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Conversation With Mary Higgins Clark

by Claire E. White

Born and raised in New York, internationally bestselling author Mary Higgins Clark is of Irish descent. "The Irish are, by nature, storytellers," says Clark, who considers her Irish heritage an important influence on her writing.

Mary's father died when she was ten. Her mother struggled to bring up Mary and her two brothers. After graduating from high school, Mary went to secretarial school, so she could get a job and help her mother with the family finances.

After working for three years in an advertising agency, travel fever seized her. For the year 1949, she was a stewardess on Pan American Airlines' international flights, to see the world. "My run was Europe, Africa and Asia," Mary recalls. "I was in a revolution in Syria and on the last flight into Czechoslovakia before the Iron Curtain went down. I flew for a year and then got married."

She married a neighbor, Warren Clark. Nine years her senior, she had known him since she was 16. Soon after her marriage, she started writing short stories. She sold her first short story to *Extension Magazine* in 1956 for \$100, after six years and forty rejection slips. "I framed that first letter of acceptance," she recalls. Mary was left a young widow with five children by the death of her husband, Warren Clark, from a heart attack in 1964. She went to work writing radio scripts and, in addition, decided to write books.



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Every morning, she got up at 5 and wrote until 7, when she had to get the kids ready for school. Her first book was a biographical novel about the life of George Washington, *Aspire to the Heavens*. "It was remaindered as it came off the press," she says of her first try. Next, she decided to write a suspense novel, *Where Are the Children?*, which became a bestseller and marked a turning point in her life and career.

Mary decided to take time for things she had always wanted to do. So far, she had put all her energies into her children's education. Now she was going to catch up on her own. In 1974, she entered Fordham University at Lincoln Center and graduated summa cum laude in 1979, with a B.A. in philosophy. In May 1988, she returned to her alma mater as commencement speaker. She is a trustee of Fordham University and a member of the Board of Regents at St. Peter's College. She has thirteen honorary doctorates.

After many years of widowhood, she married John J. Conheeneey, retired Merrill Lynch Futures CEO, on November 30, 1996. They now live in Saddle River, New Jersey; they also have an apartment in Manhattan and summer homes in Spring Lake, New Jersey and Dennis, Massachusetts. Between them, they have a large family. Mary Higgins Clark has five children and six grandchildren, and her husband has four children and nine grandchildren.

Among the many honors she has received are The Women of Achievement award from the Federation of Women's Clubs in New Jersey, the Irish Woman of the Year award from the Irish-American Heritage and Cultural Week Committee of the Board of Education of the City of New York, the Gold Medal of Honor from the American-Irish Historical Society, the Spirit of Achievement Award from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University and the National Arts Club's first Gold Medal in Education. In April 1997, she received the Horatio Alger Award. She is an active advocate and participant in literacy programs. Mary was made a Dame of the Order of St. Gregory the Great, a papal honor. She is also a Dame of Malta and a Dame of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem. She was awarded the Grand Prix de Literature of France in 1980. Her books are published in translation around the world and are world-wide bestsellers; over 50 million copies of her books are currently in print. She is a #1 bestseller in France. She was Chairman of the International Crime Congress, held in New York in May 1988. She was the 1987 president of the Mystery Writers of America and, for many years, on the Board of Directors of the Mystery Writers of America.

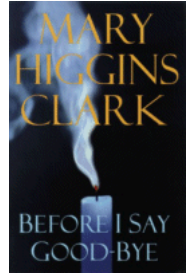
Mary recently signed a \$64 million, four book contract with her publisher of 25 years, Simon and Schuster. Her latest book, *Before I Say Good-Bye* is being sold electronically by SoftLock.com, in addition to the traditional methods of distribution. Another recent novel, *You Belong to Me*, is out in paperback.

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Let's talk about your new release, *Before I Say Good-Bye*. What was your inspiration for this book?

