A quiver full of controversy

by Cathleen Falsani
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(RNS) When Meg Moseley gave birth to her third child 20 years ago, doctors cautioned her against having any more babies, fearing that another difficult pregnancy might jeopardize her life.

So Moseley and her husband decided three was the magic number, at least for their family.

Then came an unexpected hospital visit from a couple of women who, like Moseley, had chosen to home-school their children.

These women "thought it was wrong to be limiting children, although the doctors said I was looking for trouble if I had more," Moseley recalled. "I felt intense pressure from (these) people who actually came to me in my hospital room and put their propaganda in my hands, which I put in the waste basket."

Moseley's unwelcome bedside visitors were involved in what is commonly called "Quiverfull" -- a movement within segments of conservative evangelical and Catholic Christianity that eschews all forms of birth control and teaches that the only faithful response to childbearing is to have as many children as possible, leaving the number and frequency up to God alone.

Quiverfull takes its name from a verse in the Psalms that says: "Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them."

The movement has appeared in various contexts throughout history; most recently, the ever-growing Duggar brood on TLC's "19 Kids and Counting," has popularized a charming tribe of devout Baptists in Arkansas who hope to have even more children, if it's God's will.

Moseley's encounters with adherents of the Quiverfull ideology led her to write a novel, "When Sparrows Fall," published earlier this month, about a young home-schooling mother of six children trapped in the movement's most extreme manifestation: An all-consuming, separatist community of Quiverfull faithful who are shepherded by a domineering, corrupt religious leader.

The novel is not what one might expect. Far from a saccharine story of automatons terrorized by their spiritual leader, Moseley's characters are complex and nuanced, rounded out with a romantic subplot as compelling as it is surprising.

Moseley says her characters are completely fictional, but elements of the plot and the ideas expressed are based on real experiences.

Moseley home-schooled three children -- now ages 30, 27 and 20 -- all the way through high school. It didn't start with a conviction that "this was God's way for us," Moseley said. It was more practical.

When her eldest child turned 5, the Moseleys were leery of putting their daughter on a public school bus with a bunch of "big, rough boys" from their neighborhood.

"We just couldn't stand to do that to our little 5-year-old," she said. "We thought, `How hard could kindergarten be? Let's do home school."

At the end of the school year, pleased with their experience, they decided to do it again. Their youngest graduated in 2009.

"As time went on we saw good results. We saw good academic results. We saw fun. We saw the love of learning and we just kept going," said Moseley, who now lives outside Atlanta.

"Looking back now, I sometimes wish I had not done that. They have done well, but I think that I could have done better by putting them in school. ... Parents do the best that they can and then they look back and say, `Oh, I wish I'd known what I know now."'

Moseley is quick to say that she has "many perfectly normal friends" who home-school their kids. "I certainly don't want to imply that all home-schoolers believe you should have as many children as you can. Not everyone thinks that," she said.

In part, what led the author to write her novel was a desire to push back against a "glamorization" of the Quiverfull movement in the media, particularly with the Duggars, which "doesn't show the dark side" of the movement.

"It's just not as pretty as it looks on TV sometimes. The leaders of the movement, or at least the fathers of these individual families, have the best of intentions. They think they're doing the godly thing and if God wants to give them umpteen children then God bless them, let them come.

"But so many of these families are struggling to survive financially," she said.

Mothers who are full-time home-schoolers can't or aren't allowed to work outside the home, which makes time and finances tight, leaving some childcare of the younger children to the older children.

"That can work if it's done right. But it can also be a hotbed of resentment among the children because they feel they are being used and abused," she said. "I don't believe that's what God intends when he gives children to parents."