

The Eves

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I. Grace Talks About the Writing of *The Eves*

What gave you the inspiration to write *The Eves*?

The narrative of Jessica's mom's death is very autobiographical, although I was not thinking of her risotto recipe at the time she died. The profound understanding that at that moment all of her stories were now lost to me was stunning despite the time we had to prepare for her death. The other big piece was bearing witness to the struggle I see in fellow adults in their relationships with their grown children and the horrible feeling of not being part of their own children's stories. It seems to me that the book connected those experiences.

How autobiographical is the story?

There are certainly parts of me and those I know in the book. I've told you the core, the impetus for the start. The story itself, however, is quite fictional. Carl Jung, the great German therapist, says that when we dream, each of the people in the dream actually represents a part of our selves. That's probably true to some extent when you create characters, and there are parts of me in each of the characters. I have to also admit, I've stolen heavily from personal experiences and conversations, as well as the experiences of those around me.

Can you give an example?

Sure. I have a good friend with a boat. She and her husband are among the most likable people in the world. The Tug is modeled after their boat, and so are the characters. They are the prototype for Allison and Malcolm, but their stories are not my friends'. Another example would be the quilt and the handprints; there are real examples of this in my life. The best example is the harvest. I had the great privilege of being with my son when he participated in a similar project. He lived 'off the grid' for six months and then there was this wonderful harvest. It is absolutely my imagery from there that created The Grange.

Your writing creates such clear pictures of The Grange and the house on Hobart Street, where do those images come from?

I owe thanks to my children for so many of those images. I've already mentioned the harvest. The house on Hobart Street is conjured from a house my daughter lived in and that I would love to remodel the way Roy and Jessica did. And yes, you can hear lions from the roof! I think it's the fine details in a story that make it rich, believable. I wanted readers to feel they were sitting on the window seat with Jessica, that they knew where she kept the vodka in the kitchen, that they could hear the smack of The Washington Post landing on her porch.

How long did it take you to write *The Eves*?

I started it five years ago and wrote the first two and last two chapters, then put it away. A potential agent at the time said she thought Jessica was too self-centered and she didn't understand where I was going with the novel. I was discouraged, but the women kept roaming around in my head. I didn't have much choice but to finish the book. Once I decided, it took about three and a half months.

You wrote the first and last chapters, then the middle? How does that work?

I've heard most authors write from start to finish and are surprised at where they wind up. That's never worked for me in any of my books. I know where I want it to start and end up. In education, we call it "planning for the end in mind."

Did you know what would happen in the middle to get you to the end?

Absolutely not. For me, the middle is the hard part. I had some high points. I knew Jessica would go to Africa, for example, but there were so many parts that were just fun to uncover as I wrote. I didn't know about the decision Sonia would make regarding Erica. There were also unexpected and never-anticipated things, like the character development of all the ladies. The character of Jesper was fully unanticipated, demanding some rewriting in the final chapters necessary. Those things changed the last two chapters, but not by much.

Is writing easy for you?

Yes and no. I'm really blessed with the ability to have words spill off the end of my fingers onto a page. I'm much better that way, actually, then when I'm speaking. The easy part is that I get such a charge out of the process, the characters talking in my head, the ability to create tension and resolution, and the opportunity to help people learn. You can have great fun as an author. There are things in the book that make me, and probably only my siblings, giggle or nod. For example, the phone number of the driver Jessica texts in the 'Re-entry' chapter is my childhood phone number, and the locket Jessica wears, and the picture of her mother are actually descriptions of

my mother's locket. You can make things live again or be important again in your writing. I like that part a great deal.

What's hard, sometimes, is the attention to detail. When I read through one of the drafts, Erica was fifteen on one page and several paragraphs later I state she's sixteen. There were times where it was hard to tie the two ends together. There were big things like what had to happen for Jessica to change, and little things like why Jessica bought the can of beans at the M and M. I didn't know why I had her buy them, then it just made so much sense that she would have used them to make the soup in 'The Naming' chapter.

You mention helping people learn as something you like about the writing process. The book is filled with that from the harvest, to the sustainable/greenhouse, to lambs hearing, to the Leakey footprints, and so much more. Why is that important?

As an educator, and simply as a person, I think it's so important to keep learning. In *The Eves* I'm very much guilty of what they accuse many first authors of contriving. Namely, a book that has everything I know in it. It was great fun to also do research. I didn't know how to shear a lamb, or about the regrets of aging parents, or about Paul Simon and the lyrics to Mother and Child Reunion, or a host of things. 'Through the magic of the Internet,' as Erica says, you can find out an awful lot.

