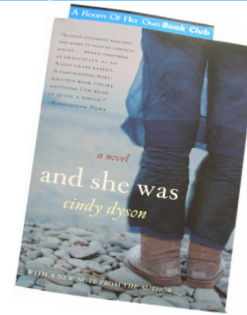


Cindy Dyson's *And She Was*

Cindy Dyson's work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *Backpacker*, *Women's World*, among other publications. The author of eight books for young adults, Dyson grew up in Alaska. *And She Was* is her impressive first novel.



Conversation with Cindy Dyson

Jana Ozturgut is Cindy's sister and lives in Alaska, where the sisters grew up. She has an M.A. in literary criticism, has taught high school English, and is working on a novel. She is currently staying home with her four children, focusing on preventing them from being trampled by neighborhood moose, and training for an Alaskan mountain marathon.

Jana Ozturgut: Your novel has a lot of factual information about the setting, the Aleutians, but your narrator gives this information in a surreal way. Can you comment on the process of shaping facts to create a world that is very real and at the same time quite other, almost dream like or fantastical.

Cindy Dyson: I was pretty conscious along the way that I wanted to have a lot of the Aleutians' actual history. I started writing the book because I had a non-fiction magazine article to write. I was researching and just became fascinated. But I knew I didn't want it to be like, "Now dear reader, we are going to pause to give you the necessary facts before we continue with the story." I wanted the factual parts to feel like the character needed to feel or the mood of that particular section. I hope everything is colored by that so it doesn't feel like an aside but like further sinking into a character's world and mind.

Jana: Can you talk about the process of transitioning to writing fiction?

Cindy: When I started writing the novel, I really didn't mean to. I had been a non-fiction writer; I was a reporter. I had several fiction-writer friends, and I would kind of make fun of them. I really had no desire to write a novel and had no idea why anyone would. I'm really not sure what happened to me, but I became entranced by [the research I was doing for] a magazine article and I just wanted to keep researching. Much to my astonishment, no magazines really wanted to have articles about the Aleutians. So I accidentally started writing a novel. I had an idea for a character and I knew I wanted to include as much as I

could about [Aleut] history--the history of conquest. I was pregnant at the time and reading about what the mothers and babies went through at the time of conquest, which of course we've read about many times before. It's a very common, old story, but when you're expecting, and then when you have [a baby] in your arms and are nursing, it's so visceral and so powerful. There are so few people to talk to about that sort of thing. I think I felt compelled in a strange way to include the history of the Aleutians almost alongside the history of my emotions as an expectant and new mother reading.

Jana: What interested you about these very different people? Who were you identifying with?

Cindy: It's kind of a split answer because the part of me who I was when I wrote that first rough draft I think I identified more, at least the emotional compelling part, was the story--or what I imagined from the little information we have--of the mothers, during the conquest especially, and then the continual devastation. I mean they couldn't catch a break for 200 years. But at the same time I think there was a part of Brandy dying in me as a new mother, that wild spirited woman who can just take a man at her whim. I had recently been married when we decided to have a baby. [Brandy] is very much about sex and very much all about her own fulfillment. That transition that takes someone from a girl or a person who is not yet morally culpable who is still kind of an Eve in a garden and then takes her to a woman, to a mother who is now moral responsible not only for herself but for another. is a crucial human transition we go through. Women can go through it without having a baby, but it certainly forces the change to happen more quickly. I guess I identified with both Brandy and the Aleut women because I was going through the transition that's represented by both of them.

Jana: In your novel two very different lifestyles collide. When you began did you know what this collision would look like?

Cindy: When I began I didn't know anything. I wanted to keep researching this place and no [magazines] would pay me to do it. And I was fascinated by this character of Brandy. The first draft I did, I think it was like 80 pages, my husband read it and he is like, 'Wow these characters are so neat and the setting is so neat and your writing is so beautiful, but I wonder if you've thought about adding a plot.' After berating him and kicking him a few times I realized that was what it lacked -- a plot. I had a voice of some characters who had come alive, a place that intrigued me, a bit of something I wanted to work through and understand for myself. The process of putting that all into a plot was a real challenge. I had never written fiction I had never given any thought to such things. Frankly starting with my husband and then family and friends,

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anyone who's opinion I respected, I started asking them to read it and then sitting down with a list of my questions and then asking them where does your heart want to go? Where does your heart start to ache? Who don't you understand? What do you wish you knew more about? Pretty open-ended questions, so I could get an idea what a plot should look like. At the same time I was researching. I remember the day I found out that many archeologists believe the Aleuts ate mummy flesh as a form of magic to hunt whales. How could I get a better plot idea than that? A lot of the plot came from researching and picking the brains of people I respected.

Jana: Who or what is the character of Brandy based on?

Cindy: Much of Brandy is based on the girl who was my best friend from sixth grade all the way through high school, who I've seen sporadically since. She and I, when we were 14, 15, 16 we had our fake I.D.s and we would sneak into bars and that sort of thing. I saw her continuing that into our 30's, and I assume now even into our 40's. I think we've all seen that, women who are too old to be wearing a skirt that short and still bleaching their hair. That was a big question for me and the impetus for Brandy's character. What makes a person really stuck, what made my friend stuck in what we did as teenagers? Why do some people get free? What is the hand that pushes them forward? I was just really curious about that. I knew the Aleutians of all places could do that. And then reading about the Aleut women, here were some women who were not going to be stuck in their circumstances and they were not going to depend on someone else. In the novel, they are the thing that unsticks Brandy, along with the physical place itself, which is so unique that it can shock you into a fresh way of thinking and maybe open doors into a fresh way of being.

