On Agate Hill

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A SHORT NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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I had done a lot of historical research but had barely begun my novel *On Agate Hill* when my beloved son Josh died in his sleep on October 26, 2003. The cause of death was "acute myocardiopathy," the collapse of an enlarged heart brought about in part, I believe, by all the weight he had gained while taking an antipsychotic drug.

He was thirty-three; he had been sick for half his life, doing daily battle with the brain disorder that first struck during the summer between his junior and senior years in high school.

In many ways, our old Josh died then—that wild funny boy of seventeen, that brilliant musician, poet, break-dancer, skateboarder, and camper.

The hospitalizations began, alternating with intermittent, heartbreaking tries at returning to normalcy, then to group homes and day programs. Finally the new drug clozapine gave him back his life, or some of it, in 1992. He moved out of the hospital into a group home, then into an apartment. He completed a vocational rehabilitation program. He got a job.

And we got to know Josh all over again, now a huge whimsical man of immense kindness, with a special sort of gravity and eccentric insight. In this later stage of schizophrenia, he was like the bodhisattva, a person who has achieved the final apotheosis, beyond desire and self. It was comforting to be with him. As a friend said, he was a man like a mountain.

But then we lost him for good.

This time, my grief—and rage—were indescribable: "oceanic," to use a doctor's terminology. He told me that there are basically two physiological reactions to grief. Some people sleep a lot, gain weight, become depressed and

lethargic. I had the other reaction—I felt like I was standing with my finger stuck into an electrical outlet, all the time.

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't read, I couldn't eat. I couldn't remember anything, anything at all. I forgot how to drive to the grocery store. I couldn't find the school where I had taught for twenty years. I left a trail of glasses, jackets, pocketbooks everywhere I went. In group situations, I was apt to blurt out wildly inappropriate remarks, like a person with social Tourette's syndrome. I cried all the time. I lost thirty pounds.

Weeks passed, then months. I was wearing out my husband and my friends. But I couldn't calm down. It was almost as if I had become addicted to these days on fire, to this intensity. I felt that if I lost it, I'd lose him even more.

Finally, I went to a psychiatrist, a kind, rumpled man who formed his hands into a little tent and listened to me scream and cry and rave for several weeks.

Then came the day when he held up his hand and said, "Enough."

"What?" I stared at him.

"I am going to give you a new prescription," my psychiatrist said, taking out his pad and pen. He began to write.

"Oh good," I said, wanting more drugs, anything.

He ripped the prescription out and handed it to me.

"Write fiction every day," it said in his crabbed little hand.

I just looked at him.

"I have been listening to you for some time," he said, "and it has occurred to me that you are an extremely lucky person, since you are a writer, because it is possible for you to enter into a narrative not your own, for extended periods of time. To live in someone else's story, as it were. I want you to do this every day for two hours. I believe that it will be good for you."

"I can't," I said. "I haven't written a word since Josh died."

"Do it," he said.

"I can't think straight, I can't concentrate," I said.

"Then just sit in the chair," he said. "Show up for work."

Vocational rehabilitation, I thought. Like Josh. So I did it. For three days. On the fourth day, I started to write.

And my novel, which I'd planned as the diary of a young girl orphaned by the Civil War, just took off and wrote itself.

"I know I am a spitfire and a burden," Molly Petree begins on May 20, 1874. "I do not care. My family is a dead family, and this is not my home, for I am a refugee girl . . . but evil or good I intend to write it all down every true thing in black and white upon the page, for evil or good it is my own true life and I WILL have it. I will."

Molly's spitfire grit strengthened me as she proceeded to "give all her heart," no matter what, during a passionate life journey which included love, betrayal, motherhood, and grief (of course, grief). But by the time we were done with it—Molly and I, two years later—she had finally found a real home, and I could find my way to the grocery store. I could laugh.

And yes, through the mysterious alchemy of fiction, my sweet Josh had managed to find his own way into the final pages of the novel after all, as a mystical bluesman and healer living wild and free at last in the deep piney woods he used to play in as a child.

When Joan Didion published *The Year of Magical Thinking*, with its close observation of her life in the painful year immediately following her husband's death, a friend wondered, "How can she do that—write at such a time?"

"The right question is, how could she *not* do that?" I answered. Writing is what Joan Didion does, what she has always done. It's how she has lived her life.

