

How the Light Gets in

Jolina Petersheim

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"Compellingly woven by Jolina Petersheim's capable pen, *How the Light Gets In* follows a trail of grief toward healing, leading to an impossible choice--what is best when every path will hurt someone?" --Lisa Wingate, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Before We Were Yours*

From the highly acclaimed author of *The Outcast* and *The Alliance* comes an engrossing novel about marriage and motherhood, loss and moving on.

When Ruth Neufeld's husband and father-in-law are killed working for a relief organization overseas, she travels to Wisconsin with her young daughters and mother-in-law Mabel to bury her husband. She hopes the Mennonite community will be a quiet place to grieve and piece together next steps.

Ruth and her family are welcomed by Elam, her husband's cousin, who invites them to stay at his cranberry farm through the harvest. Sifting through fields of berries and memories of a marriage that was broken long before her husband died, Ruth finds solace in the beauty of the land and healing through hard work and budding friendship. She also encounters the possibility of new love with Elam, whose gentle encouragement awakens hopes and dreams she thought she'd lost forever.

But an unexpected twist threatens to unseat the happy ending Ruth is about to write for herself. On the precipice of a fresh start and a new marriage, Ruth must make an impossible decision: which path to choose if her husband isn't dead after all.

How the Light Gets in Details


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From Reader Review How the Light Gets in for online ebook

Heidi Chiavaroli says

A book about impossible circumstances, *How the Light Gets In* forced me into uncomfortable places, broke me, then put me back together again. I knew from reading other reviews that there was going to be a twist at the end, so naturally I was guessing what would happen throughout the entire book. I was nowhere close in my guesses, and still very surprised by the ending. Surprised, and absolutely satisfied. This was my first book I read by Jolina, but I'm looking forward to more.

Fareya says

A beautifully written, simple and heartfelt story about grief and forgiveness, marriage and motherhood, *How the Light Gets In* by Jolina Petersheim surprised me. I didn't know what to expect out of this book, because having read the premise first, I was a little put off, since it felt like the entire plot and twists were revealed in that short blurb, but was I wrong! Don't let it fool you either, the blurb has nothing on the whole story. They say never judge a book by its cover, let me add – never judge a book by its premise either!

Twenty nine year old Ruth's world comes crashing down when a terrorist bomb destroys a hospital in Afghanistan, killing everyone inside within minutes including Ruth's husband and father-in-law, who were both working as doctors without borders for a relief organization. Overcome with grief, and not able to fathom how her life took such a huge wrong turn, Ruth accepts her mother-in-law's invitation to travel to Wisconsin, to bury both the deceased, and stay for a while among the close-knit Mennonite community, which her late husband, Chandler belonged to. Chandler's cousin, Elam welcomes them in their home and offers Ruth with a temporary job at his cranberry farm.

As Ruth struggles with her daily life of trying to cope with the sudden loss of her husband and raising her two young girls all by herself, she finds unexpected solace in this foreign land. She discovers she likes working the land on the farm and also gradually finds herself on the path of healing and acceptance, and is grateful for the kindness and understanding of the community.

Parallel to Ruth's present life story, we also get glimpses of the past – how Ruth met Chandler, how they fell in love, how they married and had the girls, how the relationship progressed, their highs and lows in the relationship, everything until the day Chandler left for Afghanistan – and all this is in the form of letters, which I personally thought was a wonderful intimate touch to the story.

The second part of the story is where the twist happens, and Ruth needs to pick one of two nearly impossible choices. What she picks and why, is an excellent topic for an epic book club discussion, because every individual's decision and their respective right and wrong would be based on a number of factors – how they deal with grief, how they recover, how easily they forgive, if they do so at all, their priorities, their heartbreak and their own personal redemption. There's no right or wrong when there are only two ways and they both hurt someone. I'd just leave it at that.

But wait, just when you think you know how the story ends, there's that final twist, and I was baffled by how the author suddenly changed directions. Truthfully, I was still okay with how she chose to wrap-up Ruth's story, but I am positive there will be a great divide among the readers over this ending. People will either

strongly agree or disagree, and you need to read the book to find out which side you're on.

