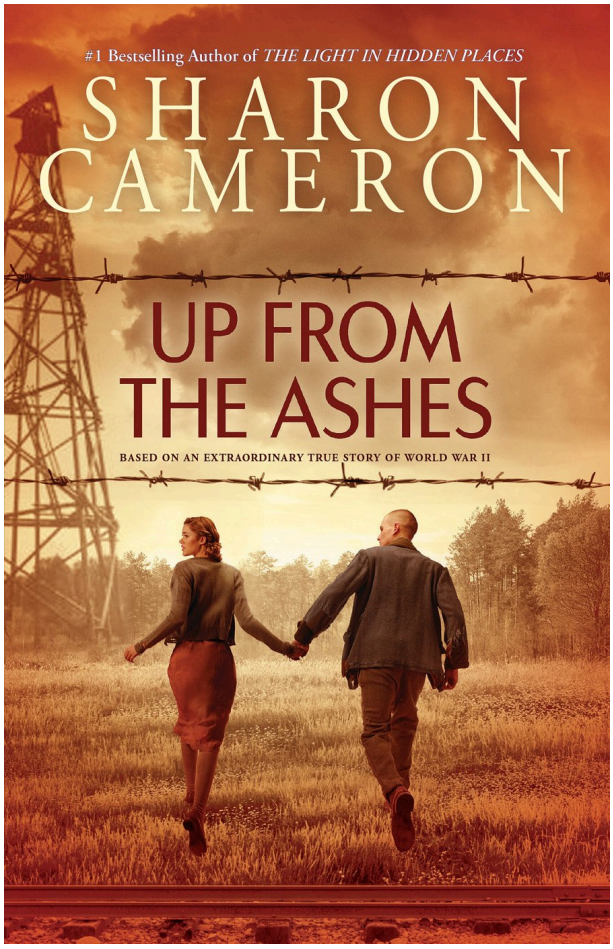
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Sharon, You Know You’re Gonna Write This Book, Right?

On publication day of Up from the Ashes, #1 New York Times bestselling author Sharon Cameron talks with Paul Salfen about Chaim and Selma Engel, the Sobibor uprising, and the museum wall that told her she was going to write the novel.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Official cover of Up from the Ashes, from publisher materials provided for the interview. Scholastic Press.

Sharon Cameron was already walking around with the story in her head when she went, alone, through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She was on tour for *Artifice*, her previous novel, and she had been resisting this one, a little. Then she came around a corner, and there was Chaim Engel’s face, projected onto the wall, talking about the escape from the Sobibor death camp.

“It just struck me,” she told Paul Salfen. “Like, Sharon, you know you’re gonna write this book, right? And I did.”

The book is *Up from the Ashes*, published by Scholastic Press on October 6, 2026, the day Cameron sat down with Salfen. It is based on the true story of Chaim and Selma Engel, who met in 1943 at Sobibor, in German-occupied Poland, after they were paired to dance for the amusement of their Nazi guards. They did not speak the same language. “As Selma said later, love became their language,” Cameron said, “and they really became each other’s reason to survive what should have been unsurvivable.” When the prisoners rose up, Chaim and Selma ran hand-in-hand out of the front gate and into a new life. Cameron, the #1 New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of *The Light in Hidden Places*, a Reese’s Book Club pick, calls this her fourth novel about the Holocaust, and she talks about it as dramatized reality rather than invention. Every character, she said, is a real person with their real name. Every event is based on eyewitness testimony.

THEY FOUND HOPE IN A PLACE WHERE THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN NO HOPE

Salfen asked her to tell people at home what they were getting into. Cameron did not soften the setting, and she did not stop at the horror of it.

“Up from the Ashes is based on the true story of Chaim and Selma Engel, who were two people who met in the most horrific circumstances possible, which was the Sobibor death camp in Poland in 1943,” she said. “They were paired up to dance together for the amusement of their Nazi guards. They didn’t even speak the same language, but as Selma said later, love became their language.”

The research, she admitted, can be a knife. “Sometimes I will, you know, read something, I think, okay, that’s the worst thing, that’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard, and then the next time it’s, and now that’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard.” What drew her to this story, she said, was how balanced it is with hope and light.

“Chaim and Selma found love in a place where there should not have been love,” she said. “They found hope in a place where there should have been no hope. And I think, really, that is what gave them the strength and the courage when the time came to rise up against those guards and run hand-in-hand out of that front gate and into a new life. I think it’s what saved them.”

> *“They found hope in a place where there should have been no hope.”*

She is careful about what kind of book this is. “This novel, because this is about real people, you know, I think of it as dramatized reality,” she said. “Every character in this book is a real person with their real name. Every event is based on eyewitness testimony. It is as close to what happened as we can know it, but put into a narrative form.” Publisher materials for the interview also note that she worked closely with the Engel children and grandchildren. The official jacket and her site identify the couple as Selma Wijnberg and Chaim Engel, and describe a novel that follows their meeting, their love, and the revolt and mass escape from Sobibor.

YOU KNOW YOU’RE GONNA WRITE THIS BOOK

The story did not arrive all at once. While Cameron was researching other Holocaust novels, her editor asked whether she had ever heard of a place called Sobibor. She had not. It is lesser known than camps such as Auschwitz, she told Salfen, and there is a reason for that.

