WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING . . .

I could not put it down. Katie Schuermann is definitely on to something, with her continuing tale of everyday Lutherans captured by the Gospel and engaging the world around them. If you grew up in a small town, you have definitely known people like this—real people, with real sorrows, real struggles, and a very real Savior!

—Rev. Jon D. Vieker, PhD, Senior Assistant to the President, LCMS

It’s rare that a sequel outshines its predecessor, but Katie Schuermann has accomplished that with *The Choir Immortal*. Katie captures life’s complicated mix of sorrow and joy, grief and hope with the same warm narrative and delightful humor she gave us in *House of Living Stones*. She brings her characters to such life you weep with them in their sorrow, you belly-laugh at their antics, and you share the healing comfort of the sweet promises we have in our Lord Jesus Christ right along with them. Katie invites us to share the ups and downs of life with the people of Zion Lutheran Church, reminding us we are not alone in all we encounter and endure while answering each trial with the sweet truth of God’s Word, grace, and redemption in Christ. A truly edifying delight of a novel.

—Vanessa Rasanen, wife, mom, and writer

*The Choir Immortal* describes the elating heights and sorrowful depths of our experiences in this fallen world with a careful balance of honesty and grace. Drawing from the riches of Lutheran hymnody, Katie Schuermann finds expression for what every congregation and individual Christian has faced. With an unswerving focus on the Gospel of Christ crucified, we’re reminded of the Lord’s promises through every season of grief and joy.

—Tony Oliphant, pastor

Something about Katie Schuermann’s *The Choir Immortal* is very familiar. Anyone who has spent time in the rhythm of a Lutheran parish—a rhythm of sin and forgiveness, heartbreak and comfort, loss and enduring love—will find *The Choir Immortal* a familiar home. It is real sinners in need of the real Jesus, bearing one another’s burdens as Christ bore them all on the cross. As a pastor, fifteen years out of full-time parish ministry, it made me long to return.

—Todd Wilken, host of Issues, Etc.
Retaining the engaging style which captivated *House of Living Stones* readers, *The Choir Immortal* positively sings with Mrs. Schuermann’s sweet and distinctly Christian voice. Each page is liberally strewn with gems to discover—delightful turns of phrase, poignant moments, and archly-made insights by characters facing true challenges in an authentic way. Mrs. Schuermann’s vignettes allow the reader to experience the gamut of human emotion: hilarity, awkwardness, heartbreak, catharsis, and more—oftentimes all on the same page. Once you pick it up, you will not want to put it down, and once you finish it you will immediately want to read it again!

—Heidi Poyer, wife, mother, attorney

Mrs. Schuermann is fantastic at developing characters which engage your imagination, allowing you to share in the lives of the people of Bradbury. These characters feel real, they experience real-life situations, and they fail in their handling of life issues as do we all. This is not sugar-coated storytelling. Life is represented accurately, both the good and the bad. Humor and faith make this book a complete gem. You will want to buy one for all your friends, it is that good!

—Sheryl Eby, wife and mother

Katie Schuermann once again draws the reader into the heart and soul of Zion Lutheran Church. She captures the raw emotions—both high and low—of each character and then delivers to the reader comfort, joy, and peace through hymnody, the Lord’s words, and her own wit and wisdom. And, if one listens carefully when reading a hymn, one can almost hear Schuermann’s sweet, angelic voice singing the hymn, bidding the reader to join her voice with hers.

—Teresa Becker, pastor’s wife and registered nurse

You will laugh and cry with the people of Bradbury as Katie Schuermann weaves a story of real life that you won’t be able to put down. In the most beautiful combination of character development, storytelling, Scripture, poetry, and hymnody, Schuermann acknowledges our own great joys and deep sorrows, pointing us again and again to Christ—His gifts of mercy, hope, and true peace for the choir immortal. Schuermann is a gift to the Body of Christ.

—Julia Habrecht, wife, godmother, Lutheran school headmaster
The Choir Immortal

KATIE SCHUERMANN

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS
For my dad, Bob Roley, who raised me to believe I could do anything, even write a book.
Now let all the heav’ns adore Thee,
Let saints and angels sing before Thee
With harp and cymbals’ clearest tone.
Of one pearl each shining portal,
Where, joining with the choir immortal,
We gather round Thy radiant throne.
No eye has seen the light,
No ear has heard the might
Of Thy glory;
Therefore will we
Eternally
Sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee!