Jana: Tell me how the Talking Head's song And She Was became part of your novel?

Cindy: I had been trying to think of a good title; I didn't like my working title. I had at least one screaming child in the backseat of my car and I had a tire going flat and I was driving into town to do a bunch of errands, which I hate, and of course I was turning the radio up so I could drown out my child in the back, and that song She's Come Undone came on, and I was like "Oh! That'd be so perfect!" But Wally Lamb already took that title so I was cussing out Wally Lamb, my child is screaming, and then the next song to come on the radio was And She Was. I listened to it and I thought, "Wow, I love that song." It has this kind of bee-boppy sound with a haunting undertone, and the lyrics are beautiful and kind of mysterious. When I got home from all my errands, I got out all my old tapes and listened to it over and over, and just thought, "Oh, it's perfect." And when I sold the book, my publisher told me, "There's no way you can use that; It'll cost you tens of thousands to buy the rights to even use the title. But I said "I want to try." I contacted David Burns and

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I talked to his personal assistant and sent him the manuscript and apparently [Burns] liked it or at least his assistant said he did, and he signed over all the lyrics and the rights for me to use it in the book. My publisher was quite shocked and went on about how that never really happened and had to contact [Burns] herself to make sure I hadn't the rights agreement.

Jana: The interwoven stories about the generations of Aleut women feel authentic. What contributes to this quality? Do you have ties to that community?

Cindy: I wanted to be able to write with some personal knowledge about how [Dutch Harbor] felt during the season Brandy was there. I lived there four or five months so I place Brandy there during the same time frame. I did go back during the research phase to see how things had changed, where my memory was faulty. I recovered some hiking trails, found the remains of my cabin, drank at the Elbow Room. As far as the back-story goes, so much of their history was lost so quickly. As I say on book, it is estimated that ninety percent died in the first sixty/eighty years of conquest. Russian fur traders were not real interested in writing down a lot of history so we just don't have a lot. But I think, as far as the imagining, I remember having this overwhelming feeling as I researched and then wrote that I knew how these women felt and acted...why they did what they did. I was confronted with an unexpected feeling of the viciousness of motherhood--that mother-bear thing--and its something I don't think they prepare you for. All of a sudden I knew I could kill and die for this little thing in my arms. There wouldn't be any moral wishy-washiness. All of a sudden, I knew how these women, whose children are dying, would act and how they would feel. It was pretty powerful for me to think that across time and across culture, skin color, and religion, mothers feel this same intensity, this ferocity. You look at any story of atrocities and [mothers] act the same way. I remember with the tsunami in the Philippines and you could see the look on a mother's face as she held a dead child. And your like "You know I know exactly what you feel." This is something that cuts across all culture. It's purely human. That was pretty powerful and I felt confident that I captured that. But I don't know, really, about the more subtle things about Aleut culture. In the paperback version I was allowed to include an author's note that delineates what we think we know and what things I simply made up. I was really glad to be able to do that because people kept asking and I think it's an important delineation to make. But as far as that power of being able to say "I think this is how a threatened mother of a child feels," I feel I got it right.

On Amazon I got a couple scathing reviews from people who were Aleut or claiming to be Aleut saying that I didn't understand them at all and that I portrayed them all as drunks and wife beaters and killers and so forth. Those are actually a couple of my favorite reviews and I

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encourage people to go look them up because I think they are really fascinating. Maybe someday if I get the courage, I'll try to find out who those people are and talk to them about what struck them so violently about the book. I had several Aleut people say just the opposite too. I remember having my third reading in Seattle and a group of two or three Aleut women came up to me at the signing table and they said, "You don't let any of those Aleuts give you shit because they're gonna try to, I just know it. It's a great book." I guess you can't please everyone. But anytime you dig into someone else's culture and are willing to say bad things, people are going to be offended. I kind of like to be offended now and then so I think I'm giving people a gift whether they realize it or not.

Jana: I remember the Aleut internment glossed over in high school Alaskan history, but it has received far less attention than the Japanese interment during this period. With this story and the others did you have a sense of telling a part of history that needs attention?

Cindy: Yes, few people know that Japan occupied part of the Aleutian Islands during WWII, that bombs were dropped, that the Aleuts were forcibly removed to internment camps. We know about the Japanese experience because this happened to thousands and because there were reporters in California. In Alaska, there were hundred and few witnesses. The entire Aleutian islands were evacuated of all their people and resettlement was awful. Only half the people ever returned to their island the death rates were three to ten times what they were in the Japanese interment camps. There was a doctor who sexually abused the girls; most of the camps didn't even have a doctor. It was just atrocious and that's where a lot of the alcoholism was picked up because in the interment camp alcohol was brought to them through the military. It's very sad and very unknown.

I started a scholarship with part of the proceeds from the book for Aleut students pursuing writing, history, archeology, anthropology--those areas of study that flesh out the stories. Last year we awarded two people the scholarship and I am hoping, if I ever get royalties from the book, I'll be able to keep increasing that scholarship because it's so powerful to be able to tell your story. Stories have the power to help us reframe events. On my website are the names of a few books and a documentary for anyone interested. Also on my site is your slideshow about how to use the power of story to reframe historic events — Find Your Voice — is a powerful visual of this idea and I still cry when I watch it.

