

## Broken Writer, Healed Readers

### By Jennifer Slattery

It's often true—those ~~been said, those~~ used mightily by God have first been broken. For Athol Dickson, his pain-filled past made him the writer he is today.

~~Having~~ Dickson has struggled with heartache, depression, and moments of faithlessness—~~these struggles helped him, he~~ understands humanity at its core. He knows what it's like to run from God, to face betrayal, and to lose those he held dear. His pain contributes to the gripping realism of his books and allows him to ~~This enables him to write with a gripping realism that~~ penetrates to the very soul.

### 'I'm done with You'

A few years before his novel *River Rising* was published, Dickson's mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The two were extremely close, enjoying vacations together, frequent phone chats, and daily visits. While she was sick, ~~Athol~~ he was her primary caregiver. As a result, ~~and~~ he saw firsthand how devastating cancer ~~can~~ could be.

Possible pull quote: He saw firsthand how devastating cancer could be.

~~And things got worse. Then,~~ A few months after his mother's diagnosis, when she was already bed-ridden, losing weight, and losing her battle ~~with the disease~~, Athol received more tragic news. His mother's sister and best friend of ~~seventy~~ 70 years had died of cancer; and someone needed to tell his mother.

"I got so mad at God," ~~Athol~~ Dickson says ~~said~~. "~~There was a televangelist talking on the TV set at that moment, and I watched that man jabbering on and on and strutting on the stage.~~ I was struck with an overwhelming sense of futility and loss and misery. I decided God and I were finished. I told him, 'If this is how you treat the ones I love, I'm done with you.'"

At that point, ~~Athol~~ Dickson deliberately stopped praying and tried to pretend God didn't exist.

### 'I came crawling back'

But, his ~~Athol's~~ depression increased. ~~This period of darkness lasted for two weeks.~~ Plunged into the depths of despair, living far from God, ~~Athol~~ Dickson said ~~says~~ he learned exactly what Solomon meant in Ecclesiastes when he talked about ~~vanity and~~ the futility of life. "When you turn away from God, having known Him as He truly is, what you're turning toward is nothing."<sup>22</sup> ~~Athol said.~~ "Nothing at all. Everything becomes two dimensional, like cardboard cut-outs."

Possible pull quote: When you turn away from God ... what you're turning toward is nothing.

~~Athol Dickson~~ continued to spiral into a cycle of relentless negative thinking. ~~Feelings of shame, inadequacy, and fear~~ He became trapped ~~him by feelings of shame, inadequacy, and fear~~ for no rational reasons. He wanted out.

Before seeking professional help, he and his wife decided to get away. They embarked on a two-week road trip to the Rocky Mountains. While she drove, ~~Athol Dickson~~ focused on the beauty all around. ~~and b~~Before long, Christ broke through. By their ~~ir time they returned~~ home, ~~Athol he had~~ remembered who God was, how beautiful He is, and how much God loves him.

“So, of course, I came crawling back,” ~~Athol Dickson sayssaid~~, “and like the father of the prodigal, God came running out to meet me.” ~~From where he is now, Dickson Looking back,~~ ~~Athol~~ cherishes the experience. ~~because n~~Not only did it teach him about the depths of God’s love, it showed him there’s nothing he could say or do that God will not forgive.

### ‘He treats them no different’

Each painful experience, from the death of his mother to a personal struggle with drug addiction, has made ~~Athol Dickson~~ the person and writer he is today. Having experienced the healing love of Christ, he now spends a great deal of his time demonstrating that grace to others. Once a week, ~~he teaches a resume writing class you’ll find him down at his local~~ a homeless shelter ~~where he uses his writing skills to teach a resumé class for those seeking jobs~~. Each month, he serves “the least of these” his famous ribs, looks them in the eye, and treats them with dignity and respect.

Possible pull quote: Dickson spends a great deal of time demonstrating God’s healing grace to others.

“Athol interacts with the homeless the same way he interacts with me if we are spending time together,” ~~said says~~ Eddie Orem, ~~Athol’s Dickson’s~~ close friend. “[He treats them] no different than if he was chatting with a businessman, a pastor, or a waitress at a restaurant.” ~~According to his closest companions, Christ’s love radiates from within and overflows to all he encounters.~~

One week, an ~~inebriated very drunk~~ man walked into ~~Athol’s Dickson’s~~ weekly Bible study. The man sat down, quiet, and listened as ~~Athol Dickson~~ expanded on some ~~of the~~ deeper truths of Scripture. Toward the end, the man broke down and started to cry. He asked for prayer, wanting release from his addiction. ~~Athol Dickson~~, having struggled with his own inner demons, was moved not just to compassion, but to action. He got up, walked over ~~to man~~, and held ~~him the man~~ while everyone prayed.

“Athol ~~seems to feels~~ the hurt and pain ~~that~~ others feel,” ~~Eddie Orem sayssaid~~. “I ~~ean~~ see a genuine sadness in Athol when others are suffering.”

### ‘A man of great inner strength’

~~Athol's Dickson's~~ compassion comes from a heart set 100% percent on Christ, according to his brother, Garret Dickson. "He is a man of great inner strength, sensitive to a higher calling."<sup>5</sup> ~~said Athol's brother, Garret Dickson.~~

Athol Dickson's empathetic understanding and deep compassion bleed into his writing and impact his character development. ~~g. When asked how his personal struggles impact the way he develops his characters, Athol said,~~ "Compared to writers who haven't dealt with things like addiction, depression, disease, and death, it's probably easier for me to imagine some of the dark places where my characters live and the difficult times that have shaped the way they are," he says.

Possible pull quote: It's probably easier for me to imagine some of the dark places where my characters live.

~~For example, in h~~His latest novel, *The Opposite of Art*, is an example. one ~~One~~ of his characters, raised around drug addiction and prostitution, is deeply scarred. "I lived some of that before I became a Christian," Athol Dickson said. "And I've known many people in that kind of life, so I can write with some authority about it."

That authority ~~Athol's novels are written with the authority~~ and compassion in Dickson's novels is a result of what he's learned from his own trials. His books are driven by a passion based on experience. They are driven by a passion rooted in deep a deep affection for his Savior. ~~It's easy to see why Athol's fiction continues to win awards and impact lives.~~

Side Bar:

~~A man of many passions, Athol Dickson's novels transcend description with a literary style that blends magical realism, suspense, and a strong sense of spirituality. They have been favorably compared to the work of Octavia Butler (*Publisher's Weekly*), Daphne du Maurier (FaithfulReader.com, by Cindy Crosby, *Christianity Today* fiction critic), and Flannery O'Connor (*The New York Times*). He's a three-time Christy Award winner and his novel, *River Rising*, a gripping story that personifies the gospel, won the Audie Award. He loves reading and digging deep into the pages of Scripture and draws inspiration from God's creation. Those who know him best describe him as "deep" and "compassionate"—someone who puts feet to his faith, on and off the page.~~