(LSB 516:3)
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Zion Lutheran Church roasted in the late August sunshine like a crock in a convection oven. Ripples of hot, humid air rose from the asphalt parking lot in waves, and Beverly Davis, dressed in her favorite cobalt-blue frock with the embroidered portrait collar, heaved her sticky frame out of her Buick and onto the sweltering pavement. She fanned herself frantically, shaking out her pleated skirt in a desperate attempt to create wind where there was none, but her efforts were to no avail. Beads of sweat sprouted on her powdered forehead and threatened to stream down her temples in erosive rills as she crossed the black, oily expanse and entered the church office door. Irv, her husband and Zion’s faithful trustee, was waiting for her there.

“Here,” Bev panted, shoving a metal tool into his hand while dabbing at her face with a clean hankie. “I found it in the shed like you said. It was hiding under those bags of fertilizer we bought on sale last week at Big R.”

Irv simply nodded his thanks before quickly disappearing down the hall with his adjustable wrench. The stoic man had never been one to waste words, and the present crisis called for
all brevity and efficiency. In less than one hour, Zion was host-
ing Bradbury’s wedding of the century, and the church’s air con-
ditioning was a bust.

It was an ecclesiastical comedy of errors, really. Irv had been
urging the congregation for years to replace the five rusting
air-conditioning units currently baking on a concrete slab out-
side the fellowship hall, but his advice went unheeded. As Don
Kull had put it at last March’s voters’ meeting, “I don’t see no
good reason to fix what ain’t broke.”

Irv had shrugged at the time, mumbling something like
“They’re on their ninth life, that’s all,” but he didn’t push the
matter any further. He wasn’t much for speaking in public, let
alone arguing.

Some of the voters in attendance, however, rarely turned
down an opportunity to speak.

Candice Bradbury stood before the gathered assembly like
Eris on Mount Olympus condescending to address the lowly
humans below. “If there’s a concern about longevity, we should
protect our investment by working the units less. I move we run
the air only on Sundays, when the majority of the congregation
is present, and let the church staff enjoy the residual air the rest
of the week.”

Mrs. Arlene Scheinberg, Zion’s crusty secretary of thirty-
seven years and exactly one-half of the church staff who would
be enjoying the proposed weekly leftovers, proceeded to turn the
office thermostat down an extra three degrees every Monday
through Friday for the entire month of June—in commemora-
tion of Candice’s thoughtful benevolence, of course.

The situation worsened when two of the units began leak-
ing refrigerant in early July.
“Seems ta me we could jus’ patch ’em up with some duct tape,” Don Kull suggested to his fellow members on the Board of Trustees.

“The copper tubing’s damaged,” Irv explained. “Needs to be soldered or replaced.”

“Well, then,” Harold Schmidt sighed, doing his best to appear put out by the notion, “I guess we’d better get to it.” Secretly, the retired appliance salesman was beyond pleased. He had a high-temperature torch sitting in his garage, waiting for an opportunity such as this.

Pastor Fletcher quickly intervened, both for Irv’s sake as well as for that of the seventy-three-year-old stained glass windows rising above the fellowship hall. “How about we hire a technician for this job?”

Harold grunted and Don shrugged, but Irv gave his pastor a grateful nod.

When a fan on one of the units gave out exactly two weeks before the wedding, heat began to rise among the ladies in the quilting circle.

“I’m telling you, it’s only a matter of time,” Mrs. Scheinberg ruminated aloud to the other quilters one Tuesday morning in August. “Those units need replacing.”

“I simply don’t agree, Arlene,” Candice quipped, setting down her needle to adjust the amethyst brooch pinned to her lavender top. She fingered it reverently as if it were a medal of honor and not her latest purchase from lia sophia. “Four of the units are still working perfectly fine.”

“Candice makes a good point,” said Nettie Schmidt, Harold’s sweet-natured but rather dim-witted bride of fifty-two years, nodding from her corner of the quilt. “It’s like that time I bought a turkey breast at full price at IGA when I already had
cube steak thawing in the fridge. Harold nearly got sick from eating both for supper.”