One last thing I'd like to mention is that towards the end, there's an extremely touching and personal author's note, where Jolina Petersheim talks a bit about her own life struggles that inspired her to write this story. Make sure you don't miss that, it provides a deeper insight into what instigated Ruth's story.

Overall, *How the Light Gets In* by Jolina Petersheim is a beautiful, heartfelt contemporary that'll invoke too many emotions, but will ultimately leave the reader healed.

For more reviews visit my blog [Booktimistic - Books, Outdoors & Optimism](#)

*** An ARC was provided by Tyndale House and TLC Book Tours in exchange for an honest review. All opinions are my own. ***

Emily P says

It is not often that I receive a book for review and finish it within less than 48 hours. However, "How The Light Gets In," is a rare exception. This powerful contemporary retelling of the Biblical story of Ruth moved me to tears, encouraged my heart and left me breathless with a plot twist I never expected.

Ruth Neufeld has received the shock of her life: her husband Chandler and her father in law, both doctors with Physicians International, have been killed in a bombing while serving overseas. Ruth brings her two young daughters to Wisconsin to stay with Chandler's extended family on their cranberry farm. Elam, Chandler's cousin, encourages them to involve themselves in the community around them as they harvest the cranberries. Through the friendship and encouragement Elam and her mother in law Mabel provide, Ruth begins the process of grieving the loss of her husband and reminisces on a marriage with cracks that grew into crevasses. As she begins to move on, tentatively seeking the possibility of a romance with Elam, Ruth's existence is flipped on its axis by an event no one could see coming.

Ruth must choose between a new, fulfilling relationship and the unexpected--a long distance call that brings another question--what if Chandler is still alive? As Ruth weighs her options and considers her family's future, which life will she choose? I will not give away any more, just suffice to say there is a HUGE plot twist that will shift your perceptions.

Jolina Petersheim writes in a way I can only describe as lyrical. Her descriptors are lovely and the world she creates comes into stark view as the reader continues the novel. I absolutely adored the characters and their relational waltz. Please also do not miss the Author's Note at the end of the book. Petersheim writes honestly, with a vulnerability that expresses the struggles of marriage and family in a relatable way. Life rarely ends up how we expect, and "Where The Light Gets In," is a wonderful reminder of all the possibilities set before us. We have an active role to play in our own stories. Are we willing to do the work to make them stories worth telling?

I was thankful to be an early reader (I read it in less than 2 days, people!!) and was not required to leave a review. All opinions are my own. Thank you to Tyndale House for the ARC.

Tressa (Wishful Endings) says

4.5 Stars

HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN is a story of pain, loss, and hope as a mother with two young children loses her father, father-in-law, and husband within a few months. It's a story of family, forgiveness, and healing, with strands of faith and romance woven throughout.

This was such a bittersweet, heartbreaking, but beautiful story! I absolutely adored these characters, from Ruth and her brokenness, to her mother-in-law Mabel, to Ruth's sweet girls, to Elam and his tenderness, and to Chandler who was doing the best he knew. I couldn't help falling in love with them all. This story was so well written, with twists and turns (one that was very surprising that I would have liked to have been extended quite a bit at the end). It is a retelling of the biblical story of Ruth, but the author did a wonderful job in really making this story her own, and in making a Mennonite story work for me. It pulled on all my emotions, broke my heart, and then healed it. It also had so many little pieces of wisdom that prompted some self-reflection.

"For wasn't it easier to be someone's knight in shining armor, halfway around the world, than to participate in the unsung day-to-day efforts required of child-rearing and marriage?"

In the end, was it what I wished for? This was a story that was well worth the read. The bittersweet moments were well balanced with sweet and heartfelt ones, with characters readers will love, and a story all can relate to in one way or another. Definitely recommended for inspirational romance readers!

Content: Some suggested content between a married couple, but clean.

Source: I received a complimentary ARC from the publisher, which did not require a positive review nor affect it in any way.

Rachel McMillan says

Here's the deal... I cannot talk about this book at the level I want because of spoilers. I mean, I know I could click the **HIDE REVIEW BECAUSE OF SPOILERS** button but then you might be curious about the spoilers and I tried so hard to read this ASAP to avoid spoilers, I feel like keeping them out will encourage you to do the same.

