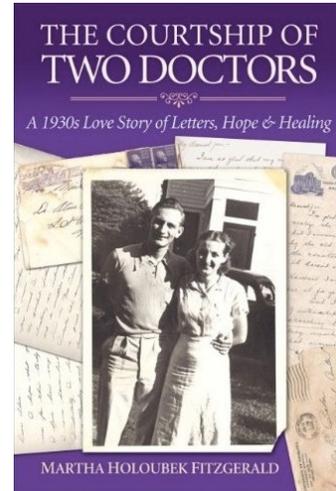


Q&A with Martha Fitzgerald, author and editor of *The Courtship of Two Doctors*



***The Courtship of Two Doctors* relates the true-life love story behind your father’s award-winning novel *Letters to Luke*, which you also edited and published. Tell us a little about *Courtship* and why you wanted to share your parents’ letters with the world.**

Before his death in 2007, my father, co-founder of LSU School of Medicine in Shreveport, entrusted to me his personal papers. Among them: the nearly 800 letters he and my mother, both physicians, exchanged before their marriage. *The Courtship of Two Doctors* draws on that collection to celebrate long-lasting love and the healing profession.

Joe Holoubek of Omaha and Alice Baker of New Orleans met as senior medical students in 1937 during a summer fellowship at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Letters flew back and forth twice a week their last year in school and every day their internship year. They wrote about professors and fellow students in Louisiana, Nebraska, and Minnesota, about physicians and patients, illnesses and treatments, family and friends, football, songs, and movies.

They set their sights on postgraduate training at Mayo, the medical mecca where they found each other and danced to the haunting “Harbor Lights.” Grave illness and career setbacks shook their confidence, but the two decided to face an uncertain future together, trusting in each other and the relationship they built letter by letter.

My father and I started on this book together in the final months of his life. Proceeds will benefit LSU School of Medicine in Shreveport, a marriage ministry, and other causes I share with my late parents.

Eight hundred letters is a lot to go through! How’d you put it all together in book form?

The first step was to edit and annotate the entire collection of letters, making it available to researchers of 20th century health care and academic medicine. This book comprises excerpts from roughly 310 letters, creating a story line rich with personal drama and historical context. *The Courtship of Two Doctors* recreates the medical era before antibiotics, when health workers were at risk of serious infection, and vividly illustrates the 1930s social barriers challenging two-career marriages.

I edited the letters with a light hand, to preserve the flavor of the time—1937-1939—and the personality of each author.

Your parents’ letters illustrate the development of long-lasting love. Can you give us a few marriage pointers you learned from them?

To listen. To build a relationship based on trust, shared values, and mutual respect. To put family first. To grow spiritually together. To dance and share adventures!

What do you think your parents would say about this book?

They would be surprised but proud that their story could inspire others. They brought pre-Cana marriage preparation to northwest Louisiana, establishing a citywide interfaith program for engaged couples. Each program featured the stories of long-married couples, as well as advice from experts in law, finances, psychology, and sexuality.

This is not only a love story, it's a medical history. Why was the late 1930s so important for the health-care industry, especially for New Orleans?

Courtship recalls the pride and prestige of the new Charity Hospital soon to open in New Orleans—a flagship hospital for two first-class medical schools, Tulane and Louisiana State University. But construction was still under way at the time of the letters, and the old Charity was critically overcrowded. As century-old hospital buildings were torn down, wards were combined or moved down the street to provisional quarters. A November 1937 expose in *Time* magazine reported that in one makeshift ward, twenty-seven patients were sharing ten so-called three-quarter beds—two patients resting and one waiting his turn.

Such conditions multiplied the risks health-care workers faced at hospitals across the country. It was the era before antibiotics, and infection control was primitive by today's standards. Sulfa compounds were the new miracle drugs, and radiation was liberally applied, but tuberculosis ran rampant.

I knew before I began editing these letters that my mother contracted tuberculosis as an intern at Charity Hospital. I was surprised to learn that my father was hospitalized three times during his internship at Nebraska's University Hospital, twice with infections in a cut finger and once with scarlet fever. In the latter case, he spent several weeks in semi-darkness in the city isolation hospital—nicknamed “the bug house”—to protect his eyes and control spread of the disease. During that time, he could not write his daily letters to my mother. They were dictated and typed. Her letters to him during this period were destroyed before he left the hospital, for fear of contamination.

What's something only you know about your parents that isn't in the book?

They loved to dance, and they loved to travel. Although they danced while courting, they were largely self-taught. Decades later, they took lessons in ballroom dancing from a local pro. And when my father's hometown of Clarkson, Nebraska, started an annual Czech Days Festival, they enjoyed attending and dancing the polka, often in folk costumes my grandmother made.

Family vacations were great bonding experiences, releasing our parents from the demands of patient care and hospital work. The last major trip I took with my parents was in 1988. My husband and I joined them for two weeks in Austria and Czechoslovakia, my father's ancestral homeland. My favorite photo is of my usually dapper father at the world-famous Pilsen brewery. He's dressed casually in a Notre Dame polo shirt, sporting a big smile and a huge glass of beer.

What do you hope people get out of reading *Courtship*?

I hope to inspire new generations of servant healers, encourage young couples to cherish one another, and generate new interest in personal family history.

I encourage readers to consider anew what treasures lie in your attics or cedar chests—diaries, scrapbooks, wartime correspondence, or other letters lovingly preserved by parents or grandparents. Take a second look at items you might once have considered too personal or even insignificant. Consider donating them to a local historical archive. But first, spend time with these treasures and rediscover your forbears.

You will encounter a number of delightful surprises and intriguing clues about your ancestry. There's quite a bit of sleuthing involved in sorting out facts and dates and names. You just might enjoy playing amateur detective!

For those who haven't read your father's book *Letters to Luke*, can you tell us what it's about?

Letters to Luke: From His Fellow Physician Joseph of Capernaum, a historical novel, brings the gospels to life through the story of two young Jews trained in the healing arts. Joseph and Elisa encounter Jesus in Capernaum, and become friends and followers. They accompany Jesus, his apostles, and other followers on their journey from Galilee to Judea for Passover. They bear witness to His redemptive sufferings on the cross, then return to Capernaum to carry on His work. There, as members of an early Christian house-church, they become targets for persecution by Saul of Tarsus.

The power of *Letters to Luke* lies in my father's ability to write with authority—as if he and my mother were living in the time of Christ and encountering Jesus for the first time. Their spiritual journey unfolds in letters to Luke of Antioch, a friend and fellow physician.

Winner of the Writers Digest Award for inspirational literature and the Independent Publisher Award for religious fiction, *Letters to Luke* is the story of a doubter who becomes a believer, a man of science who becomes a man of faith. It emphasizes the healing power of forgiveness, respect for women's spirituality, and the sacredness of life.

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