In a different way, I realized, this is how I have lived my life, too. Of course, writing is an escape: as Anne Tyler once said, "I write because I want to have more than one life."

I do, too.

But writing is also a source of nourishment and strength. It cannot bring our loved ones back, but it can sometimes fix them in our fleeting memories as they were in life, and it can always help us make it through the night.

My psychiatrist's prescription may benefit us all. Whether we are writing fiction or nonfiction, journaling or writing for publication, writing itself is an inherently therapeutic activity. Simply to line up words one after another upon a page is to create some order where it did not exist, to give a recognizable shape to the sadness and chaos of our lives.

1. Early on, Molly writes in her diary, "I want to be a real girl and live as hard as I can in this world, I dont want to lie in the bed like Mama or be sick like Mary White. Or be a lady. I would rather work my fingers to the bone and die like Fannie. I want to live so hard and love so much I will use myself all the way up like a candle, it seems to me like this is the point of it all, not Heaven" (page 78). This says so much about Molly's character. How do you think Molly came to reach this conclusion about her aspirations, and how do you think it shapes what happens later on in her life?

2. How do Nicky Eck's crimes against Molly affect the rest of her life?

3. *On Agate Hill* is a story within a story, told from many different perspectives. The novel opens with a letter from Tuscany Miller, a university student from the present day who is looking into her own past and the pasts of those who lived at her father's (Ava's) new home. What parallels can you draw from both stories, and why do you suppose the author chose to set it up this way? How would the book be different if the author left out the Tuscany Miller thread altogether?

4. Why does Mariah Snow take an immediate dislike to Molly? Is this a clue to what happened in Mariah's past? Do you believe people like or dislike other people because they possess similar qualities (either positive or negative)?

5. At the beginning of the chapter titled "Paradise Lost," Agnes Rutherford describes Agate Hill in a letter to her sister, Mariah Snow. She says that it is "surrounded by an air of loneliness" and "Defeat. Failure. Loss. Decay" (page 132). She goes on to say that "the interior of the house was so unkept as to appear ransacked" (page 135). This is far different from what we are

led to believe from reading Molly's journal. How do you think your reading experience would've been affected by knowing the true state of the plantation right from the very beginning?

6. What do you make of the author's choice to write a majority of the novel in journal entries and letters? How would the novel be different if she had chosen to tell the story using straight prose?

7. In the September 22, 1873, letter to her sister, Agnes relays the story of how Molly first came to be accepted by her peers at Gatewood Academy (page 157). Why did the rest of the girls choose to accept Molly instead of shunning her after Ida and Adeline Brown made fun of her background? What does this say about girls and group mentality?

8. In her May 3, 1874, journal entry, Mariah Snow writes (referring to women), "We lose our names as we lose our Youth, our Beauty, & our Lives" (page 163). What does this say about her character? About how women were treated in general at that time? How is that different from how women are treated now? Do you know women who feel the way Mariah does? Do you feel that way about your life?

9. What do you think happened to Mary White?

10. In the beginning of the section titled "Up on Bobcat," Agnes writes in her "Final Impressions," "I wonder if I could have done anything different, if I could perhaps have waited and chosen a less drastic course, and what would have happened then . . . but it is impossible to wrest a decision out of its time and place, and even now I cannot think what I should have done" (page 219). In your opinion, could things have been different? What are other possible outcomes? Would a different outcome make the story less or more interesting in your opinion?

11. When Simon Black visits Molly in the mountains in February (page 241), Molly doesn't discuss with Agnes what transpired between them. What do you suppose was said?

12. After Jacky's funeral, why do you think Molly asks BJ to take her to Icy Hinshaw's cabin, and then leaves without saying a word? Later, she asks BJ to give Icy and her children her house, the one she shared with Jacky. She says, "take care of them, for they are Jacky's. They are yours" (page 325). What exactly does she mean by this?

13. Who do you believe killed Jacky (with the first shot in the stomach, not the second shot in his neck)? Why do you suppose BJ helped Molly cover up what really happened to Jacky?

14. Discuss this quote: "love lives not in places nor even bodies but in the spaces between them, the long and lovely sweep of air and sky, and in the living heart and memory until that is gone too, and we are all wanderers, as we have always been, upon the earth" (page 328).