This is just going to be my thinking aloud. Some people are going to think my experience lessens what is happening on the page. I tend to think that the more perspectives we offer to round out the layers and layers of this piece, the more chance we have to reaching a holistic conclusion about its power as a form of thoughtful literary engagement.

Because this is a thoughtful novel that is a worthy addition to this year's Christian fiction offerings and wielded by a talented pen. Petersheim is consistently a word smith of great skill whose inimitable voice is matched only by her great heart. 'How the Light Gets In' is not merely a story--- but a rumination on love and duty and our expectations versus God's expectations of us.

How do we backtrack out of a rash decision whose tentative conclusion brings us close to personal

wholeness and happiness?

I have no experience in marriage or raising a family but I encourage those who are the same to read it anyways... because of its universal treatise on relationships as a whole. And our view of God as a whole.

I am a sucker for a Ruth retelling. It is my favourite Bible story and I always love to see how people work it into modern parallels and parables. Indeed, there is a resonant Biblical cadence here: not only in the slow and twisting plot pieces that are at times gut wrenching and immensely sad, but also because Petersheim so expertly immerses us into the timeless traditions of the Mennonite communities in Wisconsin. The working of the cranberry marshes is a perfect canvas to stand in for the gleaning the Biblical Ruth does in Boaz's field.

This book instills a great sense of loss: loss of a person, loss of self. When Ruth gives up her passion for art and literature and identity in exchange for her husband's noble work, I found myself absolutely wrenched. Why should *his* dedication to his calling trump hers? Even if her calling doesn't mirror the magnanimous sacrifices of his medical pursuits? Does choosing to follow your own path and God given desires for your talents make you selfish? or just human. Later, when Ruth encounters a kindred spirit who understands on a deeply passionate level what art and literature mean to her---even while exercising his own daily sacrifices on a smaller but still meaningful scale, the reader ponders how and when we are to know what is right for us. God doles equal grace, human nature doles several doubts.

When sacrifice becomes selfish. When people think they are putting something about themselves and how the missing puzzle pieces get jumbled.

This is a book that inspires the reader to look to God. To put aside what we think we deserve in pursuit of a Higher Opinion. Indeed, the much-talked about conclusion to this tale, leaves the careful reader wondering if these actions are really undertaken out of a sense of love---or duty. And, to ruminate on how Christ will fit into the cracks between---the slices unseen---beyond the page.

I actually found this a cautionary tale that inspires readers to think about their relationships intentionally against their own dreams. Is it enough to swap because love and marriage and children seem the right step at a certain point in life? For one character, her early and relatively quick marriage left her unhappy when she was confronted with what she truly wanted after maturing through a few seasons of life.

Is her happiness less than her children's automatically? Or is there a way that had she waited for the right man she could have had both . For there is another character that fits her so wholly and represents a type of sacrifice born of selflessness. It is a sheer genius that pits two main characters against each other while never making them archetypal. Turning tropes on their ears through a funnel of beautiful language and resonant scenes is what makes Petersheim---long known for infusing literary softness into strong inspirational narratives-- the perfect person to dissect this.

This is the most interesting and introspective use of the Ruth story I have ever encountered (and I have paid my fictional dues when it comes to this story). The threads of the story sew up this light, gorgeous tapestry and yet the relationships--not the characters-- are where we find the archetypes.

For right or wrong (I am still ---and this is the power of the book---thinking about this), I cannot decide if I

enjoyed the fact that one character was so greatly lacking while the other was so obviously suited to the heroine. Or, if it was an intentional way of showing how love for children and sense of duty allows us to settle for second best.

We leave the characters without certainty. We wonder if the people we have shared page time with will find solace beyond their doing the right thing. How one trick of providence and circumstance can take us steps back in happiness. How the heroine will ever find true contentment.

But this is not a story about a happy ending on a human scale. This is a story that pleads with us to trust God's voice and we hope--- even as so much happens beyond our visual interaction with what is happening on the page, that He intervenes to make sense of our limited knowledge and our complicated decisions.

Part of me thinks a little more nuance on this level would loan a more complicated reaction when we reach the crux of the story. While the obvious preference of the author for one character then makes the sacrifices to duty and honour for another character all the more startling. And dreams are clung to and lost and I only hope that the second-best dreams that the characters fall back on flourish into something wonderful.

