

Q & A



Special Grace

Prayers and Reflections for Families with Special Needs

April 12, 2022 | \$16, 128 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0351-0

"If you live with disability as I do, you, too, will love Special Grace. . . . Messy, but beautiful. Gut wrenching, but wonderfully real. You'll discover a new friend in Elrena Evans, a Christ-loving mom who invites you to join her as she kneels at the throne on behalf of her family with special needs."

—Joni Eareckson Tada, from the foreword

Words for the Times We Have None

Tell us about your experiences in dance and standup comedy.

Elrena Evans: What a fun question! I've been dancing my entire life—I started taking ballet at the age of four, but really, I think I was probably dancing before I was even born. It has always been a part of me. And I was blessed to have the right people in my life at the right times when I otherwise might have quit, who encouraged me to keep going. When I had my daughter, in graduate school, I had a teacher who told me that if I could keep dancing through the birth of my firstborn, I could keep dancing through anything. I went back and found her again after Kid Three or Kid Four (or Kid Five? I don't even remember now!) and told her she was right. And I'm still dancing.

I think dancing is one way that I make sense of my world. It's often how I process emotions, it's how I express things that I can't express in words, and it's what connects me to my faith. When I am unable to dance (I've had a couple of not-insignificant injuries over the years!), I can get pretty cranky. Just ask my kids.

I got into standup comedy because people are always telling me that I'm funny. Once, memorably, during a job interview, the hiring manager told me, "You're so funny!" And I was like . . . "Really? I'm not trying to be?!" But I also really like new challenges, and I thought it would be challenging to try to be funny on purpose. And it is. Standup comedy is *hard*. My oldest son once told me that I'm good at two things: making people laugh and making people cry . . . so I think I'm trying to lean into both.

What was the hardest part of writing this book?

Elrena: The hardest part of writing *Special Grace* was that I am a very private person. And I am even more private about my family, especially my children. Sharing the stories in this book feels so scary and so vulnerable to me. I don't know that I could have done it without the support of my closest friends, who have encouraged me every step of the way.

As I was writing this book, I thought a lot about the saying that our greatest strengths are also our greatest challenges, because it seems like this is one of the gifts God has given me—to write these highly personal stories drawn from my own life. But it's so hard! I remember struggling with a story I was writing at one point and thinking, *Why, God? Why did you have to make this be my gift? Why couldn't I be, I don't know, an accountant? (I'm surprisingly good with numbers!) Or a different kind of writer, like . . . maybe a sportswriter?* (I shared this thought with my friends, and they all said, "Because you know nothing about sports.") But this is the gift that God has given me, and I am trying to do my best to steward it well. When readers let me know that my writing has touched them in some way, I am encouraged to keep going.



Tara Burns, print and online publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or tburns@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, author interviews
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com



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Elrena Evans (MFA, Penn State) is executive editor of *Paper&String*, a digital care package celebrating faith, creativity, and beauty in its many forms. She is the author of a short story collection, *This Crowded Night*, and coauthor of the essay collection *Mama, PhD: Women Write About Motherhood and Academic Life*.

What is your family's greatest joy?

Elrena: This is going to sound pretty cheesy, but I think my family's greatest joy is just being together. We are a super quirky lot, but we "get" each other. And when I look at my children, I see such capacity for kindness, and it just fills my heart with joy.

What is your family's greatest struggle?

Elrena: My family's greatest struggle is probably also just being together! I told a friend once that I feel like everyone in my family is singing their own note—and as those notes fluctuate and change, sometimes they all come together in harmony, and the result is beautiful. But sometimes those notes clash with one another, and the resulting discord can be pretty painful.

Where did the idea for *Special Grace* come from, and who did you have in mind when writing it?

Special Grace began, fittingly, with a prayer. Several years ago, it was the day before going back to school, and I was thinking about my son starting school, and some of my friends' kids, and all the different needs and challenges these kids are bringing to their first day of school. And I thought, *I want to write a prayer. For my son, for my family, for my friends' kids, for my friends.* I was walking down the stairs in my house when I had this thought, and I sat down in the middle of the staircase and just started writing.

I sent the prayer out to my friends once I finished it, and the response I got was so encouraging. And then I was thinking, I'm an Episcopalian, so written prayers are an important part of my faith tradition, both in the Book of Common Prayer and elsewhere. But where are the prayers for my son, for my family, for other families like mine? Where are the prayers for an IEP meeting, for special education, for when my kid bit his teacher? So I started writing: prayers for an initial diagnosis, prayers for a new mobility device, prayers for starting medication, prayers for therapists and special education teachers, prayers for the insurance company . . . prayers for every aspect of life for families of children with special needs.

Why are written prayers like this important and helpful?

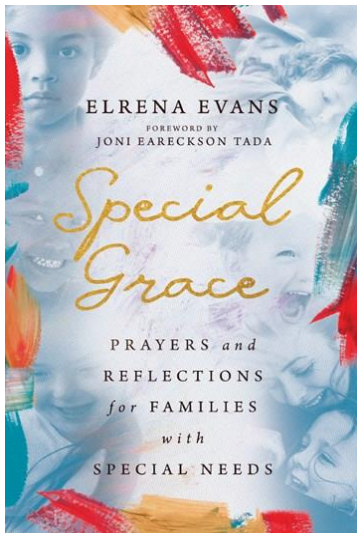
Elrena: I write in the introduction to the book, "Here are words for the times we have none. Our journeys are unique and I don't presume to say my journey has been anything like yours. But I pray that as you read this book, you will find glimpses of your own reflection, of the beauty and wonder of your story. I pray that you will find solace and comfort, and maybe a smile. I pray that these words may be yours when you need them, and that they may spur you on to create or find more words of your own as you travel this path with your child."

And that is my prayer: that this book can be words for when you have none, that you will feel comfort and solace, and that the prayers will bring you to the One who is always listening, even when we don't have words.



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You have covered a lot of topics with these prayers. Which of the topics/times were the most defining moments for you and why?

Elrena: Oh, that is such an interesting question! I've been asked which prayers are my favorites (I don't have a favorite, although the prayer "For a Substitute Teacher" would be on my list if I did because it was written so in the moment and was so exactly what I was feeling). But I haven't been asked about defining moments!

Two of the prayers that several of my early readers highlighted as especially meaningful to them were "A Prayer for a Loved One Who Is Out of Control" and "A Prayer for a Meltdown." And I think both of those prayers came out of defining moments for me. When someone we love is out of control or in a meltdown, it feels so frightening and so vulnerable. I remember the specific moments that inspired me to write those prayers, and I feel that fear—that vulnerability—when I read them. It is my prayer that these prayers will also offer comfort and hope to those who pray them, as they did for me.

What is your hope for your readers, their children, and their families?

Elrena: My hope for readers of *Special Grace* is that they feel comforted and that they feel seen. Raising children with special needs can be such a lonely, isolating journey, and I think so often as parents of children with special needs, we feel overlooked or even invisible. My hope and prayer is that readers will not only see their experiences reflected in the book and feel comforted but that they will feel seen as well.

(And if I get to have another hope? I hope that *Special Grace* will bring readers moments of joy and laughter! This journey isn't just about struggle—it's about joy, and delight, and yes, even laughter. I think those moments are one way that God shows us special grace.)



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