Jana: In some ways your novel turns morality upside down. You have a heroine who takes drugs and sleeps around. You have mentors that commit murder. And you turn the metaphor of taking the forbidden fruit into something positive.

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Cindy: The story of the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden has always been a real problem for me. I am a Christian and have chosen to believe it. Whether allegorically or not, I believe that is the gist of what human-kind went through. I've always had a big problem with it because it seems to blame us for something God did. I started to wonder, well if God did this, maybe it's a gift. And if so, how can I conceptualize it as a gift? I know that for myself, the idea of living amorally--not perceiving my choices as good or bad--would feel pretty vacuous. And of course I can't conceptualize living as if [my choices] didn't matter. For me [morality] makes things important. I judge and I am required to do so. I must judge my actions and everybody else's. When trying to conceptualize the fall from grace as a gift, the necessary question is what are we doing with that gift that God gave us? I love the idea of morally ambiguous mentors. It is only the people who will act, who we can then judge as good or evil. The people who do nothing will just be nothing. I think the apathetic among us are actually the more sinister evil. To act in the best way you can, with the best information you have that's all you can do. It is these people who can be heroes. I do think the Aleut women go too far and slip into evil actions, but they are acting. They are not apathetic. Right now with our culture, which is pretty self-satisfied, fairly pampered, I think apathy is one of our greatest evils. So the fact that the Aleut women are nowhere near apathetic makes them mentors even when they do wrong. It's just so much more interesting to have mentors with cracks, to have mentors who are slitting people's throats.

With Brandy I wanted to make sure that drugs and alcohol and promiscuity were not the root of her problems because that's too easy, too common. I think it's rarely, if ever, true that surface behaviors are the problem. I wanted you to know that she had a drink in her hand at the end of the book—that changing behavior is not what it's about. It's about something so much deeper. The subculture she is in, in the 80's, in a fishing village on the Aleutian Islands there are drugs all over the place, this is her culture and that was very authentic. I wanted that to be in your face, and I didn't want anyone to go away with the idea that stopping those really superficial things has anything whatsoever to do with good and evil.

Jana: Thad is a great guy. He stays alive through the book. Why doesn't Brandy end up with him?

Cindy: Number one, I in no way wanted this to be a romance. And I in no way wanted to say that a man saves a woman — in a way he does, he's part of her process, certainly. But I want it to be bigger than that; I wanted it to be more about a soul being saved than a woman being saved....I really felt that if she'd ended up with him that it would have been wrong of

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him to pick a mate who had treated him that way, who had been willing to do those things, and it would have made him less to do so. She had to become morally culpable, to become a moral person, whether for good or bad, before she could be involved with another moral person. I think it's pretty common, especially in some kinds of men, to want to do that for a woman. And I think it's probably always pretty wrong...A woman, a person, has to become a moral being on their own. No one else can do that for them. She could have gone through that transition on her own and then stayed together with him. She doesn't really tell you what happens to her. But I make it pretty clear that she does find a Thad, someone who's equally as wonderful and good for her as he could have been if she had been ready for him.... It's sad. Because he is a good guy. But he's a little blind in wanting to be with a woman who's not a good woman; she's not there yet. And what does it say about him? I think women should flee from men who are trying to rescue them from that kind of basic moral accountability. Men should rescue us from rats and snakes and flat tires. That's their role. I don't think it's healthy for them to be rescuing us from our culpability to be a moral human being.

Discussion Guide for Readers of Cindy Dyson's *And She Was*

Written by Debra Dean whose bestselling debut novel, *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a *Borders Original Voice*, a #1 *Booksense Pick*, a *Booklist Top Ten Novel*, and an *American Library Association Notable Book of the Year*, and has been published in seventeen languages. Her collection of short stories, *Confessions of a Falling Woman*, came out in January to critical acclaim. A native of Seattle, Dean worked as an actor in the New York theatre for nearly a decade before opting for the life of a writer. She is currently serving as a visiting professor at the University of Miami and working on a second novel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Some readers find Brandy a difficult character to identify with or like. How did your initial feelings about Brandy color the story for you? Did those feelings evolve as you read?

2. "There are those among you who will wish to think of these Aleuts as pure of heart and deed, living in pristine nature, at one, and all that. We have that tendency, those of us from recent conquering cultures. After a few generations the guilt sets in, and we nurse that guilt, making our once and former enemies into phantoms of some imagined time when humans were innocents." Brandy is addressing the romanticizing of native cultures by Europeans and their descendents. Can you think of examples in American fiction and film that shaped your own views of Native Americans? How does the depiction of the Aleuts in *And She Was* conform to or differ from other portrayals?

3. There is a literary tradition of internal transformation being prompted by travel and the protagonist's introduction to a new culture. Is this merely a literary device or do you believe, as Brandy does, that a place can change a person? The recent memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, among others, suggests that different destinations offer their own unique lessons. Is Brandy's transformation the result of her exposure to the particularity of Dutch Harbor or might she have had a similar awakening in, say, India or the south of France?

4. The women of this novel reject passivity, dependency on men, and the status of victimhood, and claim their power by acting. "To live with intention, in the full force of our own will, is the most essential and the most dangerous thing we will ever do. It is the act that makes us fully human." These actions, however, are fraught with moral ambiguity. Was there ever a point in the Aleut women's stories that you saw their actions as wrong -- murder rather than killing? How do you think the author judged each generation of Aleut women's actions? And what about Brandy? Is the novel ultimately grounded in morality, and if so, how would you define this morality?