But Ruth-- oh Ruth-- you gave up so much by not taking the time to get to know yourself outside of a relationship. It makes me want to tug Ruth close and say--go learn who you are before you can become a part of a unit... another person cannot make you happy, another person will not fulfill you. Why not learn God's purpose first and then grow with another? (but then we wouldn't have a book)

I only have one tiny little beef with the book that is so beyond superficial it might not even bear mentioning-- but I am mentioning it anyways:

there is no true threshing floor scene in this homage to its Biblical antecedent and I think it might have made for an interesting scene. Also, that's just me being selfish because BOAZ is my jam, yo! ;)

And on that completely rachel-y note, I conclude:
I don't quite know where I stand with this story....

I know where I stand with the book, of course. It is a meditative and deeply moving construction of doubt and grace and hope and loss underscored by all-too-human feelings made deeply human and altogether resplendent due to the insane competence of the author winding the twists and turns of a poetically symbolic tale.

I hope Jolina Petersheim enjoys all of the awards she is going to win.
If this isn't a CT Book of the Year, I will throw jelly bellys

Let's Quote it Up:

"Elam's cabin was an ode to natural beauty and wonder-- and she loved imagining him--large boned, capable Elam--out in the woods or in the cranberry fields, gathering these small treasures and tucking them into his pockets to keep them safe."

"Why do you say such things?"

"I'm not just saying it, Ruth, I know it. Because like him [God], I only see you through love."

"And yet she remembered [his] gift. Her art studio. A room of her own when she didn't have a roof to her name. The thoughtfulness touched her in a way few gifts had, and she knew it was more than a gift to her. It was proof he wanted more than the fulfillment of his dream for a family, but that he also wanted to make her own dreams come true."

"Meanwhile, above them, the moon and stars turned their gazes to the clear black sky"

"Their afternoon shadows touched as they stretched across the land."

"Each medium opened a world to him not confined his tongue"

"Loss -- like anger-- like love---produces reactions corresponding with personality"

Susan says

This book is outstanding in every way! Beautifully written and stunning! Jolina's Petersheim's literary voice is unique. I rode the figurative roller-coaster of emotions as my heart broke for Ruth in this story filled with multiple twists and turns. After the unexpected death of her husband, Ruth seeks refuge with her husband's extended Mennonite family. Ms. Petersheim gives us a story of the journey from grief to healing. Not only is Ruth grieving the loss of her husband, she is also grieving the loss of a broken relationship.

Through a series of journal entries and letters, the broken pieces of the past are slowly revealed. Jolina Petersheim expertly reveals the light of God's love in this story of heartbreak, love, hope and forgiveness. The reader will be challenged by soul-searching. I found myself immediately immersed in Ruth's story. But it was when she learned to forgive, to find hope, that I found the tears flowing.

Faced by a couple of moral dilemmas, I was unsure of how I wanted the story to end. While my heart wanted one ending, I knew another would be better. Please don't peek ahead to the last page, the ending is so much more satisfying if you wait.

Petersheim's books are not a light, feel-good read. You will find yourself challenged, but possibly a better person. I believe the title *How the Light Gets In* can apply to how this light that can be shed on our lives as well. I find I think about Petersheim's stories, her characters and dilemmas, long after the last page has been read. Her stories will remain on my keeper shelf.

I voluntarily reviewed a complimentary copy of this book from the author/publisher. I was not required to write a review. All opinions expressed are my own.

Kari says

I have such mixed feelings about this book. On one hand, it is a beautifully written story about grief and forgiveness. After her husband and father-in-law are killed overseas, Ruth comes to the US to bury them and live with her mother-in-law to try to heal herself and her two daughters. She is able to take the time to reflect on her marriage. She discovers a lot of truths about her marriage to Chandler and is able to reconcile her feelings on it. The characters were compelling, especially the quiet Elam. They were probably my favorite part of the whole book.

What I struggle with is the direction that the author took in the last third of the book. It just didn't sit well with me. Given everything, I'm not sure I would have chosen the same path that Ruth did. It's kind of hard to explain without giving anything away. I guess I felt a little set up. I didn't care for the twist at all. Overall, I would recommend trying this one out. It's one I think you need to judge for yourself.