There were several things. I think many people are interested in psychic phenomena. I was in Florida on my book tour, and I was talking to the young woman who was my media escort. I asked her how long she had been doing this kind of work, and she replied that this was just a part-time job for her, that her real job was that she was a psychic. I asked her how one becomes a professional psychic -- how one qualifies to be one. And she replied, "Oh, you don't have to be qualified. You can tell what clients want to hear, and that's what you tell them." So she wasn't a real psychic at all, and that set me thinking about all the fraud in that industry -- all the psychic hotlines and the like. In New York, there have been stories in the news about how they are teaching people on welfare to be psychics. So there are a lot of phonies in the field. Then my housekeeper's 18 year-old daughter decided not to go to college and to be a waitress instead, which just broke her mother's heart. Then the daughter ran up a \$450 phone bill, calling a psychic. My housekeeper said, "If the psychic had just told her to go back to college, I wouldn't really have minded." Those two stories just stuck with me. After *Where Are the Children* had been published in paperback, a friend was going to a palmist and dragged me along. This woman took my hand and said to me, "You are going to be very famous throughout the world. You are going to make a great deal of money. You'll live to be very old, and you'll die abroad." So I thought, "What is she smoking?" My friend and I treated it as a joke; I said when I was 80 I would just stop traveling. The next week, my book hit the bestseller lists, and then the movie rights sold - and this was just the beginning of my career really taking off. She really hit the nail on the head, as it turned out. And yet, you can go to some psychics and all you get are vague predictions. It's all just a bunch of mumbo jumbo. The subject has always intrigued me. There are some people with genuine ESP. When my brother was only eighteen years old he enlisted in the Navy and went off to boot camp. They sent home a picture of him in his dress blues, and my mother looked at the picture and said, "He has death in his eyes." He died soon after.



Another time she said that she had a really bad feeling about her brother. He traveled a great deal, and he had had a stroke. They found him dying, sitting in front of the apartment building they had lived in as children. He had no identification on him, and so they were about to bury him in Potter's Field. And there were other incidents with my mother when I was a kid. So some people do seem to have very highly trained ESP. Because of those experiences, I wanted to use ESP in a book. I didn't want to come across as too skeptical, yet I didn't want to come through as a believer. I wanted a feeling that yes, there is such a thing and some people have a gift, but that there are a lot of fakes out there, as well.

The heroine of the book is Nell McDermott, a woman with a great political career ahead of her. Nell is an interesting and complex character who has lost both her parents when she was young and now her beloved husband. How did you approach writing her?

I was always interested in the documented stories of people who had awakened after dreaming that someone that they loved had said goodbye, only to find that the person had died during the night. There are many such documented cases. And I thought that I wanted Nell to be someone who has ESP. Because of her experiences early in the book with her mother, father and grandmother, we know that her ESP is genuine. I thought that gave her a good background. I wanted her to be well-equipped to take over her grandfather's congressional seat, so I had her raised by her grandfather. I felt that it developed her character. I had her marry someone rather quickly. She did that because she was a little vulnerable at that time in her life. She has two aging relatives that she is close to -- her grandfather and Aunt Gert -- but otherwise, she is quite alone. All these qualities made Nell the kind of character that was perfect for this book.

"[m]y faith has been an immense help to me in trying times. If you think that life is all tragedy and hard luck, then nothing can really help you. You have to believe that there is some kind of plan and reason for things. Accept what you cannot change, and do your best to make the things you can change better..."

Nell's grandfather is such a strong character. He's complex -- you get the feeling there's so much more going on under the surface than he lets on. How did you create the character of Cornelius McDermott, or Mac?

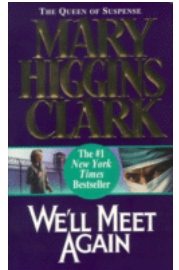
There are cases like this going on in New York all the time -- I cut a lot of stories out of *The New York Times*. There has been an architectural renaissance going on in the twenties. And there really was a landmark building which was removed from the list -- it wasn't burned down or anything, of course. I started thinking about how if you had land next to a landmarked building, how much more valuable your property would be were that landmark simply to burn down. There were a lot of architects and builders who had been caught up in a bribery scandal. They all ended up getting fined a couple thousand dollars, and then going back to business as usual. It's an interesting subject with lots of good stories in it, like the little landowner who sells his property and then finds out that it was worth ten times what he received for it.

What was the most challenging aspect of writing this book?