5. Authors who choose to write a novel with two alternating storylines run the risk that readers will find one of the stories more engaging and become impatient with the 'intrusions' of the other. Did you find Brandy's and Aya's stories to be equally compelling? Were the two stories necessary to each other?

6. Drugs and alcohol are prominent in *And She Was*. Is this merely an accu-

rate depiction of the time and place or do mind-altering substances serve a thematic purpose? Why do you think the author never attributes either Brandy's or the Aleut women's problems to drug use and drinking? Why do you think the author never has Brandy give up drugs and alcohol in her quest for change?

7. When readers become engaged with a character, we often wish to rewrite or extend her story. Go ahead, indulge. Should Brandy have stayed with Thad? And what do you think will become of her after she leaves Dutch Harbor? If you were writing the sequel, what would it include?

Writer's Craft Guide of Cindy Dyson's *And She Was*

Written by Dr. Dana Haring, an intrepid teacher of middle school English whose students force her to work creatively every day. She holds graduate degrees in English and education from the University of Montana. In crafting a life in Montana, nature and her 10 year old son fill her with energy and wonder. A current project is remodeling her historic house's guest room into a room of her own.

1. In the book's opening, Dyson writes of the power of place, stating: "People do not possess such places but are possessed by them." Although referring specifically to the birthing of islands along the Aleutian chain, the idea that places can possess us can reach more broadly. What other places wield this sort of power over people? What place wields power and possession over you?
2. Throughout the novel, Dyson uses lines from "And She Was" a 1986 hit by the Talking Heads as chapter titles. As a narrative device, how does this enhance or impede the reader's experience? How do aspects of popular culture such as music help define our memories and experiences? When did this phenomena begin, and is it culturally unique?
3. Dyson draws a comparison of lessons learned from two different mothers. In one, an Aleut daughter is reminded of her power of self-determination when her mother holds her hands and urges her: "These hands, in them you hold your fate, and in no

one's hands but your own does your future rest." Some 220 years later, Brandy receives lessons from her mother about the power of short hemlines, Aqua Net, padded bras, and tight jeans. Both girls become strong women, and both have their respective lessons woven into their being. Brandy, however, has other lessons to learn to achieve self-determination. Consider the irony: in the society where strong prohibitions were placed in front of women, a mother stressed the power of self, whereas in a society that gave at least lip service to equality, a mother stressed that luring a man was most important. What do parents, and especially mothers of girls, explicitly and implicitly arm their children with now?

4. The novel focuses on power and knowledge. "Knowledge and power—the two loop back on each other as parts of the same whole. . . What does power taste like? What is the taste of knowledge? Of good or evil? . . . That was the point of the story. The taste of power and of knowledge is the only taste we know. We are born and we die with it." What do you see as the link between the two, and what happens when one is present without the other?
5. "I am blond, and that's where most of my problems started. Not just the problems of the moment, but yesterday's and last year's and a lifetime's." So says Brandy as she follows another "cute guy with curly hair and no long-range goals." Are women more likely than men to blame a physical feature for their problems? Do we give our physical features credit for successes as well? Is a tendency to point to a physical feature as a determining factor in life, whether consciously or subconsciously, whether positive or negative, one that helps people grow or one that keeps people in stasis?
6. Dyson's research for the novel is clearly evident, from the snippets of Roman culture to the more thorough detailing of Aleut history. What place does research and factual information have in fiction? How does the reader's trust of the narrator or the author shift in the presence of fact?
7. In the historical segments, Dyson documents 250 years of Aleut culture, from first contact with European invaders in the 1700s to 1986. During those 250 years, what fundamental changes occur for the Aleut people? At the same time, what remains constant? What, then, are the defining elements of culture?
8. The Aleut women, in breaking taboos, move from hunting animals to save their

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children, to killing people to save their culture. Are they heroes or criminals? As Brandy wonders: "And I still don't know, all these years later, what they were, are. Monsters? Martyrs? Heroes?" How does the distance between heroism and evil change?

9. Many women in the novel wield sexual power: Brandy, her mother, the Hi-Tide waitresses, Fenia, Bellie. But is it power? Sex is most often used as currency, for coke, for a place to stay, for a sense of being wanted. When is sex not used as currency?

10. For the Aleut women the impetus for dramatic action is often the loss of children, either through death or government action. It is the children's starvation that causes Aya and her companions to learn to hunt. It is the death of children to disease that drives the women to kill Usilax who is keeping the medicine away from the village. It is the removal of children that causes Liz and others to murder the social worker and a violent husband. Bellie, who is herself childless, admits to herself before killing Nicholas, "They had always killed for the children. They were mothers first." Of the women who perform these acts, some are mothers, and some are not. How does motherhood make women capable of nearly unspeakable acts? Second, how does that rage of motherhood extend to other women?

11. Near the end of Thad and Brandy's relationship, he wants something more permanent. She, however, rejects this and sees in his dreams something weak. She sees in Thad's love her "father's helplessness and in myself my mother's cruelty." And she despises this vision. While starting to recognize her own power, she paradoxically resents his willingness to give up his own. In a relationship, where does the power lie? How is this determined? What happens when it changes?

12. Near the end of the book, when Brandy is leaving the island, she breaks her own habit of voyeurism and writes on the bathroom wall of the ferry: "Non sum ego quod fueran. . .I am not what I was." The influences of power, landscape, evil, freedom, history, culture, death, and love have taken her to this new place in herself. How do those forces interact? Do people generally ride a wave of change, like the tsunami, or do they create that change for themselves?

