

"Side-splitting, utterly relatable . . . nothing short of a delight."

REE DRUMMOND, aka The Pioneer Woman

Sparkly Green Earrings



Catching the light at every turn

- a memoir -

Melanie Shankle

author of the Big Mama blog

I love Melanie Shankle. She is a beautiful conglomeration of so many things I appreciate, and each of them is obvious in these pages. She's profoundly insightful, witty, relatable, wide open, and passionate about Jesus. She likes people, and I like that in a person. In this book, Melanie lives her life with us and invites us to live our lives with her. Relish this ride, sister! You won't be sorry you took it.

BETH MOORE

New York Times bestselling author and Bible study teacher

In her memoir, Melanie uses an irresistible combination of dab-the-corner-of-your-eye emotion and laugh-so-loud-you-scare-the-cat humor. Every chapter of *Sparkly Green Earrings*—actually, every page—is a splendid journey through sudden, side-splitting laughter and utterly relatable tears . . . and back to laughter again. She captures every fear, crazy notion, nervous breakdown, and desperate moment of new motherhood so expertly and hilariously that I actually wondered if she'd tapped into my memory of having my first child. And all throughout the book, as Caroline grows and starts school (and has a very short stint in Brownies), Melanie establishes just how much her faith has guided and propelled her through this miraculous privilege known as motherhood. Her memoir is nothing short of a delight.

REE DRUMMOND

New York Times bestselling author of *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*

What happens when you read a book that's one part *Blue Like Jazz*, one part Anita Renfroe, and two parts Big Mama? You laugh too loud, nod till your neck hurts, and throw your hands up with a relieved *yes!* Simply put: I love Melanie Shankle, and every page of this book shimmers with her fabulous voice, honest hilarity, and the light of a Savior that makes even the wackiest, hardest days of motherhood somehow glimmer with something grand. *Sparkly Green Earrings*—the perfect accessory to be dazzled by grace and more than a glint of God.

ANN VOSKAMP

New York Times bestselling author of the *One Thousand Gifts*

Melanie's writing is insightful, hilarious, and full of encouragement for the journey. *Sparkly Green Earrings* is refreshment for the soul. For all the reasons thousands of people love her blog, you will be smitten with her book. Mostly because you will fall in love with Melanie through its pages, and more important, with the God she serves.

KELLY MINTER

Bible study author, writer, and speaker

Melanie has the rare gift of making you embarrass yourself laughing while considering the deeper undertones of each story. I don't know a mama who would say that parenting is exactly what she thought it would be all the time. It's a delicate dance we do, this balancing of the ordinary and the holy, and often we get it wrong. The ability to pull the humanity out and examine it in the wake of what really matters is not an easy task, but it's one Melanie has done exquisitely. As writers, we pray our words string together in a way that connects our flesh to the Storyteller, and I'm so honored to have my endorsement on a book that does that as well as this one does. I dare you to read it without laughing, without seeing your own life embedded in its corners. You're in for a journey with a beautiful woman who, in my estimation, has a lot more light catching to do around a million more turns. Her wit, humility, and true writing ability will make you want to chase her as she goes.

ANGIE SMITH

Author of *I Will Carry You* and *What Women Fear*



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Sparkly Green, Earrings

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Melanie Shankle



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The Book of Dreams



OKAY. Y'ALL. APPARENTLY the hardest part of writing a book is figuring out where to begin. It's certainly not that I haven't always wanted to write a book, because I have. I've wanted to write a book ever since I read *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself* by Judy Blume in the fifth grade. Say what you want about *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, but I have always been partial to Sally J.

And so my love of the written word compelled me to start a blog almost five years ago, when my daughter, Caroline, was not quite three years old. I knew I should document her childhood, and I also knew there was no way that was going to happen in any sort of scrapbook form unless I paid someone to do it for me because all those different papers and scissors and stickers totally freak me out. I have way too many perfectionistic tendencies to take on something that requires all that cutting and pasting.

In a shortsighted turn of events, I christened the blog Big Mama. I say shortsighted because there are now times when I'm

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out in public and someone will recognize me and call out, “BIG MAMA!” And then everyone in Starbucks will turn around to see if Martin Lawrence is there.

But the name Big Mama seemed appropriate at the time because that’s what Caroline called me in those days. We were in that mode of getting rid of the pacifier my mother-in-law said she never should have had in the first place and learning to use the potty like a BIG GIRL, and Caroline decided there was no higher compliment that could be given than BIG. And so I became Big Mama.

Just like I’d always dreamed.