“These are the camps that we often don’t know anything about because no one survived them,” she said. “Sobibor was a place for mass murder on an industrial scale. They could process, that being the polite term, 2,000 to 3,000 people per day. Just a few would be saved when they came in from the killing trains to run the camp, to serve the Nazis, or to do jobs that needed done, like Chaim and Selma did, which was sorting the clothes of the dead, and finding any valuables that the Nazis wanted to loot and keep for themselves. It was a horrific situation.”

Then she went to the oral histories. Chaim and Selma talking about their experiences, she said, are publicly available on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website. "Fascinating listening, if you ever want to go and listen to these people talk about their lives. It's absolutely extraordinary." She was riveted. She thought about it for months. She had been resisting the story a little. And then, on the *Artifice* tour, walking the museum by herself, she came around a corner and saw Engel's face on the wall, talking about the escape.

> *"Sharon, you know you're gonna write this book, right? And I did."*

Salfen noted that she had written fantasy novels before this kind of work, and asked whether the turn felt like a different fulfillment. Cameron has written across genres, including dystopia, steampunk, and light science fiction, and she said she had researched all of them as if they were historical. Switching into something hyper accurate, hyper real, "was darker, but not that different. So for me, it didn't feel like a shift at all. It felt very natural."

THAT ROAD ENDS IN SOBIBOR

Salfen asked what she hopes readers will take away, the thing they will need to talk about with somebody. Cameron said the history, and the memory of it, are vitally important, and that this is not only a story of the past.

"This is very much a story of our now, and what is happening in our world right now," she said. "I think people don't realize how powerful their own choices are. The Holocaust could have never happened without the permission of the society that it happened in, and that comes down to the individual, and not just like some big major decision, but what you're doing on a daily basis. Every time we take a small step down the road of dehumanization, whether it is how we think about another people group, or how we treat this person that we disagree with that lives across the street, whatever that is that happens inside our mind. Well, each little step down that road, that road ends in Sobibor. Every time. History has shown it to us again and again and again."

Ordinary people, she said, have the power to take a step in the other direction. "These choices, while maybe we don't think our choices are powerful, we feel like ordinary people living ordinary lives. Well, that's what Chaim and Selma felt too. But I would argue that their choice was world-changing, because people are learning from it, they are reading their story right now, and I think that these kinds of stories, when we can take them down to our individual heart and mind, they have the potential to be world changers. And that's what I hope people take from this book."

> *"That road ends in Sobibor. Every time."*

I HAD DECIDED TO CHANGE MY LIFE

The other origin story in the conversation is her own. Cameron did not write one unassigned word, she said, until she was in her mid-30s. She was a classical pianist, completely happy, and sure she would do that forever. She was also a passionate reader, with a passion for research and history, "sleuthing out these clues to what our world used to look like and how that connects to our today." She got obsessed with a little piece of history, walked past her computer with 45 spare minutes, and sat down on a whim.

“I kid you not, I stood up after 45 minutes, and I had decided to change my life,” she said. “I felt head over heels in love with creating story, and with the written word, and to just discovering what would come out of me. It was an amazing experience, and it completely transformed what I did with my life.”



Sharon Cameron. Photo by Rusty Russell.

Salfen called it a Hail Mary moment, the kind of throw you have to make. “It was absolutely like that,” Cameron said. “I threw that ball to the other end of the field.”

The advice she would give someone staring at a screen, wondering whether they could do it, is not a formula. “Give yourself permission to do it. Give yourself permission to take the time. Give yourself permission to learn and to do it badly. I have to give myself permission to do it badly every single day, because, you know, books don’t leap out fully formed. When you first start writing, to get to know your creative self and to learn who you are as a creator, there’s a journey there, and it’s a beautiful time, and it never stops, really. People think, oh, I’m on this journey to publication. The journey doesn’t stop there. I would say start the journey, give yourself permission to do it and see what comes out.”

When the words will not come, even on a contracted book, even past a deadline, she puts herself in a bubble. “No one else has to read this,” she tells herself. “This can just be for me. And I think when you take that pressure off, it sort of just uncorks the creativity. I often find I just start reflowing.”

She is still, she said, a little surprised by the rest of it, the bestseller lists included. Asked what she is working on now, she laughed. “What I’m working on right now is *Up from the Ashes* and all of the things that go with it.” She has thoughts about what comes next, including adult historical, “a little bit started, on that,” and, at some point, a turn back toward the speculative. “I love doing this, but I love those stories too. So I will probably do something maybe a little off the wall.”

The work in front of readers now is the one the museum wall would not let her put down. *Up from the Ashes* is a young adult novel, 416 pages, from Scholastic Press, and it is out now. Cameron’s hope is not only that people finish the book, but that they recognize their own choices in it, and the road those choices can take.

FIND UP FROM THE ASHES

The book: *Up from the Ashes* by Sharon Cameron. Published October 6, 2026, by Scholastic Press. A young adult novel based on the true story of Selma Wijnberg and Chaim Engel and the uprising at the Sobibor death camp. 416 pages. ISBN 978-1-5461-4461-8. Ages 12 and up.

Author site: sharoncameronbooks.com/books

Publisher page: shop.scholastic.com, Up from the Ashes

Oral histories: Chaim and Selma Engel's interviews, Cameron noted, are publicly available through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Reviews: The book received starred reviews from Kirkus Reviews, Booklist, and School Library Journal, as cited in publisher materials for this interview.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine on October 6, 2026, the book's publication day.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.