It was the balancing of the psychic elements with the suspense elements. That was really tricky. Also, I had no less than four people in the boat that blew up in the first few pages of the book, and I began to worry that I had killed them off too fast! I thought, "I still need them!" (laughing) Because now you have to see these people through other people's eyes for the rest of the book. It was the only way to write it -- I wasn't sorry I did it that way. But it did make me a bit nervous in the beginning.

Also being released in April, 2000, is the paperback of *We'll Meet Again*. That story revolved around a woman who was imprisoned for years for a crime she didn't even remember committing, and some shocking goings on in the local HMO. What was your inspiration for that book?

There was a true case in New Jersey that happened twenty-five years ago about a woman who had separated from her husband. The husband would come over on Saturdays and one day the kids came home and asked, "Where's Dad?" The woman said that he had left. The next evening at dinner, the woman said, "Oh by the way, did I tell you that I shot your father yesterday?" She had shot him, then locked the door to the study where the body was still lying. Later she said she didn't remember doing it, that she supposed that she had, but that she didn't know why she had made that announcement at the dinner table. I thought there was a story here somewhere. But it took me twenty years to find the right way to use those circumstances in a book.



Do you keep an idea book?

Not really. But I do cut out clippings and just throw them into one drawer. But I just found that one case profoundly interesting, and I knew that someday I would use it. I never use the entire true story -- it's just a springboard for my ideas. In my book the woman actually accepts the blame for the crime, because she had been so traumatized that she did everything wrong, like leaving her fingerprints everywhere.

I think to a creative person, anything can probably spark an interesting idea.

Yes, it can be something quite small. For example, we just bought a house in Spring Lake, New Jersey -- we're renovating it now -- and I'm going to set my next book in Spring Lake. It's a wonderful Victorian town. It's an ocean town, and it looks as if it hasn't changed in 100 years when you drive into it. I said, there's a good story here. I say, "Suppose that a young woman inherits a house here that her grandmother left to her. And suppose that..." And I just go from there. Being Irish is a help, I must say. The Irish are great storytellers. The Irish do nothing simply. No one just goes to the store for some milk and returns. It's more like: "Oh, Dear God -- such a trip! It was raining, and I thought I'd slip for sure and then..." Everything is an adventure.

I'd like to talk about the details of the creative process. What is a typical writing day like for you?

I like to hit it early, before the phone starts ringing and all the craziness starts. We have four houses, which is really amazing to me, and makes for a lot going on. (You know, I was raised in a three room apartment, after my father died.) So before all the non-writing business of the day starts, I like to get up and get right to work. I get a cup of coffee, and go to my office which is nice and quiet. Once I get started in the morning, it flows easily after that. I like to get started on the next book as soon as possible, so I don't feel rushed. The last two books I had to start rather later than I had wanted to, so I really felt the deadlines. Right now, I've already started the book for next year. It will be easier to do four or five pages a day now, so that the book will be well underway by Fall. Of course, publicity for the current book always takes up a fair amount of time, so this time I'm bringing a computer with me on tour.

So you write directly onto the computer?

Oh, yes, but I can write longhand, if need be. In fact, on long trips I do just that. It's not worth it to lug a computer around, because the battery only lasts two hours on a laptop. My first two books took three years apiece to write, because there were no word processing systems. I would constantly be re-typing twenty or thirty pages with all the revisions -- and sometimes I couldn't even read my own writing. Then I had to type it out. And revisions were a nightmare. If you changed one date, you had to go through 420 pages and change it everywhere. Now you just make a global change. You just make your revisions and hit print.

Do you revise as you go, or do you like to get a first draft on paper first, and then revise?

I'm always revising as I go. By the time a chapter is finished, it's pretty much done. Of course, it is edited after that. I send 25-30 pages at a time to my editor. That works beautifully for both of us. This way, he doesn't ever say, "Let's go back to chapter two and rework this character." By the time the publisher gets the last chapter of the book, the entire book has been edited.

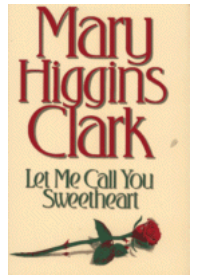
Your books are known for their interesting characters. Do you use character bios at all?

