



Eleanor Cooney

Death in Slow Motion
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An Interview with Eleanor Cooney

How would you describe your family today?

My mother is in an assisted-living place just a few blocks from the place we put her almost four years ago. That first place saved our lives, but it started to show signs of "running down" in the last year or so — it got sold, the fees went up, staff was cut back, and so we moved her to a new place. What's interesting about this is the contrast between the first experience of placing her and this recent second one. In my book, I describe the killing anxiety, guilt and pure terror of moving day — of having to "trick" my mother, leave her there, and steal away like thieves. The second move was a total piece of cake. We packed up all her stuff while she snoozed on her bed. When the car was filled, we woke her up and said, "Let's go for a ride, Mom!" We took her to the new place, where there were several familiar faces — staff and residents who'd preceded her — and I sat her down in front of an Elvis movie on the TV, we unpacked her stuff and arranged her room, I showed it to her, and she acted as if nothing at all had happened.

I still live in northern California: California is huge, and my town is remote and rural. It's a three-and-a-half hour drive to where my mother is. I was glad about that when we first placed her, but now I'm sorry it's so far away. As the disease progresses, the visits have become a thousand times easier — she doesn't cling to me the way she once did. On the contrary, she's fairly remote, doesn't always know who I am. I wish I could be more "present" before she slips away entirely. There's always a new kind of sorrow waiting around the corner with this disease. My brother lives a thousand miles away, gets here a couple of times a year, and I know the feeling's the same for him. Mitch and I live in the house my brother bought so that we could move my mother here and take care of her. We only had her in this house for a year or so before we threw in the towel. It's a great house, but it's infested with a bit of malaise, a tinge of failure and sorrow for me, because it was supposed to be her house, too.

In what ways, if any, has the publication of *Death in Slow Motion* affected your life and the lives of your family members?

It's made my mother a bit of a celebrity with the staff of the assisted-living place. Some of them read the book, which is full of juicy, vivid biographical stuff about my mother when she was in her prime. She was a writer, a world-class glamour-girl, a great wit, and she knew people like Arthur Miller and John Huston. I was always intensely proud of my mother. Alzheimer's is the great leveler — it turns you into just another poor doddering anonymous old wreck, and all your former glory, whatever it was, is gone into oblivion. A lot of my book is a portrait of my mother as she was. I wanted to bring her back to life so people would know exactly what was lost. So the staff folks have had a detailed glimpse of whom and what Mary was, and it definitely gives them a thrill. That pleases me hugely! Here in my town, people who've read the book occasionally say things to Mitch and me like: "Gosh, I had no idea that you were going through such hell. I would have helped you more if I'd known." And I think: Yeah, right, sure, thanks a lot. On a larger scale, I've been offered a lot of speaking engagements, all over the country — something I never expected. Not only have I been paid quite nicely to do it, but I've discovered that standing up in front of a crowd of 500 people and talking to them suits me just fine. I really dig it! For both me and my brother, people from the past, all the way back to grade school and such; have reappeared because they saw the book. And I get e-mails from total strangers who've read the book, usually people relating experiences that make mine look like a tea party.

How did you decide you wanted to be a writer and how did you make it happen? In what ways did your mother influence and support you?