“Why didn’t you just—?” Bev began to ask, but Mrs. Scheinberg laid a silencing hand on Bev’s arm and shook her head. The church secretary had learned years ago not to follow the pied piper—however tempting his tune—through the meandering maze of Nettie’s mind. That’s how people got lost.

Candice, on the other hand, hummed an affirmative as if Nettie’s carnivorous comparison had made perfect sense. “All I’m saying is that it’s offensive. We shouldn’t be spending money on something so opulent as replacing working air-conditioning units when there are children starving in Africa.”

Mrs. Scheinberg snorted. “So says the woman flashing costume jewelry while sitting comfortably in seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit.” She lifted her wattled chin, ruffled her feathers, and clucked at the purple peacock splaying her colors across the quilt. “Wait until it feels as hot as Africa in here, and then we’ll see who thinks good stewardship is opulent and offensive.”

Mrs. Scheinberg, it turned out, had not been too far off from the truth in her prediction that morning with the quilters, for it really did feel like the Congo in the church the afternoon of the wedding. Bev patted at her face, nervous that all of her foundation would be wiped clean away before the ceremony even started. Not that it mattered. It was the bride everyone would be looking at—and oh, what a sweet bride! How she had blushed a pretty pink when the women of the congregation had offered to throw her a wedding reception.

“Now, please, don’t go to any trouble,” she had pleaded. “All I want is a simple ceremony.”

Simple, however, was not a word the women of Zion understood. Marge Johnson proceeded to make exquisite invitations
by hand, using pressed, dried flowers from her own garden; Phyllis Bingley worked all of June and July quilting individual coasters for wedding favors; the Koelster sisters promised biscuits from scratch and fried chicken for the meal; and Candice, not to be outdone, baked and frosted fourteen fluffy, white twinkie cakes for the dessert.

Even Yvonne Roe, Zion’s disapproving misanthrope, descended from her castle to offer to sew the bridal gown.

“What color should I make it? She’s not exactly a virgin, you know.”

Bev had colored five different shades of red at Yvonne’s brash assertion, but Mrs. Scheinberg simply poured a look of hot contempt over her gold-rimmed glasses onto the wrinkled, priggish woman.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Yvonne. She’s a widow, not a whore. It’s not her fault her husband up and died on her.” Mrs. Scheinberg knew about such things. Her own husband had up and died nearly forty-one years before in a farming accident.

“The dress will be white.” This final directive came from Rebecca Jones, a pretty, spirited mother of five, counting the one currently growing in her womb. She also happened to be the matron of honor for the wedding. “We already picked out the dress last weekend in Fairview Heights. So, thank you, Yvonne, but no thanks.”

“Well, call me when your own dress needs letting out.” Yvonne eyed Rebecca’s expanding abdomen meaningfully. “I can’t stand the way women flaunt their pregnancies in tight clothes these days. It’s indecent.”

Rebecca, who stood to be a full eight months pregnant the day of the wedding, fought against hormones, human nature, and the powers of hell to offer the sour woman even one civilized word, but charity turned out to be too tall an order for the
moment. The expectant mother simply bit her lip and turned, red-faced, away.

In the beginning, Bev had felt left out of the wedding planning festivities. She had no special skills to offer the creative team, and Sunday after Sunday, everyone chattered and exchanged ideas around her as if she weren’t there. But when three of the five air-conditioning units blew out the morning of the wedding, it was Bev who sprang into action. She knew her way around a pressure cooker, after all: keep the steam regulating properly and watch the clock. She cheerfully corralled the bridal party safely across the street to the parsonage to keep cool, fresh, and dry while Irv performed mechanical surgery on the busted units. Then, braving the heat, she returned to the stuffy church to look in on things while everyone else was away. She busied herself with centerpieces and mints and napkins in the fellowship hall, touching up an arrangement here and patting down a tablecloth there, fussing over every little detail like the good Lutheran girl she was. She wanted everything to be just perfect. Zion was her church, after all. She had been baptized, confirmed, and married here, and, as she was not one to leave any project unfinished, she fully intended to be buried here. If this wedding didn’t come off as a complete success, she would feel personally responsible.