Oh, yes. I always use very detailed character bios. You have to know where the character went to school, whether she was a good student, what she loves, what she hates etc. You have to know everything about this person's character in order to write her properly. What does she look like? How old is she? What in her background made her the person she is today? Let's take Winifred, for example, in *Before I Say Good-bye*. Her background was very harsh, and as a result she has a very vivid fantasy life. And she harbors a great deal of resentment which has to come out somewhere. She dresses very plainly. Her mother is a strong influence in her life. The

many other people. It's hard on the elderly in the homes. They are older, they are ill, and they don't want to be there. I know someone who runs a very good nursing facility and she said to me, "You know, we can do everything for them except make them happy." I used that line in the book. And it's very true.

What is your advice to the aspiring suspense writer?

The first thing you have to do is write. So many people tell me, "I'm going to write a book as soon as...." The three fatal words are as soon as.... As soon as I learn to use the computer. As soon as I quit my job. As soon as the kids grow up. As soon as the dog dies. But trust me, as soon as the kids grow up and the dog dies, there will be a new set of excuses not to write which will be equally valid. If you are a morning person, get up an hour earlier and use that time to write. If you're a night person, go to bed an hour later. But don't say you're too busy, because you'll always be too busy! The second thing I always suggest is to take writing courses, because classes help you get focused and to learn the craft of writing. No matter where you live, there are adult education classes on writing. Take a class on suspense writing. The third thing is to select which writers you admire the most, whose books you really enjoy reading the most. That is probably the genre in which you will enjoy writing, as well. Study the techniques used by those writers. When I wrote *A Cry in the Night*, I decided I wanted it to be a cross between *Rebecca* and *Psycho*. I re-read Rebecca and then wrote down the first and last paragraphs of each chapter, and a synopsis of what happened in between those two paragraphs. I did this so that I could break down the bones of the book, to see how it was structured. I tell people to do that - it's very instructive to see how a book is actually put together. Then write your own story. Then get a copy of the *Writer's Market* and study it. Read the trades. Read *Publisher's Weekly* and *The Writer* magazine. Sylvia Burack, the founder of *The Writer* is a lovely woman. She has always been able to get really incredible writers to write for her magazine. Those articles contain great advice. Writing is essentially a solitary profession, but writers need good feedback and criticism. Writer's groups and workshops are very helpful. Out of my first writing class we started a writer's workshop, and it went on for forty years. It was really great; it is why I was a successful writer. I could get such helpful criticism that it was astonishing.



I guess the most important thing is to be careful who you pick to be in your workshop?

Yes. But it is an interesting fact that some people who are not good writers are very good critics, who made an excellent addition to the workshop. It is essential to have rigid rules, so that it doesn't end up a gossip session. The way it worked was this: one person read her own story or chapter for twenty minutes then stopped, unless he or she had only half a paragraph or so to go until the end. This way, no one person monopolized the group's time. After that, each person would criticize for three minutes and then we stopped. Then the author would ask questions to clarify what the group members meant, or to make suggestions as to how to overcome perceived flaws. After a few minutes of general discussion, we went on to the next writer. All criticism had to be objective, and fair -- no vicious remarks. It really worked.

You talked about sending pages to your editor. I've noticed you've dedicated your books to your editor before. Obviously you have a good relationship. Describe to me what makes a really great fiction editor.

Well, a great fiction editor is one who is simply a great editor. He or she brings out the best in the writer. He can guide the writer. Michael Korda and I discuss what the next book will be about. His ideas are always wonderful. For the book, *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*, I knew that I wanted to write about plastic surgery. I told Michael that I thought that was an interesting topic, that many people were interested in the subject. Plastic surgery isn't just for the rich and famous anymore. If you have an accident, a plastic surgeon will be there to supervise the stitching if there are injuries to the face. Or if you have a kid with a great big nose or something that could make him unhappy, you'll get it taken care of immediately so that the child won't be miserable. Michael said, "What if a plastic surgeon gave the same face to a bunch of different women? Why would he do that?" Then I knew we had it. That became the book.

