



Death in Slow Motion

By Eleanor Cooney
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Introduction

In *Death in Slow Motion*, Eleanor Cooney piercingly describes the terms on which she mounted an offense against Alzheimer's disease, what she calls "death's warm-up act," which insidiously attacked her once-glamorous and vibrantly witty mother. Following the break-up of her short and disastrous second marriage, to film director John Huston's closest friend Tim Durant, Mary Durant settled in Connecticut, as a single parent and raised her two children. She cultivated a lively social network of artist and writer friends. A much-admired woman of razor-sharp wit and a wicked sense of humor, Mary Durant found the love of her life in husband number three, a man 12 years her junior -- and environmentalist and author Michael Harwood was truly her perfect match. No one could guess that Mike would be laid low by congenital vascular anomalies in his right arm and dead at 55 after radical surgery that was meant to save him. Overwhelmed with grief in the wake of his death, Mary Durant lost her joie de vivre and the dark clouds of Alzheimer's set in. *Death in Slow Motion* is the harrowing

story of her daughter's efforts to reclaim her and the struggle of their lifetimes. Prior to its release in book form, an extensive excerpt of it ran in *Harper's* magazine.

Discussion Questions

1. "The only possible upside to Alzheimer's that I can think of is that you are finally and forever free from having to do paperwork of any kind ever again," writes Eleanor Cooney. Mary Durant was a vibrant, creative, and funny woman who thrived in the company of her artistic, bohemian circle of friends. With her failing health and diminished mental capacity, did her children have a responsibility to try to keep her lifestyle intact as part of their efforts to sustain her quality of life? To what degree are children meant to make concessions to accommodate new care-taking responsibilities?
2. *Death in Slow Motion* is as heartbreaking as it is darkly funny. What role did humor play in keeping Eleanor and Mitch sane? Was humor a tactic of diversion to help keep perspective or a release valve for overwhelming circumstances and emotions -- or both? How effective was Cooney in instilling humor into an otherwise gut-wrenching story?
3. What can be accomplished by honestly recounting a life? Can we make sense of memories that we can recall and those we cannot? Can parsing through the details of (sometimes painful) events bring peace or are we better served by focusing on good memories -- the happier times of celebration and high spirits?
4. Cooney seems to agree with her father who once said that old age is an unnatural condition and that Mother Nature wants us to reproduce and "get off the stage." What can be learned from Eleanor's account of the reversal of the caretaking relationship between parent and child? In many ways, Eleanor must adapt to the unexpected, if eventual -- do her responses contradict your own notions of how you might react in similar situations?
5. In Eleanor's words, her mother's mind "shifts like a Dali landscape" in ways that are incomprehensible to onlookers. Can a parallel be drawn between Mary's amorphous intellect and the necessity forced upon Eleanor to redefine the terms of her relationship with her mother? How does Mary's fluctuating state of mind force her family to reassert their ties to her?
6. The care of an ailing parent can sometimes be looked upon as a "test" of love, loyalty, or decency. To what extent are adult children responsible for their parents' well-being? How greatly did Mary's family take on that weight? And how did it affect the relationships between her children and their partners?
7. Alzheimer's disease severely impaired Mary's ability to rightly remember events and people in her life -- even those closest to her. To the extent that a person is shaped by the events of her life, how can she know herself once the memories begin to fade? And how can others know her? How closely tied are memory and identity?
8. Location plays an important role in both Mary and Eleanor's lives. In a sense, Mary defined herself by the things and people who surrounded her as Eleanor created a life far from the "Connecticut melancholia" of her youth. What did the East Coast represent to Eleanor and her brother? How did the memories of place affect their decisions regarding their mother's care?
9. Mike's death was a watershed time in Mary's life; her unrelenting grief decided the shape of her life in the years following his death. Eleanor and Mitch believe that it is this grief that hastened Mary's intellectual decline and the onslaught of dementia. In the sense that death interrupted their carefully crafted, vibrant lives, so did Alzheimer's make its unexpected and life-altering appearance. How does Eleanor cope with her sadness and frustration at her mother's loss of autonomy, personage, and changed living accommodations? Can this be likened to Mary's mode of grieving for Mike?

About the Author

Eleanor Cooney was a teenager in the mid-1960s. Because of her liberated and very hip mother she says the sex-drugs-and-rock'n'roll that was happening all around her was no big deal. She didn't have to "bust out" the way so many of her contemporaries did -- she was already there. Cooney went to art school in Boston, but was not ready to buckle down, so migrated west within a couple of years, spending her 20s in Boulder, Colorado, while leading a hand-to-mouth, cash 'n' carry, semi hedonistic artist-type life of playing in the mountains and running around irresponsibly in pursuit of fun. She also sold some of her artwork and did a lot of house painting. By her late 20s the charm of slinging ladders and buckets wore off and, pushing 30, she felt a vague but persistent urge to get to work, though she still thought of herself as a graphic artist. Cooney left Boulder in the late 1970s and migrated further west, to northern California, where she made the switch to writing and now resides.