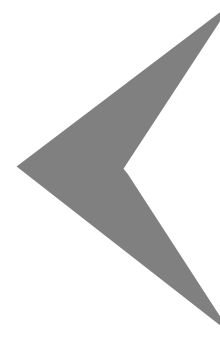
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Since its beginning A Room of Her Own Foundation (AROHO) has given almost \$500,000 to creative women through our \$50,000 Gift of Freedom awards, scholarships, retreats, public readings, the AROHO Book Club, and our customized web-based resource center.

AROHO has hosted over 200 women writers at our unique retreats which feature a world-class faculty, and we have sponsored approximately \$50,000 in scholarships for women writers to attend our retreats as well as other intensive writing programs.

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Elise Juska's *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy*

Elise Juka won the Tom Williams Memorial Award for excellence in fiction writing. Her stories and essays have appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Salmagundi*, and *Black Warrior Review* to name a few. *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy* is her third, highly praised novel.



Conversation with Elise Juska

Kerry Reilly earned an MFA at the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Threepenny Review, The Gettysburg Review and other literary journals. Reilly teaches writing at the University of Colorado, Boulder and is currently working on a memoir.

Kerry Reilly: Before age 35, you have written three critically acclaimed novels, are working on a fourth, and all the while, you continue to publish short stories in many of the country's top literary journals. How do you do it?

Elise Juska: I think I'm fortunate in that every part of my writing life seems to feed every other—ideas for novels generate ideas for stories, stories generate more stories, energy generates energy. Even my teaching, though it claims some of my writing time, tends to fuel my process—having that opportunity, week after week, to articulate what I believe about fiction, what I love about fiction, then go home to write fiction. Not to say it isn't hard work, because it's always hard. Sometimes excruciating and disappointing. Regardless, most nights I go to bed eager to wake up so I can get back to it. It's the thing I want most to be doing in the world.

Kerry: How did you get the idea for this novel?

Elise: Believe it or not, I had a moment similar to the one Claire experiences on the first page, when her hand seems to blend into her kitchen counter. The image stayed in my mind, I wrote it down, and eventually the novel moved from there.

Kerry: Why did you decide to set the novel in Ireland?

Elise: I lived on the west coast of Ireland as a junior in college, and I've always wanted to write a novel set there. One of the things that struck me most about the country was its relationship to language, the joy of it.

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I remember living there a month or so when it dawned on me that most stories I heard weren't true—at least, not true in a literal sense. And no one seemed to care. An exuberant, well-told, untrue story was better than a boring, true one. I was struck too by the lack of cynicism, the whole-heartedness of belief in signs and myth and superstition. Here were my friends—Irish kids who were twenty, twenty-one, like me—and the sight of one or two magpies could affect them deeply. Once, my roommate saw a lone magpie and started to cry. I was astounded by that purity of belief. In those ways, Ireland seemed a fitting counterpoint to Claire's life, one that was more literal, practical, rooted in fact, in language that fits into grids.

Kerry: Speaking of which, do you like crossword puzzles?

Elise: Like them, yes, but I'm not good at them. At least the legit ones. My real forte is the "EZ" variety; I used to do those with my grandmother when I was a little girl. When I started researching Claire's job, I sought the help of a real cruciverbalist who writes puzzles for *The New York Times*. He gave me some fascinating information about how puzzles are designed—where they begin, how they evolve. As I wrote and researched, the whole idea of puzzle-making and meaning-making felt more and more fitting, a reflection of the way Claire was constructing meaning in her own life.

Kerry: Was it challenging to set the novel so far from home?

Elise: It was by far the most difficult of my three novels, for a few reasons, and one of them was certainly the setting. Trying to capture the details. To get the place right. And dialect—that was an enormous challenge, making the dialogue sound authentic but not overdoing it. I'd hoped to revisit Ireland while I was writing, but I couldn't afford it; instead, I consulted my old journals and photos. I asked questions of my old Irish friends and found some very generous people on the Internet, like a woman with a tourism web site in Limerick who not only answered my questions about the geography of the city but took photos for me on her lunch break! I have very clear emotional memories of Ireland—the feeling of the pubs, the people. Gut memories. But having the help of Irish friends made me more confident in the details.

Kerry: What were the other ways the novel was the most difficult to write?

Elise: Structurally, it was the most ambitious of the three. The first, *Getting Over Jack*

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Wagner, was more episodic; *The Hazards of Sleeping Alone* was a more complicated novel character-wise, but followed a more or less linear narrative. *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* I saw as being so much about memory, about the events of Claire's present forcing her to look again at her past and see her family in a new light. On the page, the novel was about equally divided between past and present; it was a challenge to find that balance, to decide what memories needed to be included and how to weave those two strands together. Needless to say, a lot was cut along the way.

I also find that the more I write and the more I know about writing, the more difficult it becomes. The more you know, the more you know what you want to do better. It's a good thing, because it compels you to keep evolving as a writer and challenging yourself in new ways. You don't want to keep replicating the same book—where's the excitement in that? The risk, I think, is in becoming too analytical. I teach a lot of workshops and do an awful lot of critiquing. Sometimes when I read a good story I have to remind myself to step away, not peer too closely at its inner workings but just experience the old, pure pleasure of reading for reading's sake. It can be hard, but I think it's important. It reminds us why we do what we do.

