



Two Steps Forward: A Story of Persevering in Hope

Sharon Garlough Brown

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Four friends continue to learn lessons of faith even after their spiritual retreat has ended.

In her sequel to *Sensible Shoes*, Sharon Garlough Brown sends her four protagonists out to walk the walk they learned together during their spiritual retreat. *Two Steps Forward* picks up just after the retreat, chronicling their rocky path of returning to their normal lives.

Meg, Mara, Hannah, and Charissa formed a special bond of friendship at their retreat, but now it's back to reality. Meg has planned a trip to England to visit her eighteen-year-old daughter for Christmas and to have a talk she has put off for a long time. Mara is struggling with a verbally abusive husband. Hannah is taking a long-needed rest from ministry, forcing herself to tend to her own needs rather than everyone else's. Charissa is working furiously on finishing her graduate studies—and experiencing a pregnancy that her husband seems to want more than she does.

Brown smoothly places readers inside the life of each one of these women, switching perspective with each chapter. Their stories are intimate. Though they're feeling good about their journey in growing closer to the Lord, conflict is introduced early, though gently. And you're not at all behind if you haven't read the first book.

The season of Advent and its theme of anticipation provides the backdrop for the continued lessons these four friends must learn. Brown emphasizes the idea of Christ being born into a messy world, and these are certainly messy lives. Mara, for instance, has believed at a subconscious level that a life of abuse is normal. "It's like I know I live in a cave," she says, "but I've lived in it for so long that I've got it decorated the way I like, and it's comfortable."

The fact that this Christian book is not full of whitewashed characters is particularly appealing. As in the Bible itself, there are plenty of flawed people here. Sometimes, Brown lovingly shows, God doesn't clean up the messes of life. Sometimes he calms the storm, but sometimes he just calms his child.

BILLIE RAE BATES (Winter 2016)

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