I wanted the experience of reading *The Eves* to be similar to, say, listening to NPR. In fact, it was the inspiration for a few of the lines in the book. One set is when Elizabeth and Jessica first meet in her room and they talk about listening to NPR. The other is when Jan and Margaret Mary have a dispute about the use of quilts in the Underground Railroad. I wanted to provoke thought, conversation, being informed. It was important to me to create that dynamic because I think most readers are really smart and they want to not only be entertained but to learn.

What's it like to have people read your work?

Honestly, it's the most naked and hardest thing I do. Opening yourself up, even for praise, is a very humbling process. It's also really fun. I didn't realize how much I'd enjoy sharing the experience of people reading *The Eves*. When someone says they are on page twenty or the chapter about Africa and are loving it, I get excited for them. I want to know where they are in the book, what they hope happens, what makes them sad or happy or angry. It is for me, like Jan says, delicious! It's also somehow silly, it's just a book. So many people have such amazing gifts. I just gather words.

How important is age, race, and sexual identity in the story?

I want to say it's critically important and not important at all. When I was writing the plot summary for review, the document where you have to describe the characters, I had a very hard time labeling them, Black, White, Latinx, Native American, lesbian, etc. Part of that points up my

privilege, or advantage, as a white author. People assume the character is white unless otherwise categorized. I wasn't comfortable with that. Their individual ages, traits, experiences, and cultural background certainly give them their richness. These, combined, are the sum of the whole. But I also wanted the book to feel seamless as if we could get the feel for them without the labeling.

Do you have a favorite character or a least favorite?

Oh, that's a tough one. I like them all for so very many reasons. I love Tobias. I can hear his voice in my head, and the actor that would play him on the screen. He's very much like my Dad, who I miss dearly. Jessica isn't my favorite, but I can feel her very intimately. Sonia just makes me laugh and I love that. I wish I got to know Tia, CC, and Jesper more. I'm particularly glad Jesper showed up.

You mention the book going to the big screen, do you think there will be a movie?

Wouldn't that be lovely? Let's see it become a full-fledged, well-received book first. However, to be honest, I wrote with the idea of a film or cable series, not because I was being grandiose, but because I got such a visual and palpable sense of the experience. I could see it as a movie or a Netflix experience and wrote with images of certain characters in mind.

You mentioned, just now, being honest. Talk about the theme of that in the book.

Well, without giving too much away, Jessica is living a lie. She does this because it makes her life easier. At the end we learn that Elizabeth and Roy tell a lie as well. I think that a lot of us are less than honest with ourselves and others and I wanted that tension and honesty to come through in the book. There is also judgement around Jessica. Is she a bad person because she is living this lie, or do we have sympathy for her because it helps her survive.

Another theme is how differently different people look at the same event, can you talk about that?

That was much harder to write about, probably because it's just so true, so honest. We all know that no two people see the same thing the same way but there is something so very 'off' with the way Jessica sees things. She mentions early on in the book that Roy sees things she doesn't. That gets echoed in a statement about Sonia and Erica as well. Most profoundly, I think, is what Jessica believes to be true about her and her kids. Certainly, all the other characters see Jessica much differently than she sees herself. This raised for me the question of what is true and how do we ever know it. Is personal 'truth' real and how much does it matter when it differs from another's?

II. Book Club Discussion Questions

1. Did you like the book? Why, why not?
2. What did you learn from the novel?
3. Which character do you identify with most? Least? Why?
4. Who did you like the most? Least? Why?
5. Erica, in many ways, is the turning point for the novel. In what ways do you agree with this statement?
6. We don't get to meet Run and Adam, what do you know and feel about them?
7. What do you think of the themes of honesty, truth, fact, fiction and lying throughout the book?
8. Jessica has kept a huge secret, in fact, she lies. How does this make you feel about her?
9. Sonia never lies. What does this make you think about her?
10. Sonia says that she believes that in large measure we can write our own stories, change the ending. What evidence do you see of this in the book or in your own life?
11. What role do individual's perceptions play in the storyline? Does it make sense? How do you know the truth of an event?
12. Jessica seems to get stories and information from the other characters that they don't share with each other. Why do you think this is?
13. Jessica tries to define what love, falling in love, and being in love means. Is she in love? Do those things mean different things at different points in life?
14. Is Jessica religious? Are the others? What role does religion play in the story?
15. What do you think of the lessons Jessica chooses to catalogue?
16. Jessica states on several occasions that she felt she didn't deserve something. How does that play out for her?
17. If you were to sum up the message of each character, what would it be?
18. How does the theme of regret play out in the book?
19. There is no interview with Elizabeth. What do we really know about her? We don't get to hear the conversation about 'reach.' What is the 'reach' of each character?
20. Why do Jessica and Elizabeth have the bond they do?
21. Why does Erica feel so connected to Jessica?
22. Do the characters have a moral compass?
23. Does Jessica decide her future, or does she let others shape her future?
24. Do we know Jessica, or do we have other's impressions of her?
25. How important is Jesper?
26. What do you think will happen between Jesper and the rest of his 'family'?