I'd like to talk a bit about a difficult period in your life -- after your husband died, leaving you a single mother of five. How did you find the strength to go on, and to launch a new career? What kept you going during those years?

It was tough, of course. But I really had no choice but to carry on for my children. Warren had very little insurance because he had a history of heart trouble, and he had changed jobs. After he died, I had \$25,000 in benefits, which is not much with five kids. There was no question I was going to have to work. My father died under the same circumstances. He left my mother a widow, with the three of us kids to support. My mother had no money and she couldn't get a job. In those days, no one would hire a woman. In those days, to be 52 years old was pretty ancient. You have to have lived through it to understand. But my mother never took it out on us. She was a wonderful woman; she just held her grief in, and didn't take it out on us. When she lost my brother, it absolutely broke her heart. But six months later she had a graduation party for me from high school. So I had lived through very hard times as a child and had watched my mother overcome the same circumstances. I was able to accept what had happened and to deal with it.

Do you think that your faith is also what helped get you through those times?

It is absolutely essential. Because you have to realize that there is a plan for all of this and there is a reason. And I felt I had been blessed. I had fourteen wonderful years with my husband and five terrific kids.

It's nice to see somebody who had a good experience with the church. Certainly there have been a lot of writers, like Frank McCourt and others, who had terrible experiences with the Catholic Church. You must have had a very different experience?

Yes, I was taught by the Catholic nuns all through school; they were wonderful teachers. When my brother was dying, the Pastor of our church emptied the collection plate and gave it to my mother and he said buy a ticket and go out and be with him. She paid him back later, of course, but it was such a gift at the time. I know that other people had bad experiences, but I certainly did not. So my faith has been an immense help to me in trying times. If you think that life is all tragedy and hard luck, then nothing can really help you. You have to believe that there is some kind of plan and reason for things. Accept what you cannot change, and do your best to make the things you can change better. After my husband died, I knew someone who said to me, "You're taking it very well." I said, "Me having hysterics isn't going to change anything. What choice do I really have, but to carry on for my children?" I did have a friend whose husband had died a few years earlier. She was in such a state

I think it was a wonderful thing to do, and I think it was quite appropriate. We know that there were abuses, and for him to make such a statement was the right thing to do. He is a very holy man, a very enlightened man. He had a lot to do with the fall of communism. He has used his moral authority to make necessary changes. He has even recognized Palestine. He's one of the few leaders who has. He's very ill, but he keeps traveling, doing the good work. The Parkinson's disease and the hip operation have really hurt him. I don't think he's been the same physically since he was shot, in 1980 or 1981.

As a mother and grandmother, does the amount of sex and violence in popular television, movies and games bother you at all? How should parents police these matters?

It's there and we have to deal with it. It's everywhere, in fact. My children are adults now, and they can certainly handle it. But I think the small ones should be kept away from it. Honest to God, the kids today know things that I didn't know when I was 35! I mean, really! There are no holds barred. They know so much more -- what they teach kids now at school is so much more information than we ever had. Children must learn certain things in order to know what's going on in the world, and to protect themselves.

Your work is so popular, yet your work doesn't contain X-rated love scenes or extremely graphic scenes of violence.

I don't criticize people who do put those things in their books. I think people should have the freedom to write whatever they want. I just never have chosen to do so, nor have I ever seen any need to do so. I think that I can achieve suspense using the anticipation and the imagination of the reader. I have always maintained that the sexiest line of the century was: "You'll not shut me out of your bedroom tonight, my dear."

Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*.

Right! Now, that's sexier than me spelling it out. I mean, we all know how to do it, for God's sake! Some of the scenes being written today are so explicit that I feel like I've accidentally stumbled into someone's annual physical -- and I don't want to be there. I don't need it.

You are also still a newlywed yourself. How did you meet your second husband? Did you think you would ever remarry?