Kerry: Many Irish critics praised the novel. Was their feedback particularly gratifying? How do you feel about criticism?

Elise: I had several Irish people come to my book readings and say that I "got it right." I can't tell you what a relief that was. I imagine it's a concern of any writer, especially when venturing beyond your own backyard, wanting to make sure you capture your subject as truly as you can. And when you're writing about Ireland, there are so many easy stereotypes—the charming, leprechaunish Irish people in the cheerful, blustery pubs. I've read novels that reside in those clichés. It's disappointing. In my experience, there was a lot of joy in that country, a lot of good humor, but it was also in some ways a very sad place. A frustrated place. I wanted to be sure my depiction of Ireland was a fair one, though worried some Irish readers wouldn't like it. I didn't find that at all.

Kerry: You talked about contacting a New York Times crossword constructor—what other types of research went into writing *One for Sorrow*? For example, Claire's husband is an entomologist and her mother has lupus. Did you know much about entomology and lupus before writing the novel?

Elise: I knew nothing about either, and they weren't details I planned on. The characters just started taking shape on the page. I think, with Deirdre, her cane came first. I knew she was a

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formidable personality, but had some physical vulnerability. She walked with a limp across the kitchen, and the lupus arose from there. Bob was an academic, I knew, and science-minded. I can't recall when I realized he was an entomologist specifically, but I do remember that as I started researching, many details about the insect world struck me as unexpectedly tragic, romantic. The contrast between the clinical aspects of Bob's research and the symbolic love-and-death of it felt similar to the difference between Claire's academic life and the one she discovers in Ireland. In both cases, there was quite a bit of research involved.

Kerry: You have been writing since you were in elementary school—can you talk about your writing process? Do you have an office? A schedule? Yiyun Li swears that eating walnuts helps her to write. Do you have any secret weapons?

Elise: And Robert Penn Warren said he only wrote well when eating cupcakes. I don't do anything that fun, but I'm disciplined. I try to write every morning, first thing, before the rest of the day starts crowding in. At night, my mind is too cluttered. My secret weapon is my grandfather's chair, from when he worked in a bank in New Jersey. It's this big, heavy, wooden thing, stuffing falling out, patched with duct tape. But I've convinced myself if I stop sitting in it, I'll stop writing. There's the Irish in me.

Kerry: Do you ever get stuck? If so, what do you do?

Elise: I love the William Stafford line, "Lower your standards and keep going." Thankfully, I don't get stuck often. If I do, I read. Something I know and know I love. Usually this gets me so excited about fiction that whatever fears were holding me back can't compete.

Kerry: Whose work do you read when you're stuck or looking for inspiration?

Elise: It depends somewhat on what I'm writing . . . I stay away from reading anything too stylistically loud or different, that might get into my head and affect the voice of what I'm working on. In general, what re-energizes me is the feeling of connection with the people on the page, that tapping into the core of shared human experience. A good short story does that for me—Alice Munro, William Trevor, Jhumpa Lahiri. Those are utterly reliable. Not flashy, not pretentious. Good, true storytellers. When I read them, I'm not thinking about craft. Their stories leave me so overwhelmed with compassion and recognition that I just want to get back to the keyboard.

Kerry: Has having your work published changed the way you approach writing?

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Elise: For so long—and I imagine most writers are in this boat—I was so shy, so inside my own head. Writing was this private joy. When my first book was published, it was surreal and exciting, but sort of shocking too. Suddenly it's no longer just you alone with the page. You're aware of things like marketing, royalties . . . what's that Annie Dillard line, "Be careful what you learn because that is what you'll know"? I think you can't help but go into a second novel with that extra awareness, the awareness of things you didn't know to be aware of before. And my second novel was very different from the first one, which had my editor concerned. In the first, the narrator is a funny 26-year-old; in the second, it's an anxious, middle-aged single mother. My editor was nervous the second book wouldn't sell, and ultimately, her fears were not unfounded. It sold far, far fewer copies than the first one, but I haven't second-guessed my decisions for a second. They weren't even decisions, really. I followed my instincts and did what was in the best interest of the story I was telling. I shook off the publishing concerns. Really, you have to, right? Otherwise, the integrity of the story is jeopardized. And thankfully, when I sit to write, all those concerns—like most everything else—just sort of fall away.

Kerry: Are you the type of writer who misses her characters when the book is finished? When you're writing the book, do you do things like imagine your characters are out to dinner with you? If so, do your friends notice or seem to mind?

Elise: Ha! Love that question. Well, when a book is over, I definitely feel unmoored for a little while. You live for those characters for many months, and they come to feel so real, it's strange to find them abruptly gone. There is a feeling of loss. As I'm writing, I don't imagine them out to dinner but I do bump into details unexpectedly—you know, when your mind is really in the writing mode, and everything you see feels connected to what you're working on. I'll see a woman on a train and think, "Oh, that's the handbag Claire is carrying in that car scene" or "that's the book Deirdre is reading" or whatever. Everything is relevant and everything is fodder. I also find I'll feel upset if I realize something bad is going to happen to my characters—which sounds like the kind of thing I'd hear another writer say and think sounds flaky or pretentious—but they do, to a certain extent, take on lives of their own. I remember working on *The Hazards of Sleeping Alone* and, when Emily and Walter broke up, feeling really crushed, trying to find a way around it, but I couldn't. That was where their story needed to go. I've come to realize that I tend to want to protect my characters too much, when sometimes they need to get hurt. One of the most helpful comments I got on an early draft of *One for Sorrow* was from Laura Miller—she's writing the discussion guide—who said that I was "letting Claire off the hook too easily." She was right. That comment really helped guide my revisions and complicate Claire's character. I wanted Claire to be a flawed person in the beginning,

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in order for her to recognize her flaws later on. And I was determined to not make her situation with Bob too black-and-white . . . it would have been too easy to make Bob a jerk, to give her a reason for going. I wanted the situation to be more gray—two good people with limitations and blind spots who just couldn't make it work.