27. The last few chapters of the book are unexpected. How does this position the characters for the future? What is the lesson of those chapters?
28. Do you have a favorite line or scene from the book?
29. What do you think happens in the coming years for the characters?
30. The novel follows a musical path—overture, theme, and coda. Does this work for you?
31. Why, why not?
32. The core of the book is the bond between mothers and their children, “other mothers,” and the life lessons we share or miss. Discuss this.

III. About the music that influenced *The Eves*

For decades, I’ve been impressed by the song “Hello In There” written by the late and very great John Prine. I came to know the song through Bette Midler’s rendition. It spoke to me of the disregard we sometimes place on old people, forgetting, indeed, that they were babies and sons and daughters and lovers and friends. The lines “so if you're walking down the street sometime and spot some hollow ancient eyes, please don't just pass 'em by and stare, as if you didn't care, say, Hello in there, hello," have been words I’ve tried to live by. In many ways, it is to honor this concept that I had Jessica find her way through conversations with *The Eves*. In a like manner, that’s why I gave the women and Tobias such strong voices.

In setting the stage for *The Eves* there were two pieces of music that kept buzzing in my head. They roused in me the exact feel I wanted for the book. Each speaks so strongly to a key theme of *The Eves* – the relationship between parents, particularly mothers, to their children. I was exposed to both songs performed by the Washington, DC-based group Sweet Honey in the Rock through my daughter. She sang “Wanting Memories” at the side of my Mother’s casket and it transformed me.

The words of the Overture are by Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese-American writer and poet, perhaps best known for his book *The Prophet*. The Coda was written by Dr. Ysaye Barnwell, African-American, singer, songwriter, producer, educator, actor, and writer. The links here are for performance by Sweet Honey in the Rock.

There are many, many pieces of music referenced in *The Eves* and music is very important to Jessica. In the writing, I found that funny, because I am decidedly not musical, don’t listen to music often, frequently don’t remember lyrics, and rarely songwriters and performers. In creating Jessica, I had to learn and appreciate the role music played. In one of the closing chapters Jessica gives Elizabeth her playlist. On it is “Gabriel’s Oboe,” the haunting and stirring piece of music was the theme for the 1986 film “*The Mission*.” It was written by Italian composer Ennio Morricone. The oboe, sometimes called the ill-wind of the orchestra, was perfect for that moment in the book. The link here is to Yo-Yo Ma’s playing.

IV. Food from the book

The first thing I have to say about recipes is that I grew up the daughter of an Italian mother. This immediately translates into 'there really isn't a recipe for anything.'

There are essential ingredients, there is a process; but as to exact amounts that's pretty iffy. Things like "enough salt that fits in the small little dent in the palm of your hand when you cup it" or "you dip the octopus in boiling water, in and out as you say 'in the name of the Father,' 'in the name of the Son,' and 'in the name of the Holy Ghost,'" don't directly translate into good recipes to follow. They do however, make for the basis of good food and good stories to be shared and passed down. That, after all, is one of the messages of *The Eves*.



The picture to the right is my stovetop with wooden spoons in the Hopi bowl that appears in the "Jan" chapter. I have a penchant for wooden spoons and collect them. My newest one has a llama burned into the bowl. This would make Deidre happy.

What follows are references to the food from *The Eves* and the basics to get you started. Make sure you check on allergies, dietary needs and preferences to ensure the health, well-being, and happiness of everyone. Play with these, embellish, enjoy!

Roy's Italian dinner, from the "Re-entry" chapter

My "go to" recipe for lasagna is from "All Recipes." When I am making just the sauce, I follow their sauce recipe pretty closely.

<https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/23600/worlds-best-lasagna/>

For the dinner that Roy prepares, use the "All Recipe" recipe without the meat.

After "assembling" the sauce, put together a mix of sweet and spicy Italian sausage, onion and peppers, brown and sauté, add to the sauce.

Make meatballs – mine are simple. Ground chuck, egg, a small amount of Italian breadcrumbs, oregano, parsley. Add them to the sauce.

Cook for at least an hour. More is fine. It's ALWAYS better the next day.

I like to use a fresh pasta these days. There are many available at your local grocery. Serve with a salad and garlic bread.

