



*A conversation with*

S U S A N C O N L E Y

*author of*

# ELSEY COME HOME

**Q: What inspired you to write *Elsey Come Home*?**

**A:** I wanted to look very closely at what happens to mothers when they have children and face their own flavor of an identity crisis. Some mothers leave their professions and never return. Some continue to work full-time because they have to, or want to. But most mothers I know feel conflict about their choice either way. It's one of the great unspoken secrets of motherhood, especially in America: how to have children and hold on to some semblance of your former self. How to not lose yourself. For Elsey, our main character, her career is in many ways her identity, and she doesn't know who she is once she has two little girls and stops working. Motherhood causes her to step back from her old life and to question many of her choices.

**Q: How would you describe Elsey to readers meeting her for the first time?**

**A:** Elsey is someone you want to talk to at the dinner party, because she's self-deprecating and also bitingly funny. She can read a room and has a warm smile, and what might really attract you to her is that she's curious about you and asks good questions. But she doesn't want you to ask questions about her, because she doesn't want to give her secrets away. She's known great success as an acclaimed painter, so she moves through the world with a certain level of confidence on the outside. In this way she seems self-possessed, but by the time we meet her she's struggling, and her life is unraveling, and she's trying hard to hide it.

**Q: When readers meet Elsey, she is an American expat living in China with her husband and daughters. Can you share with us a bit about the personal connection you have to the part of the world in which Elsey finds herself? How have your own experiences informed the sense of place you develop in your book?**

# K N O P F Q & A

**A:** I lived in Beijing for three years while my children were quite young, so my time in China was framed by motherhood. I met many mothers while I lived there: local Chinese mothers and ex-pat mothers from around the world, and I often wondered who was pulling it off well—mothering in the crazy capital city that is Beijing, and who was really secretly struggling. Beijing is a charmed, ancient city and also a chaotic, dizzying place to have children. I wanted to write about Elsey's life with almost no limits to the truths she might offer, because she was in effect writing a memoir and could speak of all her conflict and struggle quite openly.

I wanted to ground Elsey's journey in China to amplify the tension that most new mothers feel. By making Elsey a foreigner in Beijing the tension barometer in her life went way up. We get to see her in the dislocating land of new motherhood and also in an actual foreign country where she doesn't understand social codes and political secrets and subtext. When I lived in China I saw mothers struggling and others making it all around me, each in their own way, and I wanted Elsey to break through the secrecy and say: this can be a hard and complicated journey and the path isn't always clear, but you will find your way. You will figure out a balance that somehow works.

**Q: Much of the inner conflict Elsey experiences stems from her struggle to balance her identity as an artist with her identity as a mother. Why was it important to you that your novel explored motherhood through this lens?**

**A:** This is the lens by which I think most women view their own experience of motherhood: who am I after I have kids? What is my identity now? But this is also the lens that's most often not talked about. So this identity conflict becomes the secret, personal struggle of women. I wanted to write a novel that allowed Elsey to give a bracingly honest account of sometimes not being a good enough mother. Elsey is basically asking "how do I do this?" "How do I have kids and also be the person I was before I had kids?" Because if she can't hold on to at least some portion of her former self, she may not make it.

She needs to find a way to bridge her two identities and to bring some of that woman she used to be along with her. It's disorientating and frightening, and this identity question is a breaking point for many women. It's also a question of guilt. Because guilt comes as a side dish with almost any choice women make: to work or not to work. To stay home with their kids if they can afford it, or to put the children in daycare because they can't afford not to work, or to put the children in daycare because they can't afford to lose their sanity if they don't work. These are serious, life-changing questions, and the guilt is real but often stays hidden and corrosive. Women feel judged for their choices, and many never feel they get it right and never feel they've made exactly the right choice.

**Q: When Elsey's marriage reaches a breaking point, her husband suggests that she take time at a yoga retreat to try and regain the sense of self she seems to have lost along the way. Why incorporate this element – a yoga retreat – into your story? Is this drawn from personal experience as well?**

**A:** Yoga and bodywork have deep roots in China, and when I lived there I was so amazed at all the good attention given to the body and to integrative health: yoga, acupuncture, Chinese medicine, xi-gong, wushu and on and on. How I wish we lived more like this in America. In China I often went to a yoga studio in downtown Beijing that brought together ex-pats and local Chinese, and I was compelled by this little studio of calm in the middle of the teeming city.

So when Elsey's husband Lukas suggests that Elsey go away, I knew he'd hand her a brochure for a yoga retreat in the mountains, because I'd seen these yoga retreats in the actual mountains. I'd been to them.

# K N O P F Q & A

Very basic and rustic places that in my mind could offer Elsey the counterbalance she needed to her sense that her life was spinning out of control. And so a yoga retreat. And what a good place to go unravel and then put yourself back together again.

**Q: Whether through its dive into the pressures of motherhood or the challenges of marriage, *Elsey Come Home* gives readers an intimate glimpse into the inner workings of a woman's life. What do you most hope readers will take away from Elsey's experiences?**

**A:** Whenever I'm in a room and overhear a woman in the corner talking candidly about her struggle to do it all—to be a mother and a wife and to also have job success, I go stand as close to her as I can. Because she's telling important truths that more women need to hear. I know I needed to hear these truths. The dilemma women face today—to work and somehow fit in time to have babies and take care of those babies while continuing to work, all without subsidized child-care and longer family leave, is not going away. I would say that the pressure is only growing on women. What I hope readers take away is empathy and a keener understanding of women's hard choices.

**Q: Why is it important for readers to have books like *Elsey Come Home* – books that portray and explore the experiences of womanhood, even (or especially) in their intricacies and challenges?**

**A:** I think Elsey offers a glimpse of a real woman who writes an honest account of her unraveling, and in this way she's instructive to other women struggling out there who don't think they're "doing it right." If Elsey learns anything, it's that there is no "one" way to do it. In the end, she stays true to herself. She learns how to be a better partner and mother by speaking honestly about her fears. She learns how to be a better friend.

Throughout the book she holds on to her longing to make paintings and has to learn to be an artist without guilt and to let go of the idea that it will all get done well every day. Some days it will just get done, and that's got to be okay. I think Elsey's story reminds us of the hidden strengths and talents of women all over the world, and that none of that strength or talent comes unearned. None of it is easy. And in this way maybe Elsey's story can inspire us.

## **FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:**

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