15. What are the reasons behind Molly's decision to go back to Agate Hill in the end? How does this illustrate the change in Molly from the beginning of her life to the end of it?

16. Which character do you relate to the most in the book, and why?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

There are so many narrative layers to your novel, including, of course, the rich historical material. How much research did you do in the writing of On Agate Hill*? And what was the process? Did you do research first and then write or did you do research as you were writing?*

I'd never thought about writing a historical novel in my life. The only time I'd ever used history in my previous books was when I was writing about the lives of the older mountain women I was privileged to grow up among—lives I considered heroic and wrote about in novels such as *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *Oral History*.

But then my husband and I moved into a very old house next to a Civil War cemetery in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where we found heartbreakingly short dates and "C.S.A." carved into many of its mossy stones. I started walking my dogs in this cemetery at dusk, trying to imagine these lives. And I visited the county historical museum right down on the corner and its friendly curator, Dr. Ernest Dollar, a recent PhD from the Southern studies program down in Chapel Hill—a young man on fire with history. Ernie gave me a dusty diary kept by a young girl in boarding school in the 1870s. "You might be interested in this," he said.

But best of all was the old man who came knocking on our front door before we had even unpacked our stacked-up boxes. "Honey," he rasped, wheezing and leaning on his cane, "Let me in. I've got to tell you a story about your house"—the words every novelist is dying to hear! It turned out to be a story about obsessive love, which in turn came to obsess me.

So what was the next step?

I started reading and couldn't quit. I read for a couple of years, immersing myself in books, letters, diaries, and journals about the Civil War and Recon-

struction periods. First it was a pleasure, then an addiction. I was especially fascinated to learn how many, many Southerners of all races and stations were refugees of one kind or another, displaced by the war. The roads were clogged. Everybody was on the move. Everybody was far from home. This sense of displacement resonated with me. It reminded me of an old gospel song I used to hear while I was growing up, "I am a pilgrim and a stranger, traveling o'er this wearisome land."

Finally I realized that I was going to write a novel.

Talk a bit about Tuscany. At what point did she make her entrance? Did she introduce herself to you before Molly did?

Tuscany is always with me, sort of an alter ego, I guess (I was once Miss Bituminous Coal). Some readers hate Tuscany because they think she is such a ditz, but I have to confess, I love her. Here, she and Molly have some character traits in common, I think. They are both spunky girls who make some bad choices, and they both come through hard times to a new understanding of their lives.

But I put Tuscany in this book for another—and very important—reason, as well. As a founding fellow at the Duke Center for Documentary Studies and a lifelong oral historian, I have always been struck by the haphazard, arbitrary nature of history. History doesn't care who finds it, you know. It might just as well be Tuscany as, say, Arthur Schlesinger, or any other famous historian. And what we come to accept as historical *truth*—the official version—depends entirely on what information happens to come to light, and how: who finds it, who interprets it, how it is disseminated and publicized . . . and who knows how many boxes or artifacts and documents are sitting right now up under how many eaves, just waiting to be discovered by a carpenter? This idea has always fascinated me.

There's a heartbreaking ballad at the pivotal moment in the story. Did you write this ballad yourself?

The ballad form comes naturally to me, perhaps because I grew up on ballads and stories. Sometimes I think that our sense of language is forever formed by how we first heard speech—by who was talking to us, or singing to us, and under what circumstances and how they sounded. My sense of narrative was formed by sitting out on the porch listening to stories and songs, often sung or told by somebody who loved me. So I am more of a storyteller than a writer, in a way, and *On Agate Hill* is more like a ballad than a book—it's episodic; it's tragic and violent; its themes are the classic ballad themes of love, loss, and betrayal; and there are various kinds of repetitions holding it together.

That probably explains the intimate way the novel unfolds. But what inspired the moments of magic realism—Molly and her best friend see fairies, for instance; the farm animals kneel at Christmas; and Virgil and Old Bess fly away over the snow.

