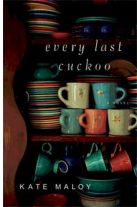


Author Kate Maloy creates a character who defies the prevailing biases of aging

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Friday, 20 February 2009 14:40



When Sarah Lucas' beloved husband, Charles, dies after an accident in the woods near their home in rural Vermont, the 75-year-old woman's life is turned completely inside out.

In "Every Last Cuckoo," her first novel for Algonquin Books, author Kate Maloy tells Sarah's story. It's a brilliant, well-written novel, and I was sad when I turned the last page. Sarah is the kind of woman I want to be.

In an e-mail interview, Maloy answered questions about Sarah, Charles and the other colorful characters in the book.

News-Telegram: How did the plot of "Every Last Cuckoo" come to you? **Kate Maloy:** I can't really say that the plot "came to me." It more or less unfolded as I was writing, with new people and events emerging from what had come before.

But the opening, where Sarah, the main character, is ill, comes straight out of a fever dream I had soon after moving to Vermont.

When I was sick, I experienced some of the same disorientation that Sarah does and saw some of the scenes she sees. I wondered how the experience of illness might change with age, and that was enough to get things started.

NT: Is the character of Sarah Lucas based on someone you know? If not, how did you find her/she find you?

KM: Sarah is very much like an aunt of mine, not in the details of her life or family but in her spirit and energy.

When my uncle died, my aunt was determined to celebrate their long and happy marriage

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rather than to sink into her loss and grief. She mourned him, as Sarah mourns Charles, but she did that in part by continuing to do the things they had done together, including travel. Sarah, too, turns her grief to action, at least after an initial period of . . . hibernation, almost.

NT: Was Charles, the Vermont country doctor, based on someone you know? **KM:** No. Charles just showed himself, scene after scene. I think he was in my mind for a long time before I started writing about him. Maybe he is the father or grandfather I wanted when I was young. I never knew either of my grandfathers and was not close to my father.

NT: The way you handle the past and present in the first part of the book is quite effective. What made you decide to write it that way? **KM:** I really needed to separate Charles's accident and its immediate aftermath from the first third of the book, which covers everything that leads up to Charles's death – his whole history with Sarah, their family, the recent past, right up to the moment of loss.

Those parts about their life together proceed in simple past tense, but the parts that describe the very last days of that past are told in present tense because I wanted readers to be right inside Sarah's mind and body as she searches the woods for her husband, and finds him, and gets him to the hospital, and so on.

Present tense is really good for that sense of urgency, and it's also a way of catching Sarah's past up with her present, right as the present changes completely, right when she must face her grief and all the questions about her future now that she is alone.

NT: Sarah admits to being more lenient with Lottie, her granddaughter, than she was with her children. This seems to be the case with grandparents. They get a "do over" with their grandchildren. What do you think?

KM: I'm not a grandmother, but many of my friends are, and I'm pretty sure the pattern you mention holds true in most cases.

I don't really think it's a do-over so much as simple delight in children one isn't responsible for raising. It takes a lot of the pressure off.

I'd also imagine that grandparenthood is a kind of affirmation. If your kids turn out to be good parents, with wonderful children of their own, it's kind of a star on your own forehead. It really must be so satisfying to see the generations come along after you.

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Sarah at one point in the novel realizes that she has known three generations before her and two after, and there she is, in the middle of the multitudes, knowing she might live to see her great-grandchildren come along. It's rather a dizzying feeling for her.

NT: A Jewish activist ends up living in Sarah's guest cabin. Where did Mordechai come from and why is he – and his views on the Middle East – important to the story? **KM:** Mordechai – the man who becomes Sarah's close friend – is an American-born Israeli who has spent more than thirty years living in the Middle East, with only short visits back to the U.S. He enters Sarah's life when he rents a cabin on her land, seeking peace and quiet for his sabbatical and a book he is writing. Like Tess, he brings the outside world with him, this time a part of the world that is relentlessly violent and has been for decades. Also like Tess, he raises many difficult questions about war and peace, since he was once a passionate Israeli soldier and has since become a pacifist. As Tess wavers in her pacifism, Mordechai remains firm in his, though never rigid in his attitudes or his thinking. He is something of a touchstone for some of the characters in the book.