Kerry: How much of the plot do you know before you sit down to write?

Elise: Very little. I struggle with plot. My stories are often more internally driven. I start with character, see what they do, and the plot proceeds from there.

Kerry: How do you know when the novel is finished?

Elise: Usually about three-quarters of the way through, I have a sense of the ending—sometimes the final line, or the final scene—a sense of the story's emotional endpoint, even if I'm not sure exactly how I'll get there. I've heard from some readers that they wanted *One for Sorrow* to go on longer, to see what Claire would do with her life once she went home. To me, though, that felt more like plot resolution than character resolution. Claire's recognizing that she shares some of the responsibility for her marriage, seeing her family relationships differently, understanding finally that her mother loved her—to me, those things marked the end of her journey in this story. She's lived so much of her life as a planner, an organizer, with such structure, that I thought it was more important that the book end with her not knowing precisely her next step, and being okay with that.

Kerry: So many people like to ask fiction writers whether their work is autobiographical. Is this a frustrating question for you?

Elise: I think it's really natural to wonder that, though I feel like my answers are often disappointing. Back in grad school, my stories were more closely autobiographical—I think there's some truth to the notion that you write your own story first, then can clear room to start making up others. That kind of fiction requires a different depth of creation, inhabiting lives that aren't your own. In *One for Sorrow*, the only piece that was reminiscent of "real life" was Paul's family. When I first arrived in Ireland, I spent a week living with a family south of Dublin, and when I was creating the Conneelys, I had that household in mind. They drank tea constantly. They ate "toasties." The front door was always banging. They were boisterous and firm and also very loving. And later, in Galway, I had a friend named Paul, a skinny, funny guy from Northern Ireland with long red hair.

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Kerry: Do you still have the typewriter you used when you were seven? Where are those stories now?

Elise: The typewriter was my dad's in college—it's still in the attic. So are all my stories. I had a toybox full. I was never much into toys . . . I remember going through a phase when I tried to sleep with a stuffed animal, because I thought I was supposed to, and it didn't work. I'd wake up with it tossed across the room. Eventually I took all the toys out of the toybox and filled it up with stories.

Kerry: Did your parents and teachers encourage you as a child?

Elise: I had incredibly supportive teachers and librarians all the way through, starting with Ms. Mortenson at the Glenside Elementary School library, who "published" my first book. Last fall, I did a reading at my hometown library and a bunch of my elementary school teachers came—really, I have been extraordinarily lucky in that regard. And my family always believed I would be a writer just as absolutely as I did. Apparently, at our family parties—I have a big extended family—I used to sit in the middle of all the commotion, reading a book. I don't remember that, though I do recall sometimes sneaking my tape recorder into parties so I could tape conversations and listen to them later.

Kerry: How did earning an MA help your writing?

Elise: When I was a senior at Bowdoin my writing teacher, Frank Burroughs, asked me why I wanted to go into a writing program straight from college. I said, "Because I want to write all the time." He nodded and said, "Okay." That's my memory of it, at least—the feeling that I'd given the right answer. If writing programs were trendy then, I didn't know it. I wasn't concerned with publishing. I just wanted to write and read fiction all the time. I'd been writing all my life and was suddenly in a place where writing was at the core of things; I was immersed in it, surrounded by people who loved it like I did. And not only did I have time to write, to put writing at the center, I had great teachers who emphasized what's important—basically, writing authentic stories about things that matter.

Kerry: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Elise: Don't wait for inspiration to strike. Don't over-focus on publishing. Write every day. Read as much as you can. Put the needs of the story first. Don't overplan. If your characters start doing something unexpected, let them. Surround yourself with good and supportive friends.

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Discussion Guide for Readers of Elise Juska's *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy*

Written by L.E. Miller, who has published her short fiction in The Missouri Review, Scribner's Best of Fiction Workshops 1999 and Calyx. A new story is forthcoming in Calyx this summer. L. E. Miller holds an M.A. in fiction writing from the University of New Hampshire. She lives on the North Shore of Massachusetts with her husband and son, where she is completing a collection of short fiction with the working title Other People's Beds.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Soon after arriving in Ireland and reuniting with her sister, Noelle, Claire muses, "Is the meaning in a language or in how we use it?" Throughout the novel, questions arise about how we use language to reveal and conceal. How do the characters vary in their relationship to language? Is Claire, with her academic background in linguistics and her current occupation as a cruciverbalist, or wordsmith, more truthful with language than Noelle and Deirdre?

2. How does Bob's verbal awkwardness factor into the marital difficulties he and Claire experience? How important do you think compatible verbal styles are in relationships?

3. Place, as embellished by wishful memory, is another important theme in the novel. Deirdre's Ireland and Ocean City are both made up in large measure of artifice. Do you think any of the characters experience place objectively? If so, which characters and which places? Do you think it's possible to achieve true objectivity about places that are important to us, or is it human nature to project our inner lives onto them?