And that’s the thing about motherhood. It’s not like anything you imagine when you’re eight years old and playing with your baby dolls and dreaming of the day you will have five children and name them Candy, Andy, Randy, Sandy, and Mandy. Or was that just me?

Why did I think it was a good idea to have children with rhyming names? More important, why did I think I’d ever survive five children? Probably because my only experience involved dressing up plastic dolls with synthetic hair that never talked back or had the kind of explosive diarrhea that ruined six outfits in four hours. Except that one time Baby Alive pooped a big piece of mold on me.

Real motherhood is different. It’s better and it’s messier and it’s more complicated. It will break your heart and make you laugh harder than you ever imagined. You find yourself alternating between feeling like your friends talked you into some sort of pyramid scheme so you could share in their misery and thinking this is the most fulfilling thing you’ve ever done in your life.

And it makes you realize that if you really love your children, then you probably shouldn't give them all names that rhyme.



The other night, long after I'd tucked Caroline into bed, I went back into her room to check on her and, truthfully, to watch her sleep. I'll never get tired of seeing the way she curls her hand up by her face and the way her lips relax and the way her long eyelashes rest on her cheeks while she sleeps. Not to mention it's one of the few times in the day when she's not arguing with me about the color of the sky or asking me to help her dig a hole in the backyard.

Lying next to her was a stack of papers filled with her drawings. There was a page entitled "Clothes I Want to Wear," complete with illustrations. From all appearances it looks like she has big plans to don a lot of muumuus with giant shoes. I've always wanted a daughter with ambitions to dress like a modern-day Mrs. Roper from *Three's Company*. And there was a page called "Places I Want to Live," with the subtitle "Beverly Hills." The accompanying sketch featured her walking down a palm-tree-lined sidewalk with a Chihuahua. I hold Jamie Lee Curtis and a cast of Prada-wearing, talking dogs directly responsible for that dream.

As I looked through all the pages, I appreciated the insight it gave me into her little mind. Sometimes the days get so busy that I miss these things. Then, as I stacked the papers to put them on her nightstand, I saw a title page that read, "Caroline's Book of Dreams."

There's no way she can know that some of the best dreams

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she'll live are the ones she can't even imagine right now. The dreams that God has planted in her heart that she hasn't uncovered yet. Even though wearing a muumuu and walking a Chihuahua in Beverly Hills aren't necessarily bad ambitions.

Over the years, people began to tell me I should write a book. And I really wanted to. Except for the whole part that actually required me to sit down and write. But then I decided, how could eleven people and my dad be wrong?

So I'm writing this book. This is my Book of Dreams. The ones that came true and the ones that didn't, the ones that make me laugh and the ones that make me cry. Almost none of them involve wearing a muumuu, but all of them involve being a mother.



CHAPTER 1

Death, Taxes, & Motherhood

I ALWAYS ASSUMED I'd have a child someday. Like death and taxes and Barbara Walters, it seemed like an inevitable part of life. But I can't remember the exact moment Perry and I decided it was time for us to bring our own little person into the world.

However, I can guarantee we didn't put nearly as much thought into it as we probably should have. I mean, it's a person we're talking about. We were making the decision to create and then raise a human being. Which is much different than a dog, despite all those well-meaning people who compare their experience of raising a puppy to having a baby.

And, by the way, I was that person. It makes me want to go back in time and gouge out my own eyes when I think of how many times I compared my best friend Gully's stories of sleepless nights with her newborn son to my own harrowing tales

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of getting out of bed to let our puppy, Scout, outside to go to the bathroom.

Yes, that's the same.

Idiot.

I think Perry and I both had the same perception of parenthood—something along the lines of “How hard can this be? After all, we've raised a puppy.” Which is probably the same thing Cujo's owner thought. And we all know how that turned out.

But if I really think hard (which is something I try not to do very often), I'd say the whole baby thing began as Perry and I drove home from a beach vacation one day in June 2001. We'd just spent three glorious days at the beach, fishing and reading and doing whatever other relaxing pastimes we used to do prior to becoming parents. I'd give you all the details, but this isn't that kind of book.

We had the windows down and the Beastie Boys turned up loud. (Don't judge. Beach vacations mean the Beastie Boys to me. It's who I am. A child of the eighties. You've got to fight for your right to party.) We were a couple of tanned, relaxed fools listening to bad rap music.

Then my cell phone rang. I turned down the music and flipped open my phone. Because this was back in the days of yore when phones still flipped open and were incapable of telling you how well you slept the night before or what you needed to buy at the grocery store or how many steps you took that day.

(I read somewhere about a guy whose wife whispered, “Mark of the beast, mark of the beast,” every time he used his iPhone to get directions and it was able to pinpoint his exact location.)