Well, I had enjoyed being married. My marriage to Warren was wonderful, and I had grown to miss being married. I had always dated; I liked to go out, but I had never met the right person really. My daughter Patty works at the Mercantile Exchange in New York, and one day she announced: "Well, I've found him." And I said, "Found who?" Patty was the one who introduced me to John Conheeny, my husband. John was the CEO of the Merrill Lynch Futures Division, and was just retiring. He was a widower who had been married for 40 years before his wife died, two years before. Patty told me that he had read my books and had enjoyed them, and that he was very good-looking. I was giving a cocktail party, and Patty said that I should invite John -- she said she just knew he would be happy to come to the party. So I invited him to the party, and that was it! John still has no idea how many tuna casseroles were floating around New Jersey in hopes of landing such an eligible bachelor! Everybody was trying to introduce him to their mother or a friend.

What do you think are the secrets to a successful marriage?

Compatibility and a sense of humor are very important. Good dispositions are a big help. I could never marry someone crabby - or one of those guys who are upset all the time. I just couldn't do it.

You mentioned that your mother was a bridal buyer for B. Altman's before she got married, and you grew up loving fashion. In fact, *While My Pretty One Sleeps* was set in the fashion world. Do still have that interest?

I love pretty clothes; I love good clothes. My mother would go scouring 5th Avenue back when we had no money. She could always find something good on the sale rack. She really knew clothes. In fact, I had to tell her once, "Please knock off the thumb and finger test. Can't you just say it's nice?" You know, where you check the quality of the fabric? When I'd introduce my mother to a friend who was wearing a nice suit, she'd immediately feel the fabric and check out the buttons, seams, cut etc. Old habits die hard, I guess!

Which decade you do think had the best fashions?

There are good fashions in every decade. Elegance is always in style. I certainly hated miniskirts, though! I mean, you would see grandmothers in miniskirts and stockings -- that was not good. If you look at Chanel's suits over the years, for example, they are elegant.

We've just emerged from the minimalist 90s, with flat hair, less ornamentation, not much color etc. And for Spring the hair is a bit bigger, the colors brighter, and even Prada is showing silk luncheon dresses.

I love silk dresses and suits. I had two silk dresses which were my favorites. They each had a sleeveless linen coat; it was such a knockout look. Why don't they make great stuff like that anymore? So much of the clothing now is so plain - not plain with style, just plain and ugly. And as for evening gowns, you need some color. Black, black, black is all we've had for years. I'm so sick of black. I own enough black clothing to furnish an entire town, because we go out frequently to black tie events. It looks like a party of penguins! I do have one evening suit with a long skirt and a sleeveless blouse and a jacket that I like. I mean, if I have to wear black then I might as well wear what looks good. I do have a new silk gown that is lilac, with a soft print. I just love it. I'm glad to see we'll be having some color for a change. Color is uplifting.

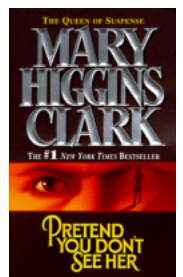
Why did you choose philosophy as a major when you went back to college? Has it helped you as a writer?

Yes, I feel that it has. I had taken various courses over the years, but the first course I took when I was going back to college was about C.S. Lewis. And I was so intrigued by it. (My first semester back I just took one course, to get myself back into the habit of studying everyday). I was going to go for an English major, but after that class I thought, "Let's go for philosophy." Because, of course, there is so much reading in a philosophy course of study, and I do love to read. There is a lot of psychology in philosophy, which I found fascinating. And it has been very helpful in my writing.

Do you ever have the itch to write in another genre? It seems like many top authors have a secret book they want to write.

Yes, I am writing my memoirs. I'm calling it *Kitchen Privileges*. After my father died, my mother put a sweet little sign out on the house that said, "Furnished room; kitchen privileges." I've wanted to do this for a long time, and now I am. I think I'm a pretty decent writer, and when I see some of the criticisms from the reviewers I am just surprised. I would like to set the record straight on a few things. I do think that authors who are commercially successful really don't get fair treatment from reviewers much of the time. When you've written over 25 books, and your first print run for a new book is 1.1 million copies, you tend to get these bad reviews sometimes. I believe that the real critics that count are the readers. I get so much mail from my readers, who are very well-educated. People like college professors write in to tell me how much they love my books. That means a lot to me. But then I'll read a literary review which says my work is full of weak writing, or calling it confetti, or that I have gullible characters, and I have to think, "Come on, now. That's just not fair."

