live near an LDS bookstore, I can now download LDS fiction instantly at the click of a mouse.

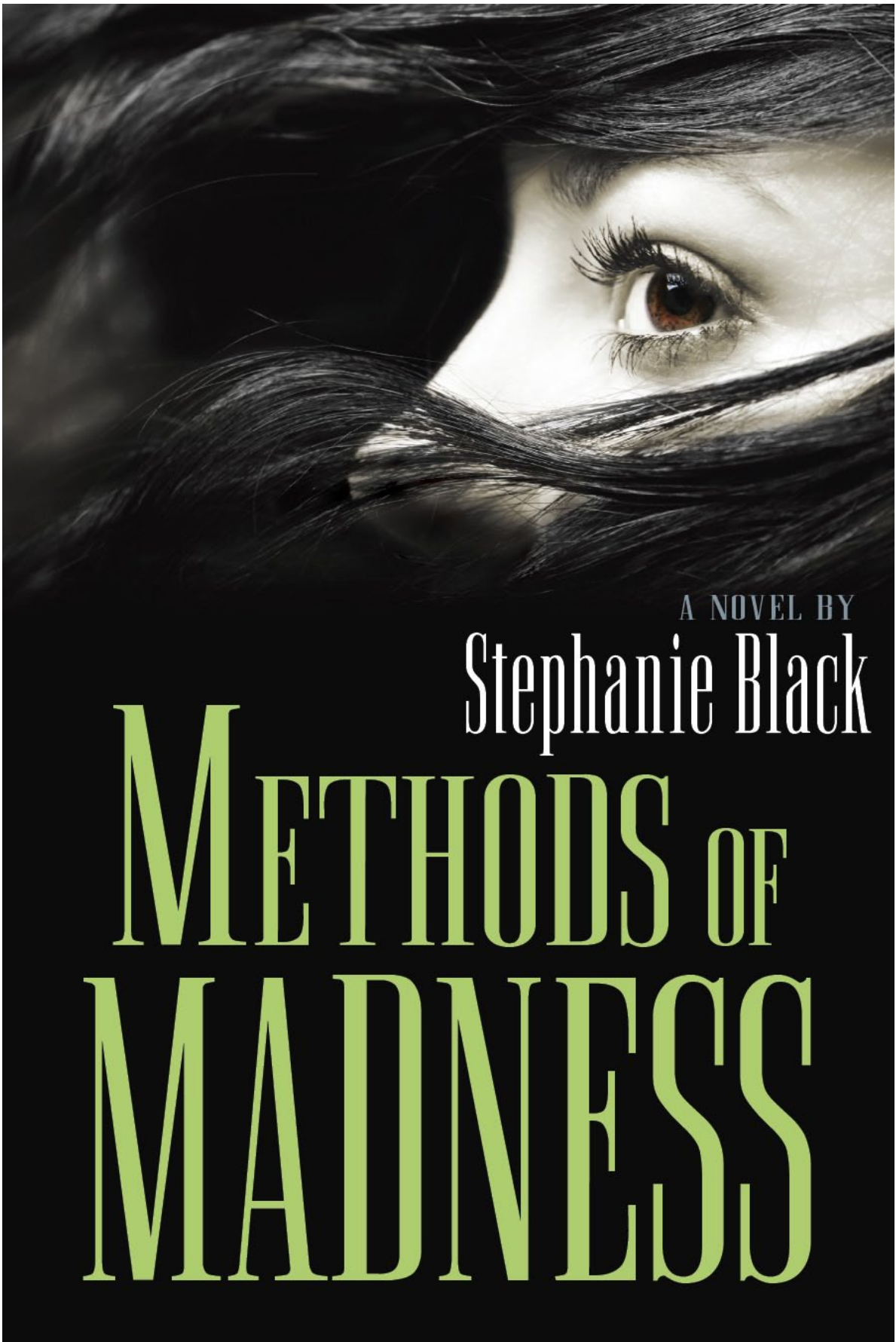
How do you see the gospel affecting your work?

Because of my faith in Jesus Christ, I don't want to write anything that endorses evil or makes it look attractive. I think it goes back to Moroni 7, where Mormon teaches about the way to judge—if something invites us to do good and to believe in Christ, it's of God; if it persuades us to do evil and not believe in Christ, it's not of God. That standard applies to everything, even fiction.

I don't think this means my books all need overt religious content, but it does mean that whatever messages I end up conveying in my novels need to endorse good, not evil.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

I think there is great value in good, clean entertainment. My first novel, *The Believer*, dealt with some deeper themes, but my contemporary mysteries are meant more as simply light, fun reads. If I can provide a source of entertainment that is fun and exciting while keeping the standards outlined by Mormon, I think that would be a worthwhile contribution. 🙌



A NOVEL BY

Stephanie Black

METHODS OF MADNESS

Image courtesy Stephanie Black