Well, a novelist is like a magpie—you are always gathering up bright little bits of memory or lore or information. Over time this becomes a "habit of being," to use Flannery O'Connor's term. Sometimes you're not even aware of it—but then when you need it, there it is. I didn't consciously set out to write magic realism; those moments just *happened* while I was in the act of writing those scenes. If I think hard, though, I know where two of them came from: my best friend and I really did believe that we saw fairies in the woods when we were little girls, and there is an old Appalachian legend that all the farm animals kneel wherever they are, in the barn or the pasture, at midnight on Christmas Eve. As for Virgil and Old Bess, that was a complete surprise to me. I could see them rise up over the snow in my mind's eye as

they left Agate Hill. Months later, while I was visiting my son and his family in Nashville, I was amazed to pick up a book of plantation history and read that the flying slave is a familiar motif—an obvious emblem of freedom—in slave narratives. So, go figure.

How incredibly satisfying that must have been! Was that the most surprising thing that happened in the course of writing the book?

It *was* one of the most surprising things that happened in the book—and a harbinger of things to come. Sometimes, if a novelist has done her homework (so she doesn't have to break the flow by stopping to look up a date, for instance, or figure out what color somebody's hair was back in chapter one), she gets very, very lucky: the characters really do *take over,* and the book takes on a thrilling life of its own, and all you have to do is hold on to your hat! Or your pen, or your computer, as the case might be. Just show up for work and wait with bated breath to find out what's going to happen next. It's like transcribing rather than writing. This has only happened to me twice before, but it happened here. I was astonished (and very moved) by the last part of the novel. I mean, I knew that Molly would return to Agate Hill, but I never suspected the turns that her life would take there, or even the very existence of Juney. He just appeared like a blessing in the end.

As Molly took over, did you find yourself judging her or disagreeing with her actions? Or any of the other characters', for that matter?

Of course, there's a part of me that is practically screaming, "Don't do it, honey!" when she runs off with Jacky . . . that same part of me that desperately wanted her to marry Ben Valiant, such a fine young man, or even the more dubious Henderson Hanes, who could have at least offered her some measure of security, which she has never had. But Molly is off on a different journey, one that will take her from being a "ghost girl" hidden away in her cubbyhole, chronicling rather than participating in her own life, to a "real

girl" who will finally "give all her heart" and "live as hard and love so much I will use myself all the way up like a candle." It's that old question, whether one should follow the head or the heart. Molly makes her own choices and takes control of her own life, for better or worse, a hard thing for a woman to do in those times, and I admire her for it. I've always been kind of a candle girl myself.

Did you keep a journal while you were growing up? Do you keep one now?

I did keep a little official diary, with a lock and key, when I was a child. Now I fill up notebook after notebook with not only my own experiences and observations but also with sketches, notes on whatever I'm reading, story ideas, place descriptions, lines of dialogue overheard in the line at the grocery store, whatever hits me. Lists, recipes, and phone numbers often appear in these pages, too. Obviously, I'm a born scribbler! So the diary format comes natural to me. And since I had steeped myself in diaries of the period, Molly's more formal language came natural, too. I have always loved the diary form anyway, for the intimacy it immediately establishes with the reader and the instantaneous character development it affords. I love to read diaries as well as write them.

Reviewers have compared On Agate Hill *to* Anne of Green Gables, Jane Eyre, *even to Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom! *In what ways have these books informed or not informed your novel? Are there certain authors or books that have shaped and influenced you as a writer?*

Well, I'm honored by these comparisons. Actually I have never read *Anne of Green Gables,* but *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Jane Eyre* are touchstones in my life—books I have read and taught several times. I'd have to say that William Faulkner has been a major influence on my work, as he has on twentieth-century writing as a whole. In twenty-five major works, he gave us twenty-five different narrative strategies, opening up the form of the novel forever. I'm

sure that my fascination with first-person voice derives from him—especially from *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury,* with their multiple narrators. And certainly his themes of race, loss, memory, place, and the importance of the past can be found here in *On Agate Hill*. As for *Jane Eyre,* one radio interviewer referred to my book as "*Jane Eyre* with sex"—I got a good laugh out of that, but had to admit it was not so far from the truth! There's the boarding school section, and I suppose that Simon Black is a mysterious figure akin in some ways to Mr. Rochester. But Molly is very much her own girl and always has been, ever since she took pen in hand and wrote, "I am a spitfire and a burden."

Who's got a hold of your pen now?

Zelda Fitzgerald, for one. I'm researching a novella about her tragic, glamorous life right now, and I've got a country music star with another story waiting in the wings. I seem to be gravitating toward shorter fiction at the moment, and I'm just full of ideas, very stimulated by working in this different form for a while. So, stay tuned!

ROGER HAILE

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