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A man to love, a story to tell

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He's written many books. Now it's her turn.

Macel Falwell, wife of the late Dr. Jerry Falwell, will release her first book on May 15, the one-year anniversary of her husband's death.

"Jerry Falwell: His Life and Legacy," published by Howard Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, begins with a dinner date the day before Jerry Falwell's death. The story is a flashback to Macel Falwell's life with the man she knew as a devoted husband, father and pastor.

"As Jerry watched emotions flicker across my face," she writes, "I reflected over our life together and marveled. It had been quite a ride — not at all what I'd envisioned when I'd married the skinny young man who founded Thomas Road Baptist Church."

Unlike other books about him and by him, this one is more personal, says son Jonathan, now pastor at TRBC.

"While everybody thinks they know Jerry Falwell and everybody thinks they know the story of his life, they don't know this story, because this story has never been told," he said. "There are a million books about Dad, but no one has ever done this because no one has ever known these things."

Sprinkled with humorous and endearing moments, the book tells of Jerry Falwell's roots, from being born the son of a bootlegger to pulling a prank in high school that cost him the spot as valedictorian, to accepting Christ as an 18-year-old boy, committing himself to the ministry and meeting his daily goal of knocking on 100 doors, to founding Thomas Road Baptist Church and Liberty University. It tells of Macel's strict upbringing in a Christian home. It tells of how the unlikely couple met, fell in love, married and raised a family — with some surprises in between. Like Macel's first failed attempt at cooking a turkey — giblets and all — and the story of how Jerry was not the first man to place an engagement ring on Macel's finger. It tells of Macel's

Christmas gift to Jerry that brought him to tears and of a beach vacation where the timid Macel bungee jumped in front of her shocked family.

As fun to read as these stories are, there are serious ones too, including the car crash Jerry was involved in with a black friend of his, one of his first brushes with the hatred of racism (Jerry lay in the hospital receiving star treatment when his friend was pushed aside). Then there were the bomb threats and death threats his family received and a kidnapping plot revealed while he was leader of the Moral Majority.

The book also includes chapters on Jerry's dealings with key leaders in politics, the media and Christianity — including Ronald Reagan, Larry Flynt and Jim Bakker.

But the first-time author said her favorite parts are the family memories, where she saw her husband in his most steadfast role.

Like the time Jerry was mistakenly scheduled to speak at a convention out of town on his son Jonathan's birthday. Missing birthdays was something Jerry did not do. He told his son he would give him the honorarium he made from the talk, to spend as he wished, or he could cancel and spend the day with his son. Jonathan chose the latter and one phone call later it was a done deal.

It was actually Jonathan, currently working on publishing two books of his own, who orchestrated his mother's book contract. Several months after his father's funeral, Macel said Jonathan surprised her with the project.

"He had already arranged it, what we were going to do and everything," she said. "I thought, 'I just can't believe this' ... I was shocked that he had done it."

But it was something she had always wanted to do.

"I'm glad that it's finally done because I wanted to do it, but I was scared to do it," she said. "People had told me, 'You ought to do it' and I thought, 'That's something I can't do.' Jerry even one time told me, 'It would be nice if you'd write a book.'"

Macel said it was not as challenging as she had thought.

"We had a lot of people interviewed, the ones that are close to Jerry, so that made that easy," she said.

Until now, she hadn't talked to anyone about her book. She admits she isn't the type of person to bare her soul.

"I haven't been open with people; I've always just kept everything in. Sometimes I think, 'Maybe I shouldn't have done that; maybe I shouldn't have told them that.'"

But she understands it's a story that will be treasured. And though it tells the story of two people from different backgrounds who met together in life, love and ministry, she said it is mostly a testimony of God at work.

In the chapter, "Jesus, Jerry and Me," she writes: "So you see, our story is not relevant because of who we were, for we were polar opposites, ordinary people with ordinary weaknesses, whose lives intersected with Jesus. Our story is relevant only because it reveals what God can do with two ordinary, if unlikely, people who dare to say Yes to Him."