"A writer does not write for her desk drawer -- she writes for people to read what she has written. A writer wants as many people as possible to read her



So, have you had to develop a thick skin?

Well, there was one review two years ago which really knocked a book of mine.(laughing) So I found out what the reviewer looked like, and I intend to make him the villain in my next novel! Or, perhaps he'll show up as a victim with a bullet in his head. That's one of the joys of being a writer. You can take out all your frustrations in fiction, and remain a perfectly lovely person in real life.

Now that's a great revenge -- and it's completely harmless! Let's talk about the Internet a bit. Do you use the Internet to correspond or to shop?

I am definitely online now, and am just now learning how to use the Internet. I really can't have an email address that is made public, because of the incredible volume of mail that I receive from readers -- and I answer all of my reader mail. My grandchildren are all on the Internet, and use computers all the time. My husband is online, too. I've only gotten online recently, so I haven't yet shopped online, but I have used the Web for research. For my book last year I downloaded a great deal of interesting and helpful research.

In light of Stephen King's recent release of his novella online, would you ever consider publishing one of your short stories in an electronic-only format?

I think it's a fascinating idea. Of course, I would have it go through my publisher, Simon and Schuster. Certainly electronic rights have become a more important part of any publishing contract. That is an issue that has to be looked at carefully by the author. It could happen in the future; I am definitely open to the idea.

In 10 years, will readers be reading your books on an electronic reader, or will they still be reading them in hardcover or paperback?

There is something so comforting about a real book that you can hold in your hand. I don't think that books will go away. You know, when television was invented, they said no one would ever go to the movies again. But that certainly didn't happen. There is always a place for a new development, such as e-books. But it doesn't necessarily mean that it will replace what came before.

Several years ago, everyone said that the Internet would mean the end of books, but it ended up having the opposite effect. Now everyone goes online to buy books, discuss books, and read about their favorite authors. Certainly, email has people writing more letters than they have in years.

Another thing that the Internet has done is to help people feel not so alone anymore. With email and chat rooms, people who led rather solitary existences can now make contact with others.

If you hadn't been a writer, what other careers could you see yourself enjoying?

Well, it's funny. I won the Dramatic Medal in high school. I won the Best Actress in the Bronx contest one year. (laughing) I really wanted to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, but instead I went to secretarial school to help support the family after my father died. But my first job was actually in advertising. But if I hadn't been a writer, I would have loved to have been an actress. My granddaughter, who has just turned 16, was just voted Best Actress by both the popular vote and the judges vote in a competition between 12 local school plays. She is going to be an actress. And my daughter Carol acted for quite a time before she became a novelist. She's an excellent actress. She still likes to act. Carol has just returned from Africa. She boarded QEII in Capetown, and will give lectures on the ship.

You must be so proud of her.

Oh, yes! I'm proud of all my children.

Were you excited that at least one of your children decided to follow in your footsteps and become a writer?

I was very pleased. All my children have done so well. Two of my children are judges, one produces radio programs, and one is on Wall Street. They all are natural storytellers. Any one of them could have been a writer if they had wanted to be.

Do you and Carol ever talk about your books in progress, or bounce story ideas off one another?

Oh, sure. On this last book, I was struggling a bit with the story. I'd show Carol a scene, and say: "This is just not working." And she'd give me honest feedback about why she thought it wasn't working. Or she will ask me about a certain character, and I will say if I think that character isn't quite working and what might be done to fix the problem. It's a very helpful process.

Is there anything else that you'd like to say to our readers?

I am just very grateful to those who enjoy my books! You know, a writer writes to be read. Years ago, Jean Kerr (who wrote *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*) said, "A writer is anyone who makes \$20,000 a year from his writing." What she meant was that a writer wants to be read. Jean Kerr was just wonderful -- she was so funny. I was so sorry when she decided to stop writing. A writer does not write for her desk drawer -- she writes for people to read what she has written. A writer wants as many people as possible to read her work. And so, I really appreciate my readers -- they are whom I write for. When I get a letter from someone who says that she's been in the hospital, and that my books have cheered her up or helped to make her forget her aches and pains, that is really gratifying to me. That makes me feel great.



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