NT: Sarah's horizons really expand after Charles' death. She shelters people, much as her mother and father did during the Depression. Having the house full of people, including an Israeli pacifist named Mordechai, seems to ease Sarah's grief. Who has the most impact on her? **KM:** Oh, Mordechai, definitely. He becomes a kind of teacher for Sarah, as well as a very close friend. One reviewer even characterized their relationship as a romance, but it's definitely not that. They come to love each other, but it's a Platonic love, completely.

Mordechai does not replace Charles. No one could even come close. But he happens to be full of things that Sarah needs to know. He holds up a mirror to her face.

NT: Sarah has a dangerous encounter toward the end of the book and handles it with incredible calm and aplomb. Would she have reacted in the same way prior to losing Charles?

KM:

I very much doubt it. Really, everything Sarah does after Charles's death is a way of confronting her own mortality. The photographs she takes in the woods. The fact that she finally ventures into the woods alone, with only her dogs. The way even her simple attitudes about housekeeping and cooking turn around. It's all about Sarah letting go of her fears and certain

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habits that feed those fears. That would have been nearly impossible when Charles was there taking care of her.

That doesn't for a second diminish her love for him, or how much she misses him. Yet she is still glad for her own growth. She doesn't have to lose her love or deny her grief to gain her new courage.

NT: Sarah's son David has a new love, Tess. Tess was raised a Quaker. (Your first book, *A Stone Bridge North: Reflections in a New Life*, also deals with the Quaker faith.) How does Tess' faith figure into the plot?

KM:

Tess lives in Boston with David, and Sarah first meets her when she comes to Vermont with him for Thanksgiving.

As a Quaker, Tess is committed to pacifism, which is one of that faith's founding tenets. Questions about war and other forms of human violence enter into the story fairly often.

In fact, before the story even opens, Tess has suffered a loss that makes her rethink her pacifism, and this part of the story interweaves with other characters and events – right up to that dangerous moment that Sarah faces.

NT: If Hollywood came calling, who would you cast in the movie? **KM:** Wouldn't I just love Hollywood to call! James Cromwell would make the perfect Charles, though he would have to be aged – hair, makeup – to play the part of an 80-year-old man.

In fact, Cromwell would be so perfect I can't really imagine anyone else in that role. I can see Jane Alexander as Sarah, very clearly, but again she would have to be made up to look 75.

Judi Dench, Vanessa Redgrave, Ellen Burstyn – they all have several of Sarah's qualities, so they would be great.

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Too bad Jessica Tandy is no longer with us. I think that's enough fantasizing for now. I'll leave the casting of the other characters to Hollywood.

NT: The book has garnered a lot of praise. How does that make you feel?

KM: Flabbergasted. Delighted. Giddy on occasion. This book was turned down more than 20 times before Algonquin made an offer. And it was worth the wait, because working with Algonquin has been marvelous every step of the way. I now count myself lucky for those turn-downs.

NT: What do you hope your readers take away from "Every Last Cuckoo?" **KM:** I think the single most important thing to me, as the author, is for readers to see Sarah's strength, courage and generosity.

There are so few elderly women protagonists in fiction, and that reflects unfortunate cultural attitudes. I want Sarah to show readers that aging does not turn a person into someone altogether different – someone weaker, needier, duller, resigned.

Rather, it can concentrate her, make her more her true self, as long as she is determined to defy the prevailing biases.

NT: What's next for you? **KM:** Another novel, I hope.

Right now I am working on a new novel, set in 2008-2009. It's about a young man on a cross-country journey, and all I will say for the moment is that he will meet both Sarah and Mordechai in his travels.

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For more information about Kate Maloy, see www.katemaloy.com or <http://www.workman.com/algonquin/>