I was an artist for most of my twenties, had always assumed that this was what I would do. The problem was that I hated to part with my work, so making a living was just about impossible. I'd always known I could write, but when I got a job with a local radio station here in northern California creating "human interest" stories, I learned that I could write on command, meet deadlines, and get paid (though scarcely lavishly at the time). My boss sent me out to report on anything I wanted to — the odder, funnier, or stranger, the better. I covered a male strip show, I searched out inventors and eccentrics living deep in the woods and interviewed them, I did play and movie reviews. I was banging them out at the rate of one a week, reading them on the air, and before long I actually had a following in the local listening audience. My fans wanted more, more, more, and so I did this, happily, for a few years, along with call-in talk shows. I accumulated quite a pile of stories, and that was when it kind of dawned on me: "Hey! I'm a writer!" A couple of years after that a friend who was a scholar of Chinese language and history got in touch with me and said: "The T'ang Dynasty is a goldmine of fantastic true tales. Let's pick one out and write a blockbuster historical novel." We did. We got an outline and sample chapters together for our first collaborative novel, *Court of the Lion*, got a major agent and sold the book to William Morrow. We were off and running. We did three more novels together: *Deception*, *Shangri-La*, and *Shore of Pearls*, and I've scarcely picked up a brush since (too bad — I was a damned good artist). But now I know for a fact that whether it's on canvas or in words, it all comes from the same part of the brain. Both my parents were writers, so there's definitely a genetic tendency — my father taught English literature at Columbia, and my mother was a novelist, reporter, poet, historian, etc. One of the important themes running through my book is the way my mother was my own private writing education. Her first novel was like a crash course for me in how the mind of the fiction writer works — because I recognized the real people behind the fictional ones, and grasped instantly the process of synthesis that the writer uses. As for support, my mother was always on my side, in everything I did — and that's another theme in my book.

Was writing your memoir a cathartic and smooth creative process or was it a harrowing experience? How did your expectations of what the memoir would be match up with the final result?

Since I was already an experienced writer with four books under my belt, had my "chops" down, as musicians say, the process was pretty smooth. I knew from Day One of taking on my mother's care that there would be a book in it; it was a little like being a true crime writer and getting the assignment before the killer is caught. I didn't know how it was going to turn out, but I knew I was going to write

about it. The advantage that writers have is that we can take horrible life experiences that might have been just lost time and utter waste, and with a little alchemy, redeem them as literary "gold." For me, the most important aspect of the book is its artistic merit. My purpose was not to be a spokesperson for Alzheimer's, or an activist for elders or anything like that — it's to be the best writer I can be. This is my mother's legacy, for sure. The writing, for me, trumps the obvious subject matter. I wanted it to be a literary memoir first and foremost, a book about writers and writing even more than a book about Alzheimer's, which is one of many themes in the book. I was thrilled with the total composition, and I got plenty of reviews where the reviewers commented first on the quality of the writing — exactly what I was hoping for.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers? What is your writing routine-where do you sit, when do you write, and what do you wear?

The world conspires to keep you from writing. Writers mostly work at home, so your friends think you're always available and interruptable. You have to be strict with them, because they have no idea at all of how hard a job it is. They think you just sit down at your keyboard and go tappety-tap-tap, and out comes a book! Put a Do Not Disturb sign on the door, take the phone off the hook, and don't procrastinate — writers write! Get to work! Drink strong coffee. It's the original Writer's Fuel. Tennessee Williams and Ernest Hemingway, both of them big drunks, always got up early, no matter how hung over they were or how late they were out the night before, drank some hot black coffee, and got right to work. Morning's best for me, too. My brain is about a thousand times more productive and reliable first thing in the morning. I don't waste time getting dressed — I comb my hair and brush my teeth, put on a bathrobe, grab coffee (after feeding my pack of cats) and head for the computer. But my best advice for aspiring writers: READ. You can't write unless you READ.

How much truth is there in "write what you know?"

Well, sure, you should write what you know, but the definition of "what you know" can be pretty broad. Ray Bradbury never went to Mars (at least I don't think he did), but he "knew" what he was writing about. It's a complicated process of vision and synthesis and imagination. I don't think William Golding was ever trapped on an island as a schoolboy, but he "knew" what he needed to know to write *Lord of the Flies*. When I was writing my novels set in ancient China, I wrote what I "knew — " obviously, I'd never been an Emperor or a barbarian slave, but in drawing the characters, I relied on my knowledge of human nature and aspects of psychology and interaction that are universal and know no time or place. I found it delicious to look out through the eyes of the villainous chief minister, for instance, to "become" him. I was incorporating what I "knew" with what I imagined.