Susan Peterson says

How the Light Gets In filled my heart with love and hope. This book is beautifully written, emotionally-driven, and unputdownable from the first page to the last. I was completely immersed in Ruth's story, through her grief, her love for her children, her hope for her future. Ruth's journey is heart-wrenching, as she is faced with impossible choices that will hurt the people she loves the most. I read this book through many tears, my heart aching for Ruth, her daughters, and the two men she loves, Elam and Chandler.

Monica says

How the Light Gets In by Jolina Petersheim is my first book by this author--but I hope to read more.

This beautiful story begins when Ruth Neufeld's husband and father-in-law are killed in a bombing overseas. Ruth's mother-in-law invites her to travel to Wisconsin with her and her two daughters to bury their men within the Wisconsin Mennonite Community. Elam Albrecht, her husband's cousin, invites them to stay at his cranberry farm through the harvest.

Ruth's marriage was broken and not doing well before her husband died, but she doesn't feel like she can share those details with anyone. She finds both solace and healing in this new place--and perhaps new love with Elam. But will Ruth get the happy ending she hopes for?

How the Light Gets In is one of the most intriguing novels that I have read lately. Petersheim kept me turning pages quickly and it kept me guessing until the end with some twists and turns. I read the book mostly within a span of two days, in spite of other real-life stuff to do in between. I found the story to not only keep my interest but to inspire me to consider my own marriage. By the end of the book, I was considering how to best reflect God in my life and to better pray for my husband and our marriage. I especially like fiction books that encourage me to live a better life through the story I just read. How the Light Gets In would make a great book for a book club discussion. The author has questions in the back of

the book for a group to use. Of course, I always like to read them for my own personal reflection too.

I received a copy of this book from the author and the publisher. I was not required to write a positive review.

Ticcoa Leister says

First, let me say that this is the first traditional Christian fiction title I've read in years. As a teenager, I devoured every word authors like Francine Rivers, Beverly Lewis, Janette Oke wrote. After college, my thirst for the neat and sweet stories of the Christian fiction genre lessened. Over the last decade, it has dissipated altogether.

I happened upon Jolina Petersheim through a friend's recommendation and decided to give *How the Light Gets In* a shot for old times' sake. After muddling through the first few chapters (which struck me as typical of the genre), I was captivated by the time I turned the page to begin Part 2.

Having finished the last half of the book in one sitting, I find myself writing this review a mere ten minutes after turning the last page and experiencing a whirlwind of emotions. I am shocked, angry, mesmerized, and satisfied. My heart is pounding and my brain fuzzy from the literary whiplash I just experienced.

Any reader who has finished a book with an unexpected ending and simultaneously wanted to shout victoriously and throw the book across the room knows this reaction is the mark of an author's job well done, a testament of skill and mastery of storytelling.

All in all, I am glad I stuck with *How the Light Gets In* and definitely recommend it to Christian fiction readers.

I received an advance copy of this book from the publisher.

Melissa Tagg says

Oh. My. Word.

I haven't had this visceral of a reaction to a final plot twist since reading the last book in Jessica Dotta's *Price of Privilege* series.

And that is all I will say because I don't want to be spoilery. But this book was beautiful in about a hundred ways. The emotional roller coaster was worth every moment and I'll be thinking about it for days and days and days... ?????

Beth says

“But a life well lived wasn’t meant for safety; a life well lived meant flinging your heart into the void.”

I don't know that I've flung my heart anywhere these days. I often feel overwhelmed and completely inadequate for a role that, most of the time, I'm still sure I'm supposed to be in. It's during these times that I tend to read books like I breathe air. Books that give me hope, books that encourage me to do a little heart flinging now and then, even if it's not the grandest gesture, even if it's just a small thing. Jolina Petersheim is one of those few and far between authors that write words that connect with me on a soul-deep level. No matter what the storyline, her words do exactly what I mentioned above – they remind me of life's goodness, they remind me that I'm not alone, and they infuse me with hope.

