

Getting the Story Right

An Interview With Fiction Writer Elizabeth Evans

By Amy Weintraub

While Elizabeth Evans was on sabbatical from the University of Arizona, where she is a full professor in the Creative Writing Program, I talked with her several times, both in her Tucson home and in mine, about her life with her family, her literary career, and her latest book, *Suicide's Girlfriend*, published in August 2002. From her early fiction prizes as an undergraduate at Cornell College in Iowa to her first published story ("Small Acts") in *Mademoiselle* in 1979 and her first collection of short stories, *Locomotion*, published in 1986 (which Frederick Busch called a "powerful and moving study of family life" written with "Jamesian precision"), Evans has been winning praise for her work. She has received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Arizona Commission on the Arts, New Voices of the West from the Lila Wallace/Readers Digest Fund, the James Michener Fellowship from the University of Iowa, and the Hawthorne International Retreat for Writers Fellowship in Scotland. Critics have compared her to Flannery O'Connor and Dostoevski, among other literary giants.

Her first novel, *The Blue Hour*, published in 1994, was immediately hailed by the *Washington Post* as "a great American novel." *Carter Clay* was selected as an *LA Times* Best Book of 1999. *Kirkus Reviews* called it "agonizing, uncompromising. ... A masterful story of simple people trying to understand God's inhumanity to man." The novel *Rowing in Eden* followed in 2000.

Above the desk where she writes, Evans keeps her worn copy of *The Essential Kierkegaard*, and, like her favorite philosopher, she's not afraid to tackle difficult ethical issues, gazing long and hard at the dark side of human nature. "As a reader," she says, "I like being in the company of writers who are trying to figure out something thorny—writers like Kundera or Dickens or Alice Munro—and I suppose other readers share that pleasure."

In her work, Evans moves from questions of global significance, questions of evil and hope in the world, to questions of personal significance: what it's like to grow up female, what it's like to grow up surrounded by addiction and unpredictable behavior, what it's like to fall in love, to fumble through those early adolescent sexual experiences, what it's like to be a smart woman protecting a weak man. She faces human frailties fearlessly, going deep, endlessly revising to discover the essence of story and character through language that is both precise and thrilling, capturing the cadence of a multitude of characters—addicts, Vietnam vets, a born-again teen mother,

intellectually precocious girls on the brink of puberty, artists and academics—often far from the quiet life she leads.

The Bloomsbury Review: *You live a very quiet and settled life with your husband, daughter, and two dogs. Yet sometimes you write about disturbing circumstances and characters who seem far from your own life. I'm thinking of characters without a conscience, like Eule in the story "Blood and Gore" (from Suicide's Girlfriend), who turns female joggers into roadkill, and Rear End (in Carter Clay), the homeless, despicable, but interesting fake Vietnam vet. Carter Clay himself is an alcoholic, guilt-ridden vet.*

How do you tap into the awareness of such blighted characters?

Elizabeth Evans: That's my job. The writer has to be able to enter into whatever mind he or she needs in order to get the story done. I can tell you that I did a lot of research about Vietnam vets, brain injury, paraplegia, and addiction to make certain I could write with authority about these folks. The new collection has stories

from the points of view of a man from Nigeria, a teenage mother who is both a fundamentalist and an iconoclast, a grammar school secretary, and so on. I was glad to get to know all of them. They have their own motivations. They have their own experiences and responses, but there was never, say, a time when I was thinking how different Carter Clay was than myself. I was too busy trying to get his story right. If I am keeping the character in the world of the story and making sure that I always feel as if he's solid enough to knock a glass off a table or get punched in the jaw, I guess he or she will feel awfully close to me.

TBR: *So, given the differences in the way you live and the way your characters live, I have to ask the question audiences often ask writers at readings: Where do you get your material?*

EE: I suppose I am always taking notes, whether in a bona fide journal or on the back of my hand. Someone says or does something interesting, and I write it down. When I was in India, I passed a store called "Adequate Furniture." I wrote it down. I read a lot—and not just fiction. I read works of philosophy, theology, science. I read the magazines people bring to the gym where I work out. I am interested in how other people think, so I'm paying attention.

TBR: *How do you take a sociopath like Rear End and make him into a well-rounded, fully realized character?*

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EE: Proceed with respect for the character. Just as I do not believe in creating characters who are idols, I don't believe in creating characters who are straw dogs—that is, simply in the story to be knocked over. And I give the reader access to the character's mind.

