

Hometown Hero

by JACKIE SHECKLER FINCH
Photos by Dale Pickett

Hometown Humorist

Philip Gulley never set out to be a writer. In fact, he got a D in English composition in college. "I only passed the course with a D because I promised my professor I would never write again," Gulley admits.

But, years later as a Quaker minister, Gulley began writing short essays for his church bulletin. Through a happy twist of fate, those essays were passed along to famed radio broadcaster Paul Harvey whose son visited Gulley's church and was placed on the newsletter mailing list. Harvey spread the "rest of the story" of the writing minister and changed the course of Gulley's life.

Now the 42-year-old writer from Danville, Ind., (pop. 4,902) has devoted readers who have fallen in love with his make-believe Harmony, a charming small town whose poignant stories and folksy characters are recounted in a half dozen books published since 1997. His titles include *Front Porch Tales*, *Home Town Tales*, *Home to Harmony*, *Just Shy of Harmony*, *Christmas in Harmony*, and *Signs and Wonders: A Harmony Novel*.

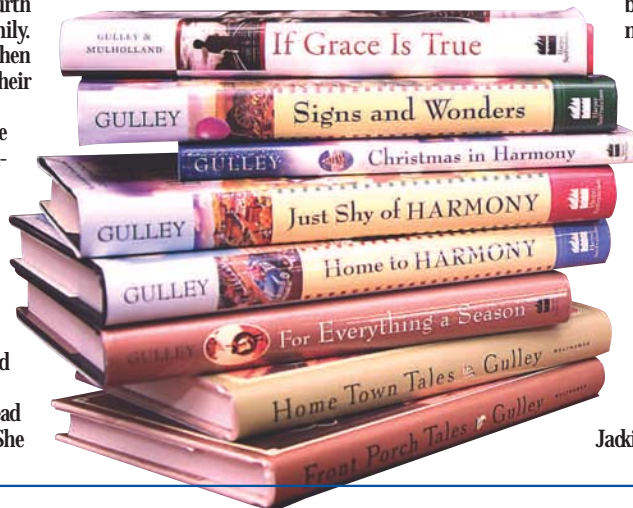
"I get a lot of letters from people who say, 'I grew up in the town you write about and wish I could live there again,'" says Gulley, who has been called Indiana's Garrison Keillor. "The town of Harmony seems so real to me that I feel like I can walk down the street and see the people I write about. It's hard for me to think of them as fictional characters. I keep expecting to see them any day now."

He got the name for his imaginary town from the Bible. "I was reading one day in the Bible and came across the verse, 'I desire therefore that you live in harmony with one another.' That seemed like such a good name for a place like where I grew up."

Gulley grew up in Danville, the fourth of five children in a strong Catholic family. He became a Quaker as a teenager when neighbors invited him to attend their Quaker church youth group.

Drawing on composites of people he has known, Gulley has created unforgettable Harmony characters such as minister and book narrator Sam Gardner. Like Gulley, Sam returns to his hometown when he is offered a job after the town's Quaker pastor dies in an accident. "Both his parents had died of heart problems, which he feared would happen to him, so he'd begun to jog and was hit by a truck."

Then there's Miriam Hodge, head elder of the town's Quaker meeting. "She



Author and minister Philip Gulley pens humorous tales from his home in Danville, Ind.

is patterned after a lady in my first church," Gulley says. With a heart of gold, Miriam nevertheless seems to find herself in some embarrassing situations. In one tale, the ladies of the Quaker meeting decide to make a quilt as a fund-raising project. All goes well until they hang the quilt in the meetinghouse and the sun hits it. Suddenly, the face of Jesus appears on the illuminated quilt. Folks begin flocking to see the holy fabric and Miriam knows she must confess a secret to her minister—she spilled coffee on the quilt, creating a stain that resembles the face of Jesus. "That's not the Lord we've been seeing," Miriam admits. "That's Maxwell House."

Readers sometimes ask how Gulley makes up the names of his characters. "I don't make them up," Gulley says. "They are real names. The Quakers have a directory of members so I just open it up, put my finger on one name for a last name. Then I skip a few pages and put my finger on a name for a first name."

In the end, all seems to turn out right in Harmony. "People always think small towns are boring," Gulley concludes. "But, to me, small towns are fascinating. You can find opportunities for relationships in a small town unlike anywhere else on Earth." ☆

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