Having fetched Irv his trusted wrench, there was now nothing left for Bev to do but wait and pray for cool air to once again rush through those eerily silent vents. It was so blasted hot! She dabbed at her face one last time before tucking her soiled hankie into her purse and walking resolutely over to the cherry-wood desk sitting in the middle of the front office. She switched on the tiny oscillating fan clipped to its edge. Normally, she would never dare lay a finger on anything sitting within five yards of Arlene Scheinberg’s sacred surface—the crotchety wom-
Chapter One: The Big Day

an could be touchy about such things—but the heat was making fast work of Bev’s carefully painted visage. One more minute in this stagnant air and what little remained of her makeup would slide down her face in a pink-and-blue avalanche. She threw all caution to the electric-powered wind and leaned her face into the delicious breeze.

“That’s more like it,” Bev breathed. She tossed a daring, side-long glance toward the darkened hallway through which her husband had disappeared. Not a single soul was in sight, so she lifted the edge of her skirt over the fan to dry out her intimates.

“Beverly Davis, what on earth are you doing?”

Bev jumped at the sound of the familiar voice, her hem catching on the plastic casing of the fan and ripping its precarious grip right off the desk. The fan crashed, still oscillating, onto the floor, and Bev bent over as quickly as her one hundred ninety-five pounds would allow to power off the contraption and secure it back onto the desk’s edge. She patted the silenced fan meekly before turning around to face her accuser.

There, frowning like an orangutan in a lemon sherbet-colored muumuu, stood Mrs. Scheinberg, one husky hip propped against the outside door while the other supported a box of folded bulletins.

Bev cleared her throat apologetically. “I-I was just trying to keep fresh.”

“By flashing my stapler?” Mrs. Scheinberg waddled on into the office, letting the outside door close behind her.

“The air conditioning’s down.”

“Of course it is. Those units needed replacing five years ago.” Mrs. Scheinberg sighed contemptuously and dropped the heavy box onto the seat of her mid-back leather chair. She then bent over to remove a can of Lysol from the bottom drawer of
her desk. “You do realize, don’t you, that this is how certain
diseases spread?”

Mrs. Scheinberg proceeded to generously spray the can’s
contents over the surface of her desk, hovering a few seconds
longer over the violated fan.

Bev was naturally too genial and happy a woman to be more
than mildly shamed by Mrs. Scheinberg’s scorn. Besides, a much
greater concern was pressing upon her conscience. “Oh, Arlene,
what are we going to do? It’s too hot in here for a beach party
let alone a wedding. Irv’s working as fast as he can, but Don
Kull borrowed the toolbox from the janitor’s closet last month
so I had to go home to fetch Irv a wrench and then I couldn’t
find it. Well, I did find it, but not where I thought. Thank God
we bought those cell phones last year! Those things really are
amazing. Did you know we can call each other for free from
anywhere in the country, even Canada? Not that we’ll ever get
to Canada, but still. It’s amazing what technology can do these
days. Anyway, all I had to do was call Irv, and he walked me
through. . . .”

Mrs. Scheinberg sighed. After forty-five years of friendship,
she was used to Bev’s roving rambles, but in this wretched heat,
even her patience was tried.

“Why is it so hot in here?” a prissy voice interrupted.

Bev and Mrs. Scheinberg turned around to find Candice
Bradbury glaring from just inside the office’s front door. The
self-proclaimed first lady of Bradbury was wearing a purple
crêpe blouse, a white linen skirt, and two large, white garde-
nias pinned to her right shoulder. Apparently, the bride’s deci-
sion not to order special flowers for the occasion hadn’t kept
Candice from ordering her own.
“The heat?” Candice insisted again, looking like a bobble-head figurine with her sand-colored wig bouncing from side to side in search of the sultry air’s source.

“The air conditioning’s broken,” Bev explained.

“What?” Candice’s eyes grew large, her pencil-drawn eyebrows pushing up into her forehead in an unattractive way.

“Broken? For how long?”

“Since eleven.”

“My cakes!” Candice immediately threw her abundant frame across the office and down the hall, griping the entire way. “Why did no one tell me? I brought the cakes in this morning and set them out on the table already. The temperature was perfect then, but the cream’ll melt in this heat! Why does no one think of these things? Seriously, is it too much to ask that the church staff think, for once?”

