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Sleep Toward Heaven
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What research did you do before writing a book that considers the experiences of Death Row inmates?

I was hired by the *Austin Chronicle* to interview Darlie Routier, now on death row for the murder of her two sons. At the last minute, Darlie canceled the interview, but there I was in Gatesville, Texas, with time on my hands. I became fascinated by the town outside the prison walls, and by the women inside them. I wrote to women in prison, met with a female warden who gave me a tour of her prison and allowed me to interview her, and read every trashy true crime book I could get my hands on. I think my family was a bit worried when I read books about serial killers in the bathtub!

When I created my fictional death row, I drew sketches of each of the women in their cells, thought about what they owned and what they loved. I hung the sketches in front of my computer as I wrote.

In writing the narratives of three different protagonists, you elected to use first-person for Celia: Why did you decide to tell Celia's story from her perspective, rather than using an omniscient, third-person narrator, as you do for Karen and Franny? Did it have anything to do with the surprise ending of your book?

The ending of the book was a surprise to me as well! The first draft of the book was only from Franny's, third-person point of view. I gave that draft to my writing group, along with one chapter from Karen's point of view. Everyone said that Karen's ten pages were the strongest part of the book! I went back and added Karen's point of view, but I still felt that something was missing. On the news in Texas, you see victims' families interviewed at executions, and to a one, they say that they hope the execution will bring them something: peace, happiness, something. I wanted to explore that desire.

Celia's voice came into my mind full-formed. She just started talking, and I rushed to keep up with her. It was never a conscious decision to make her the only first-person character, though later I had to fight to keep her that way. And when she revealed the ending, I gasped. I called my husband and said, "I have a plot twist!" I couldn't believe it.

Did you model the alternating chapter structure of your novel after any other novels that use a similar format? Once you'd chosen this form, was it difficult to carry it out for the entire span of the novel?

I am a huge fan of Michael Cunningham, whose book *The Hours* showed me that it was possible to structure a book this way. I also love Alice Munro, and one thing she does so brilliantly is to keep secrets from her characters. For example, the reader will know that a man is engaged, but the woman falling in love with him will have no idea: I love that sense of being "in on" something.

But each section was written as one long piece. Then, I sat on the floor of my office and cut each section into pieces with scissors. I taped them all together in a way that made sense, and then went back through, correcting things. Making sure everyone was in the same month, for example.

In *Sleep Toward Heaven*, you vividly depict the carnival atmosphere of a small town in which media and anti- and pro-death penalty protesters converge. Have you ever witnessed such a gathering? Why do you think executions are treated with such sensationalism by the media?

When I moved to Texas, I was struck by the overwhelming news coverage of executions. The fact is that more people are executed in Texas than any other state, so it's often in the news. I read an article by Denis Johnson in *Rolling Stone* called "Three Barbecues and an Execution," about an execution in Huntsville and it just amazed me. I haven't been to an execution, but I've seen the busy diner and crowded streets outside the Walls prison in Huntsville on an execution day.

It makes me sad that people are so fascinated by executions, but I guess as someone who reads about serial killers in her bathtub, I shouldn't be pointing any fingers!

Which of the protagonists in your novel was the most difficult to conceive? Did you find yourself identifying with any of the women in particular?

At one time or another, I identified with every one of the characters. For me, writing is about trying to place myself inside another life. I ask myself, what if I had had a life like Karen's? What would I be capable of? And how would I feel if I were in Celia's position — would I want revenge, too?

Many writers invent characters from scratch. I think that what I do is create lives. I try to find the place at which my life went in one direction and my characters' life went in another, and go back to that place and live the character's life from there. I will say that I didn't think I could write from Karen's point of view. But when I started typing, she came through loud and clear.

Was there an aspect of writing this novel — your first — that you found especially challenging or rewarding?

Over the years I spent writing it, there was one afternoon when I realized it was finished. I was in New Orleans, sitting at the desk where I write on a little laptop computer, surrounded by note cards. And Celia was talking, and then she said the last line and I stopped

typing. I was filled with the most glorious sense that I had done it: I had written a novel.