TBR: *Rear End happens to have an interesting mind.*

EE: Yes, he's smart and fancies himself an artificer in the lineage of Iago, one of the Shakespearean characters I find most interesting, yet baffling. Though I can't claim to entirely understand what motivates such characters beyond their debased self-interest—they really do exist too far outside of our shared morality to be totally accessible—I can track their thoughts and movements. And, like any well-drawn character, these crummy guys can help a writer bring forth the story's vision. They can shed necessary light.

TBR: *Then there are the morally ambiguous characters like M.B., the grandmother in Carter Clay, who substitutes religious fundamentalism for serious moral thought. In some ways, perhaps because she's a little closer to our own sensibility and experience, M.B. seems like an even harder character to write than a bad guy like Rear End.*

EE: There's a part of me—and I daresay all of us—that's selfish and vain and wants to look away from other people's pain. Despite M.B.'s lousy behavior, I feel sorry for her in some ways. Her life is pretty impoverished, after all. She thinks she needs to roost on top of her pot of gold in order to protect it from demons, while the rest of us can see she dreamed up the pot and the gold and, probably, most of the demons, too.

TBR: *Do you think showing or hinting at the psychological scaffolding that makes a character do what she or he does weakens a story?*

EE: Thank you for asking that question. In stories, one often looks for what motivates a character, but the clean and tidy motivation—what you see is what you get—can be both a fake and a bore, and it rarely assists the story in reaching any transcendent meaning. One of fiction's satisfactions is kind of a cause and effect, and yet there are the big things you write about in fiction, like love and death, that remain quite mysterious.

TBR: *You often craft high drama into your work. In all three novels there is a steady rise of tension that brings the central character to the brink of destruction. I had to remind myself to breathe while reading toward the climax in Carter Clay. How do you write with that kind of intensity?*

EE: I sometimes have to tie myself to the chair. And before I can actually do that—write a scene in which characters I care about suffer—sometimes I have to go work on another scene first. Or I trick myself, saying, "Okay, I'm going to write just a little bit of it now." I have to prepare to be brave. Then maybe I can write the whole thing out all at once. It's arduous, but I keep at it until I've figured out how to write the painful or scary scene with respect for the characters and what I know about the world. Then I feel the scene has earned its place.

TBR: *The philosophizing, omniscient narrator in Carter Clay challenges the narrative, as well as the reader, to find meaning in some pretty terrible circumstances. How did it feel to play God?*

EE: That omniscient narrator in *Carter Clay* was not God, but a narrator who had a lot of authority and asked a lot of questions. I granted myself a lot of power and numerous

voices with that narrator. There were times when I felt like all of that power meant I had the world on my back and it was crushing me, and times when I was happy as a clam to have so much freedom.

TBR: *There is a vast difference in the language you use in Carter Clay—lean, hard, unadorned, suited to your somewhat cynical, probing narrator—and the more lyrical language in Rowing in Eden, well-suited to the perceptions of a smart, romantically inclined 13-year-old girl. The shifts of prose style and voice are even more dramatic in your new collection, Suicide's Girlfriend, where quirky perceptions rise up in various voices, all from deep within the consciousness of the character. Can you explain your process?*

EE: I read everything aloud, over and over again, as I work on it, sometimes not even saying the words but just doing the beats of the words because I need to hear the rhythms of the sentences. The characters and narrators use different cadences as well as different diction. And then, I also have to feel as if the sentences satisfy the overall rhythms and tone of the story. I could not imagine writing without reading aloud. What if I lost my voice? Yikes!

TBR: *What role does planning, outlining, or otherwise using your will to direct the story play in your work?*

EE: I tell my students to try to write the story through in some sort of rough draft. Think of your project as if it's a wonderful house you want to build on a fabulous piece of land. You've already got the land—that's your desire to write a story—and all of the experiences you bring along with that desire. So now build yourself a rough little shack to live in while you build the wonderful house. You have to start somewhere. I love to tinker with sentences right off the bat, so it's not always easy for me to follow my own advice, but I know it's good advice. In fact, if I don't follow it in the first place, later I usually have to build a little shack to live in because I have to tear down part of the house for major repairs.

TBR: *Ten-year-old Penny in The Blue Hour is a peacemaker in her family. Was that a role that you played in your family?*

EE: I think so. I was the youngest and tried to run interference on things.

TBR: *There's a way in which Penny tries to provide what she perceives her father needs, a kind of ego soothing, that later the 13-year-old Franny, in Rowing in Eden, tries to provide for her boyfriend. It seems your smart young girls are often protecting men.*

EE: I think that's something that we learned as girls, that we must not let men be ashamed because the consequences would be too awful. The man would fall apart or become too angry, and you can't let that happen. I think women tend to protect men and boys from their sometimes well-deserved shame. I'm continuing to explore this theme in the novella I'm working on now. The young man in the story has done something wrong and carried out a major deception, and his wife knows that somehow she has to acknowledge it. At the time, she's also watching the Watergate trials, seeing the exposure of men in politics who have done terrible things, and she's feeling that same discomfort, the same desire not to

look, not to see. How did we learn to tiptoe?