4. *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* has been praised for its open-eyed depiction of contemporary Ireland. The scene at the Blarney Stone plays the myths about Ireland against current reality. Does this interplay occur elsewhere in the novel? If you have traveled to Ireland, have you witnessed a similar collision? What surprised you about Ireland, either during your visit or the way it is depicted in the novel?

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5. The legend of Deirdre of the Sorrows played a major role in shaping Claire's mother, Deirdre's view of her own life and fate. Are other characters in the novel shaped by legends?

6. Noelle and Deirdre have a close alliance, which has left Claire and Gene on the outside. On what is the alliance between mother and daughter founded? What factors caused the distance between Claire and her mother? Do you think these factors are as insurmountable as they ended up being for Claire and Deirdre? How would you characterize the bond between Claire and Gene?

7. Claire has arguably spent much of her life in flight, finding refuge in school and in her study of language. At the beginning of the novel, she is in flight from her unsatisfying marriage. Is Noelle in a state of flight herself? If so, from what? Does escape always signal a lack of courage?

8. Chapter Eight, "Bold," can be seen as a pivotal one in the way the reader sees Claire and Noelle, both as individuals, and in their relationship as sisters. Did your perception shift after reading this chapter?

9. When she has her big showdown with Noelle in the pub, Claire thinks that "she's sick of all the slipperiness and duplicity," of the Irish language, "the gnarled words with their cryptic accents and double meanings..." Yet one of the pleasures of this novel is the Irish language itself, with its very slipperiness. What Irish terms or expressions did you find particularly delightful or eloquent about human nature? Are facts, as Claire insists, always truer than lies?

10. *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* begins and ends with bugs, specifically with mention of the walking stick, which blends in so perfectly with its background. In the last chapter, the associations deepen to encompass Deirdre's cane, "woven with green streamers" or "anything that helps a person move safely from one place to the next." What do you think Juska's doubling back to this very early motif signals about Claire's growth over the course of the novel? Has Claire's way of seeing the world changed?

Writer's Craft Guide for Elise Juska's *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy*

Written by Rachel Pastan. She is the author of the novels *Lady of the Snakes* (Harcourt, 2008) and *This Side of Married* (Viking, 2004), which was selected for Barnes and Noble's Discover Great New Writers program. Her short stories have won many awards and appeared in such magazines as *The Threepenny Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Mademoiselle*. She lives in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania and teaches in the Bennington Writing Seminars MFA program and at Swarthmore College. When she's not mulling over sentences, she is consumed by the problem of narrative. For more information, visit www.rachelpastan.com.

Plot: Stories and novels always contain an event that triggers the plot and sets the story in motion. Usually this event happens in the first or second chapter of a novel. Can you identify the triggering event in this novel? Is there one clear answer to this question, or are there several possible answers, and if so, what are they?

A novel generally follows a character over the course of events that ultimately changes that character in important ways. How do the events of this novel change Claire? Are there things she does at the end of the story that she would never have been able to imagine herself doing at the beginning? How does she remain unchanged?

Some novelists choose to tell a story chronologically, as in Dickens' *David Copperfield* which famously begins with the main character's birth. Aristotle, writing about Greek drama, suggests that it is good to start in medias res: in the middle of things. This is what Juska does by starting *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* with Claire's decision to leave her marriage, despite the fact that much of the important action of the book takes place in Claire's childhood. What are the advantages of starting where Juska starts? What techniques does it require her to use to fill in the backstory?

Point of view: Juska tells her story through her protagonist, Claire, by using a close third-person point of view. Everything we learn, we learn through Claire's eyes and consciousness, as if we were standing close behind her looking over her shoulder as well as having access to her mind. What is gained by using this technique (as opposed to giving us access to everyone's thoughts, or having Claire tell us the story in her own voice)? What is lost?

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Tense: Juska tells her main story in the present tense, using past tense for her many flashbacks. What is the effect of this use of present tense? What is the effect of the interplay between the two tenses?

Character: We learn about characters many ways: through direct description, by observing their actions, by listening to what they say, and so on.

Dialogue: We first meet Noelle on the bottom of page 8 and then again on pp. 36-7. What do we know about her from the very first things we hear her say? What do we learn about Paul from his first words on p. 70? How accurate or incomplete are these first impressions?

Objects: Sometime we learn about characters through their possessions. On p. 102, Claire looks at her mother's pink slippers and thinks, "How like her mother to reincarnate as a slipper: bright and gaudy, part Sears clearance, part Cinderella." Can you find other examples of objects that characterize their owners?

Meaning: Claire is in love with words and preoccupied by her work as a cruciverbalist—a maker of crossword puzzles. How does Juska use this aspect of Claire's character to set up and explore some of the book's themes: love, loss, family, the nature of intelligence, and others?

Deirdre: Deirdre is arguably the most potent character in the book—the character everyone is responding to all the time—even though, by the time the story begins, she is already dead. How does Juska make us understand who Deirdre is? What do we learn about her early in the book? How does our opinion of her shift over the course of the story?

Sympathy: On p. 218, Bob tells Claire that she's not easy to love, and by her response we recognize that she agrees with his assessment. Juska challenges herself in this novel by creating a protagonist who is unhappy and can be judgmental and withdrawn. How does she compensate for this? What qualities does she give Claire so that we do care about her? What narrative techniques does she use to make us feel sympathetic to Claire?

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