Bev, who was scurrying after Candice, bowed her head like a penitent servant, though she had no reason to feel guilty. She was not church staff. Mrs. Scheinberg, however, following at a much more leisurely pace, rolled her eyes. If meteors fell from the sky, crashed through the fellowship hall roof, and landed directly on the cake table, Candice would find a way to blame it on the church staff.

“Oh, noooo!” Candice wailed as she entered the fellowship hall, loping like a tented elephant in her purple blouse. There, arranged in the shape of a melting heart on a circular table in the northwest corner of the room, were fourteen magnificent, three-layer twinkie cakes whose top two layers were slipping and sliding off their bases under their plastic-wrap covers.

Bev felt a sharp pang of regret. In all of her running around, she had never thought to refrigerate the cakes. They had looked fine before she’d left to run Irv’s errand, but then, that had
been almost an hour ago. “Now, Candice. It’s not too bad,” she soothed.

“Of course it is!” Candice snapped, looking as if she were about to burst into tears. “This is a disaster!”

“One that could have been prevented,” Mrs. Scheinberg tut-tutted, a tiny but powerful glint of victory twinkling in her eye.

“We’ll simply slide the top layers back into place and anchor them with some toothpicks,” Bev suggested.

“Don’t you dare touch my cakes!” Candice spat, holding out her right arm as if to guard her confections from a terrorist.

“Candice, be reasonable.” Mrs. Scheinberg had little patience for Candice’s foolish antics, but she was also cool in a crisis. “You need some help. Now, you do the sliding and arranging, I’ll do the anchoring, and Bev can move them to the refrigerator. They’ll firm up in no time.”

Candice really did start crying. “I’ve never had holes in my cakes before.”

“Maybe you’ll find that you like them that way,” Bev cheered. “Remember the time Dr. Duke’s chicken breasts turned blue and green from the colored toothpicks she used for her tea party? She was pretty upset about it at the time, but we all laugh about it now. Mistakes can be kind of fun, see? At least, they make good stories afterward. Why, I don’t think I ever told you about the time IGA was out of green bell peppers last summer, and I picked up one of those Hatch peppers instead. ‘They’re both green,’ I thought to myself. Well, they’re not the same, let me tell you. You should’ve heard Irv’s stomach—”

“C’mon, now,” Mrs. Scheinberg interrupted, moving toward the kitchen in search of toothpicks. “The wedding’s in forty minutes. Let’s get these cakes in the fridge before the guests arrive.”

“I wanted everything to be perfect,” Candice whimpered.
“So did the Pharisees, and look where that got them.” Mrs. Scheinberg, with all of her confidence and wit, sometimes failed in the area of consolation.

The Koelster sisters arrived just then, pushing a cart laden with insulated food containers into the kitchen through the outside door.

“Good gracious!” Janet Koelster hollered, hefting a big tub of fried chicken onto the kitchen counter and waving a hand frantically at her neck. “Am I having a hot flash or did someone leave the ovens on overnight again?”

“Neither,” Bev said, walking into the kitchen to assist with the unloading. “Air conditioning’s down.”

“Lord, have mercy. It’s got to be over a hundred out there, and it’s not much cooler in here. What a misery! Oh, well.” Janet was never one to dwell on that which couldn’t be helped. She clapped her hands decisively. “I hate to be the one to toll the bell of doom, ladies, but we’ve got to crank these ovens for a bit. Dot and I promised biscuits for the wedding.”

Dorothy Koelster, who was currently swooning under the weight of a stainless steel bowl of biscuit dough, moaned softly from the kitchen doorway.

“Oh, here, honey,” Janet cooed, taking the bowl from her sister’s arms and motioning for Bev to bring a chair into the kitchen. “Sit down, now. That’s it. Easy does it. Heat always makes it worse, doesn’t it?”

Mrs. Scheinberg shook her head, baffled. How a woman with vertigo managed to work in a hot kitchen her entire life and never once fall face-first into a pan of hot grease was beyond her. “C’mon, Candice, the cakes aren’t getting any cooler. And Bev, after you help us get the cakes into the fridge, I need you to set out the bulletins in the narthex. Guests’ll be arriving any minute.”
“Oh, ladies! Ladies!” Nettie Schmidt called, bustling into the fellowship hall and waving her hands before her face like sparklers on the Fourth of July. Her eyes were wide with child-like excitement. “She’s here! She’s here!”