TBR: *Even though The Blue Hour is a novel about the terror of family life from a child's perspective, there's a bigger theme, I think: a vision of the American Dream, partly represented by the architecturally significant house the family can't afford but buys anyway, and partly in the Willy Loman-like character of Bob, Penny's dad.*

EE: I did not think of the book as a story of the American Dream, but from very early on I knew I was writing about human ambitions. As I kept writing the book, over and over, I continued to uncover more and more of the allure and pain of those ambitions. The book is not without humor—people always laugh at certain points in the story when I give a reading from it—but all of that digging turned up a story that's also pretty sad. I encourage my students to dig deep. Step on the gas, guys.

TBR: *Do you draw from your own life for your fiction?*

EE: I've sometimes used family material in my work, but I'm after something deeper, trying to shake some meaning out of what happened, how the characters behaved toward each other. In some ways, it's easier to make everything up. Drawing from real life can hobble you. It takes a lot longer to get it into the flow of the whole narrative, the whole meaning of the story. I know I've reached the point of the story when I can't remember if it belongs to the actual past of Elizabeth Evans or if it's just something I made up.

TBR: *Do you ever not use material from the historical past because you're afraid that it might hurt someone?*

EE: Sometimes. I had a hard time getting *The Blue Hour* out of the house because I was afraid it might disturb family members. On the other hand, I'm not going to give the story less than what it needs because somebody might feel offended.

TBR: *What do you tell your students about using family material?*

EE: Be brave and honorable.

TBR: *In "Suicide's Girlfriend," the title story from the new collection, Candace Cleeve is an emerging artist, and you convey a strong painterly sensibility in her character. Are you an artist?*

EE: I was a studio painter, and actually began a graduate degree in painting before I attended the Iowa Writer's Workshop. As a child, I wrote poetry and painted, but didn't imagine I could have a life as an artist until I was in college. All around me were people supporting themselves by teaching, but committed to their art. That inspired me. I've always been willing to put in great amounts of time on my writing, and I was the same way when I was painting. I'd carry a sketchpad and be sketching at meals and when people came by my dorm room. I was not shy about people seeing my work.

TBR: *At what point did you see yourself as a writer?*

EE: I became interested in writing fiction when I read Vladimir Nabokov for the first time in an undergraduate seminar at Cornell College in Iowa. I'd read good fiction writers, of course—I've always been a great reader—but before Nabokov fiction had washed over me in a way that prevented

me from seeing the artifices. Nabokov pushed his beautiful artifices under your nose. He got me thinking about formal issues in fiction in a way that I'd always thought about them in poetry. He had fabulous narrators and perfectly rendered characters and comedy and beauty, and he was a metaphor-maker supreme.

TBR: *Do you feel you have an obligation to your readers?*

EE: When a story is finished, everything we give to our readers is part and parcel of teaching them how to read the story. The more you write, the more you learn in terms of identifying places where your reader could go astray either because you've let the world slip away, or you have the wrong tone, or you've presented information in the wrong order. Ultimately, whether or not your story works depends on how well you've done your job in teaching the reader how to read it. I can't get the story just sort of right and feel I've fulfilled my commitment.

TBR: *You have two daughters, one of whom is still at home, and until recently was home-schooled, which means at least part of your family has always been at home while you are working. How are you able to balance your writing life, your teaching life, and your home life?*

EE: Like most people, I have competing desires and responsibilities. Writing, teaching, being a parent—any of the three could easily engage all of my time. This means I have to be fairly disciplined. When my younger daughter was home-schooled, she and her dad did their work in one part of the house, and I in another. These days, my husband and I enjoy the fact that we're both at home much of the time, but we really do stay in our own work areas throughout the day, and this is also true for much of the evening. After dinner, you'll usually find the three of us off in our own rooms, reading or writing or studying. On New Year's Eve I worked until 9:30, then stayed in with my husband. I lead a pretty quiet life, both by choice and necessity. I spend more time working than many people would care to, but then my writing—although often a royal pain—is also my pleasure. ■

INTERVIEWER: **Amy Weintraub** has won numerous awards for her short fiction. Her craft essays, interviews, and profiles have appeared in *The Writer's Chronicle* and *Poets & Writers*, and her articles about yoga and depression appear regularly in national magazines. Her nonfiction book, *Compassionate Practice*, will be published by Broadway Books in 2004. She teaches writing and yoga in Tucson, AZ.