How the Light Gets In is a contemporary retelling of the story of Ruth. It's not a direct line drawn in every aspect of the story, but the heart of the story is there. In this story, Ruth is widowed, and ends up developing a deep and close relationship with her mother-in-law, Mabel. As Ruth attempts to move on, letters and memories of her time with her husband, Chandler, intersperse with the present day storyline. The picturesque Wisconsin farm, with its cranberry bogs and charming cabins, makes a wonderful back-drop for both Ruth's heart-wrenching plight, but most importantly, her hard-won healing.

I loved the realism within these pages, as well as the secondary characters – Elam, Mabel, little Sophie and Vi, and even Chandler, all flavor this story with emotion and heart. At first the plot ebbs and flows, then escalates, until a powerful reveal left me reeling. I'm honestly still not sure how I feel about it – I've thought about it off and on for the past two days, and sometimes my mind changes each time I think about it. This is a great story to drive conversations, what-ifs, and if-onlys. I think it's the mark of a brilliant writer when the reader is still thinking about and contemplating the story days later. Truly my emotions were all over the place – my heart wanted certain things when my mind said otherwise. The characters touched me that deeply.

How the Light Gets In is a compelling and surprising character-driven story, filled with organic faith and realistic hope. It gently demands that the reader pays attention, that the reader answers Ruth's questions as they resonate within their own hearts. Do yourself a favor and read the author's note; its poignant connection to the story resonated with me deeply.

If you haven't read any of Jolina Petersheim's novels, I highly recommend you pick one of her books up without delay!

I received a complimentary copy of this novel from the publisher - I was not required to post a review, and the view expressed here is my honest opinion.

Anna LeBaron says

I'm a few chapters in and already hooked! I've heard about the plot twist at the end and that readers are left dazed! Can't wait to see how this story unfolds!

My advance copy was given to me by Tyndale House Publisher.

Becky says

Simply Stunning. Those are the first words that come to mind when thinking of *How the Light Gets In*.

Those words are quickly followed by "maddening," "heartbreaking," and "impossibly difficult."

When Ruth's husband Chandler is killed in a bombing in Afghanistan, her mother-in-law Mabel invites her and her young daughters to stay with Mabel's Old Order Mennonite relatives. Adrift in a completely foreign world, Ruth soon comes to appreciate the simple, unconnected-with-the-outside-world life Mabel's relatives lead, and she also forms a friendship and then more with her husband's cousin Elam. With Elam, Ruth feels treasured, and she quickly discovers she wants to build a life with him.

Ruth is faced with heartbreaking decision after heartbreaking decision as she tries to raise her two daughters without Chandler, but with two people she never imagined as a major part of her life in Mabel and Elam, and she also must work through her feelings of anger and abandonment brought on both by Chandler's absence during life and his untimely death. Then there are her feelings for Elam, a gentle, sweet bachelor who adores her and cares for her daughters.

And here's where this review becomes difficult. There are so many twists in this novel that saying any more would be too spoilerish. So I'll just say this: keep reading. When Ruth's life turns upside down, keep reading. When she begins making decisions that have you wanting to scream at her, keep reading. And when your heart is breaking, keep reading, clear to the end. Some readers may not appreciate how the book ends, but I thought it was perfect.

This book would be such a great book club selection: the novel brings up so many questions of right and wrong and "What would I do?" that it would make for wonderful discussion. And I have a feeling that readers will either love or loathe the ending. I fall in the love camp (because I had big feelings about where the story was headed, and I felt it resolved wonderfully), but I could easily see someone hating it. And now I really need one of my friends to read it, so I can talk about all of those big feelings I can't talk about here.

Disclosure of material connection: I received this book from the publisher. I was not required to write a positive review, and the opinions expressed are my own.

Staci says

In typical Jolina Petersheim style, the writing is simply spectacular. Marriage and specifically how one approaches marital strife is the main topic of *How the Light Gets In*.

The characters and setting are well crafted. The novel delivers more than one plot twist. I had to take some time to reflect after finishing the novel to process what I'd just read.

How the Light Gets In is a unique and thought provoking novel by the talented Jolina Petersheim. My gratitude to publisher Tyndale for a complimentary copy of the novel. I was not required to post a review and the opinions expressed are my own.