(Don't think about that too long or it will freak you out.)

Anyway, I opened my phone, and Gulley greeted me with, “I’m pregnant!”

Immediately I felt tears sting my eyes. My heart did some kind of weird flip that on second thought may have actually been my arteries hardening up, courtesy of my steady vacation diet of various forms of processed snack foods.

I wasn’t shocked to hear she was pregnant. After all, I’d been with her the week before and watched her devour an entire plate of triple-cheese enchiladas, which totally aroused my suspicions. That day she’d said it was too soon to know for sure if she was pregnant but admitted it was a possibility.

Three-cheese enchiladas plus a bowl of queso seemed to indicate there was a good chance a baby was looking for some calcium to build strong bones and some fat to build chubby, edible baby thighs.

I was right. She was pregnant, and I couldn’t have been happier for her. But in my happiness there was this twinge of loneliness or sadness or some other emotion that I couldn’t nail down. I mean, this was Gulley. My very best friend in the entire world. The person I’d shared a ten-by-ten room with all during college. The person who has loved me through all my ups and downs, who has seen me laugh the hardest and cry the most and encouraged me in everything from my faith in God to getting my bangs cut. The person who has known me since we believed there was no finer outfit in the world than a pair of plaid walking shorts with a denim shirt and some loafers. Worn with socks.

We’ve been together since the days we’d nail a beach towel over the window so we could nap all day before going out all

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night. College: it really is where idiots are born. Or at least where they thrive.

Now I was afraid she was moving on to exciting new things without me. We'd managed to get married within a month of each other. Probably because God knew we'd each need the other one to talk about all the things we didn't know about marriage, such as HUSBANDS EXPECT DINNER. But now she was headed toward full-on adulthood in the form of becoming someone's mother. She was moving on to things like wearing jeans that went all the way past her belly button and discussing the merits of different types of fruit snacks for school lunches.

(Considering that was my perception of motherhood, it should come as no surprise that it took me five years of marriage to even consider it.)

(Having a dog doesn't require any of those things.)

(Although Scout will eat a fruit snack, if the opportunity arises.)

I hung up my phone, looked at Perry, and announced, "Gulley's pregnant." He took his eyes off the road and glanced over at me, and I watched the color drain from his face. "You want one, don't you?" he said.

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. Maybe. I don't know," I answered. Which was all a total lie. The truth was I had thought about it. I'd thought about it a lot, and I knew I wanted a baby. Most likely a bunch of them. I may have even had a list of baby names prepared. I was ready to move on to the next phase in our lives.

My eyes must have conveyed my real answer because all of a

sudden he said, “I feel like I’m going to throw up. I may need to pull over and throw up.”

What can I say? I married romance.

It’s safe to assume that the last hour of our trip was much quieter than the previous stretch as we tried to ignore the enormous elephant that had just dropped between us onto the console of the car.

For the next few months we engaged in the occasional conversation about having babies and listed all the pros and cons—and then September 11 happened, and it seemed like a bad time to bring a baby into the world. Especially because Perry went into some kind of mode like he was a contestant on *Survivor* and we had to do things like stockpile bottled water and cans of Vienna sausages in our garage. Although, let’s be honest—I would rather die in some apocalyptic event than eat meat that comes from a can.



And then came the day in January when I drove to Austin to be with Gulley while she delivered the most beautiful red-haired baby boy I’d ever seen. It didn’t matter that her epidural didn’t work the way it was supposed to or that I heard her actually growl when her husband had the poor judgment to enjoy a stick of beef jerky while she worked through a contraction. All that mattered was the barrel-chested, impossibly pink little boy in the nursery who made all the other babies seem sickly by comparison. All I could think was, *HOW CAN I GET ME ONE OF THOSE?*

But in spite of my fever for the babies, I knew we’d need to

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wait a little longer because we'd already committed to chaperone more than a hundred high school students on a spring break ski trip, and then we had plans to travel to Sicily with my parents so I could see the land of my ancestors. These are what you call first-world problems. Oh, we can't have a baby right now because we have to go to Colorado and ski and then go to Italy to tour Saint Peter's Basilica.

Looking back, I think the funniest part of all this is that we were under the illusion we were in control. That a baby would happen on our timetable, like we were a couple of fertile magicians pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

As it turned out, that wasn't exactly what God had planned for us. Yes, we would become parents (otherwise this would be a short book), but our path to getting there was harder and filled with more heartache than we'd counted on. I guess in a way it became our first lesson in the realities of parenthood. Which is to say, it can make you feel like a monkey in a windstorm.