Jan's Key Lime Curried Chicken, from the "Jan" chapter

Thanks to my friend Gisela for introducing me to this amazing recipe from "Gourmet/Epicurious." Like my mother, she also never met a recipe that didn't get tweaked. She and I use this recipe and each add more ginger and key limes. The Key limes are only available at certain times of year in certain regions, so you may need to plan accordingly.

<https://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/chicken-key-lime-curry-351856>

Jan's Cabbage and Plums, from the "Jan" chapter (that woman can cook!)

Wonderful recipe from Midwest Living. The recipe calls for you to mix all the ingredients and bake in a 425-degree oven. It's billed as a hands-free stir-fry. I just throw it all in my wok and stir-fry it, making sure I have almonds to sprinkle on top.

<https://www.midwestliving.com/recipe/nutty-asian-cabbage-with-plums/>

Tobias' Highball (my dad's favorite drink):

Mix 2 parts bourbon and 4 parts Ginger Ale in a tall glass with ice. Garnish with a wedge of lemon (Dad and Tobias didn't use the lemon, but that's the appropriate garnish).

Bisquick™ Coffee Cake, from the "Things Happen in Threes" chapter.

I love this recipe. When my kids were very small, I made it every weekend. It's a basic, easy, delicious recipe that you can also adapt by putting sliced apples or dropping dabs of preserve on top prior to baking. I like adding the streusel mix after any add on ingredients. Here are two places to look for the recipe.

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/41728734025849135/>

<https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/274198/bisquick-coffee-cake/>

Roy's and Jan's Apple Pie (actually my husband's recipe – I married well!!)

Total cooking time is 50 to 55 minutes

Ingredients:

1 package Pillsbury™ pie crust

5-6 medium apples, Macintosh or Golden Crisp are favorites

(5 make a nine inch, 6 make a ten-inch pie)

2/3 cup sugar

3/4 tsp of cinnamon

1/4 cup of water

Flour

Preheat oven to 400 degrees

Peel and core apples, slice them VERY thin, 1/8 of an inch – my husband swears this is the secret to this great pie.

Put them in a bowl, mix sugar and cinnamon together, pour into apples, mix and let stand.

Follow directions for rolling out the crusts, flour your rolling surface. Peeling the crusts off the floured surface is made easy if you use a pastry spatula.

Gently place bottom in ungreased pie plate, glass works best, with edges draped over side.

Fill the crust with apple mixture.

Add water.

Gently drape the top crust evenly over the apples

Crimp the top and bottom crusts together, making sure you are sealing the pie.

With a fork or knife make vents in the pie.

Place a piece of foil on the oven middle rack to catch any drippings. Place the pie on top.

Take a second piece of foil and drape or tent it over the top of the pie for the first fifteen minutes.

After 15 minutes, remove foil and reduce heat to 375 degrees.

Continue cooking for approximately 40 minutes and until crust is golden brown

Remove, let sit, enjoy!

V. Places that influenced *The Eves*

One of the magical experiences about reading is being transported to a physical place and time. In *The Eves*, I wanted to create strong images that carry the reader into the scene. In writing, I hope I accomplished the feel of being atop **Calvert Cliffs in wonderful Calvert County Maryland.**

<https://dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands/Pages/southern/calvertcliffs.aspx>

or give the sense of leaves underfoot on the sidewalks of **Hobart Street in Washington, DC** and the coziness of sitting on Jessica's roof top listening for lions.

Do a web search or Google “images for rowhouses on Hobart Street in NW Washington DC.” When you do, you will get many images for homes that are for sale. Out of respect for homeowners, I am not posting a link, however; you will see the styles of homes as well as some interior renovations.

In **Africa**, there are so many images, the majesty of the **Ngorongoro Crater** –

<http://www.ngorongorocrater.org/index.html>

and the intrigue of Mary Leakey’s discovery of “Lucy’s” footprints

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/shaenamontanari/2016/12/14/3-6-million-year-old-early-human-footprints-have-been-discovered-in-tanzania/#213e80262681>

Perhaps my favorite imagery, however, is of a place I have never visited. The magnificence of **Vigeland Sculpture Park in Oslo**. My daughter was there decades ago and brought home photos of these wonderful old women with saggy-down breasts. I was haunted and enraptured. These women served as my first models for the individual old women in the book. Make sure you visit this link long enough to see “Angry Boy” and the wonderful old women surrounding the monolith.

<https://www.visitoslo.com/en/product/?TLp=181601>

Thank you for reading *The Eves*. Please feel free to email me with questions at grace@gracesammon.net or invite me to visit your book club. If I’m available I’d love to join in the discussion!

Your notes and questions here: