

NUTS AND BOLTS

Where do you work?

My office is the room above our garage. It has four skylights above and two windows each at the front and back of the house. I have a U-shaped desk that holds my computer, a writing space, a copy machine, and a myriad drawers and file cabinets. Bookshelves, with additional file cabinets beneath, face the desk. On my left as I work, is a seating area consisting of a rattan love seat and chair. On my right, a window seat runs under the front windows. FYI, my office becomes a dorm room filled with wall-to-wall air mattresses when family comes to visit.

What hours do you keep?

When I'm working full-tilt on a book, I write from 5-7 am, break to work out, then write again until 10, at which point I'm pretty much done for raw creativity. I spend the mid-day hours on phone calls, social media, and appointments outside the house. On a good day, I'll have another two or three hours in the afternoon to proof and edit what I wrote that morning.

I happen to do some of my best creative thinking in the car. So if I need to work out a plot twist, I just drive around. I also keep a pad of paper by my bed. I'll often wake up in the middle of the night with an important thought relating to my plot. If I don't write it down, it's gone.

How many drafts do you work through?

Hundreds, I would guess. It's hard to say, what with the constant rewriting one does on a computer. I can say that I print out one complete copy of the book when I first hand it in to my editor, then another complete copy when I've finished revisions. But that doesn't take into consideration the many, many changes—some of them significant, involving plot changes, even cutting and pasting—that occur in the process of writing that first version.

Who helps you write?

Excuse me? Writing is a very, very, very solitary profession, at least it's always been that way for me. I've never been one for hands-on workshops, since I'm as private about my work as I am about my life. My editor may see part of the book as I'm writing it, but only if I need her feedback on a particular issue, or if she needs to see more for the sake of publishing plans, art work, etc.

GETTING GOING

Where do you get your ideas?

This is the question I am most often asked. The answer? I get ideas from the news, which I read every day. I get ideas from magazines, from movies, from *60 Minutes*, from stories friends tell.

My very first full-length book, *Finger Prints*, was inspired by one of my lawyer-husband's cases. Another early book, *Heart of The Night*, was sparked by the lyrics of a country music song. *A Woman's Place* came from a tiny article I read in "Working Woman" magazine, and *The Woman Next Door* from a not-so-tiny newspaper piece on infertility. *The Summer I Dared* was inspired by September 11th, while *Looking For Peyton Place*, quite simply, was born of my long-time admiration for Grace Metalious and the original *Peyton Place*.

I also get ideas from my own life experiences. When my youngest children (the twins) went off to college, I wrote *Together Alone*, about the empty nest syndrome that so many of my friends and I were experiencing. When the aunt who raised me developed Alzheimer's disease, I wrote *Shades of Grace*. When I questioned the emotional underpinnings of *The Bridges of Madison County*, I wrote *For My Daughters*. I conceived of *Escape* when I was totally stressed out writing, planning my son's wedding, touring, and revising my website, at which point all I wanted to do was, well, escape all the work. *Sweet Salt Air* came about simply because I was in the mood to write something sensual, and I don't only mean sex. I mean smells and tastes. I mean the coast of Maine, because my senses do come alive there. OK. Yeah. I also mean sex.

Blueprints was inspired by friends. So many women I know, who have built challenging and fulfilling careers, are now in their 50's and 60's and are being pushed aside by younger women. Do men get pushed aside when their hair turns gray? Absolutely not. They gain gravitas. The gender gap in this realm is something we need to discuss.

And *Before and Again*, my new book hitting stands June 26, 2018? It was inspired by so many stories I've read -- every mother's *nightmare* -- the horror of losing a child. How do you recover from that? Maggie Reid's story is as uplifting as they get.

The key for me is opening up my mind to the world. Take people-watching at the mall. I have a vivid imagination that can take a facial expression or a piece of body language and build it into a full character.

Do you work from an outline?

Nowadays, I do. My stories are too complex not to have some sort of organization. That isn't to say I have every detail of the book outlined. I did a 75-page outline once and then felt that I had already written the story! No, the best outline is less than a dozen pages long. I supplement it with character sketches.

Do the stories drive you, or are you able to control them?

I control them—which isn't to say that characters don't take off and do their own things. When those things are bad for the book, I edit them out. When they're good, I go along for the ride.

Why do you so often write about New England?

I've lived in New England all my life, and one of the first rules of writing is to write about what you know. Well, I know these six states. Then again, I also know California's Big Sur, after

multiple vacations there, so it was the perfect setting for *Coast Road*, which goes to show that the New England thing isn't a hard-and-fast rule.

Of all the books you've written, which is your favorite?

Many of you have asked this question. One reader even said, "I'm sure they are like children and you love them all in different ways." How right she is. I do love all my books. The fact is that I couldn't spend months pouring my heart and soul into a book if I didn't love it. The pleasure I get from writing is similar to the pleasure I get from reading. In other words, I write the books I most want to read!

That said, do I have favorites? Well, *For My Daughters* will always hold a special place in my heart not only because I personally relate to it and cry each time I read it, but because it was my very first in hardcover. I love *Coast Road* for its setting (Big Sur) and because I liked the challenge of creating a woman who was a main character, though she was comatose for much of the book. I love *Three Wishes* because it is a beautiful story of eternal life. I love *Flirting With Pete* because it was based on a novella I wrote that I think was – is – the best thing I've ever written. I love *Escape* because it captures a fantasy of so many women. I love *Sweet Salt Air* because of Leo and Bear, because of Charlotte with her camera and her knitting, because of Nicole and her blog, and because of the cutting-edge medical issue in the book. And *Blueprints*? This book is about woman power. And *Before and Again*? Set in a spa with relaxing music and the smell of lemon verbena in the air? Heavenly.

Over the course of my career, I've worked hard to broaden my stories and hone my writing style - in short, to become a better writer. So, if you were to pin me down about my single favorite book, I'd have to say what I've been saying for years: Which of my books is my favorite? The next one. Is that optimism? Nope. Determination.

CREATING CHARACTERS

Which comes first, character or plot?

Sometimes one, sometimes the other. In my 2009 book, *While My Sister Sleeps*, the main character came first. I had never written a coming-of-age story before, and though my main character is 27, she hasn't yet found her voice. I wanted to help her do that. In *Sweet Salt Air*, though, the plot came before the characters. Same with my newest, *Blueprints*, though the characters were right there in my head within hours of the plot's conception.

How much time do you spend sketching out your characters until they seem real enough to write about?

I do very general character sketches. In *Blueprints*, I began with Caroline, who is 56, and once she was fleshed out, I fleshed out her 29-year-old daughter, Jamie. I probably spent several months at this, but the truth is that, with any book I write, the characters grow as I write. Only

after character details have inserted themselves do those characters' true voices emerge. In other words, just as the reader gets to know the main characters, so do I!

How do you pick the names of your characters?

Randomly. I never knowingly name a character after a friend or acquaintance. Over the years, many a reader has written to me after seeing her name in one of my books, but I assure you all, it is total coincidence.

I try to match up first names with the personality of my characters. Many times, these first names come from government listings online. I get last names from the phone book, newspapers and magazines, mailboxes on the side of the road, even obituary notices - and don't say that's morbid. Isn't it nice that someone who has died now lives on in one of my books?

Some authors use pictures of celebrities to help make those characters real. Do you?

Not of celebrities. If I did that, I would see *their* faces, not those of my characters. I do use pictures from magazines, but mostly to capture a mood. Remember, my books are character driven, and those characters suffer angst. Sorry, but the smiling faces in the clothes catalogues that my mailman just delivered don't inspire angst.

Of all the characters you've created, which is your favorite?

Bree, in *Three Wishes*. She was sweet and quirky, independent and resilient. I loved her from Day One.

But I have to tell you, Charlotte, in *Sweet Salt Air*, comes in a close second. I love her spunk and her independence. I love that she's willing to knit a sweater, even though she's lousy at knitting. I love that she made a terrible, terrible mistake in life but is determined to fix it. I love that she feels so strongly about the people in her life.

That said, Caroline, in *Blueprints*, is my girl. She's the woman I want to be as I grow, the woman who meets adversity head-on and finds the cloud's silver lining. She may not end up doing what she had initially planned, but she finds rich reward in it. As she says toward the end of the book, the important part of growing older is the growing part. She's an inspiration to me.

How much of you is in each book you write?

That depends. I consciously avoid politics and religion, though I fear that my lead characters reflect my approach to the world. After all, I have to be comfortable with the things that they do.

There's a lot of me in *Sweet Salt Air*, though you'd have to know me well to see it. I once struggled through knitting an Aran Isle sweater, so Charlotte does the same. I have always appreciated the ocean, which Charlotte and Nicole both do. Blue and green are two of my favorite colors, hence the decor in Nicole's beach house.

And *Blueprints*? Ahh, there's lots of me in this newbie. For starters -- I mean, literally at the start of the book -- the main character has surgery for wrist tendonitis. I had that. And a love of Victorian homes? I've always dreamed of having one with the charm of Caroline's. I'm like Jamie in loving bacon for breakfast. And shelter pets? Caroline has three shelter cats. I had one and loved her to bits for eighteen years. Now, I live through my characters' pets.

Where am I in *Before and Again*? Maggie's mother, Margaret, has my heart.

RESEARCH

How much research goes into each book?

That depends on the book. The only research required for *For My Daughters*, for instance, was about flowers that grow on the Maine coast. *The Vineyard*, on the other hand, called for research on the subjects of grape-growing, photo restoration, dyslexia, the trees and flowers of Rhode Island, the Great Depression, and World War II.

Since I write about true-to-life situations, I try to be as accurate as possible. I get information from books, from personal interviews with experts, and from online resources. Blogs, especially, are a goldmine. For *The Woman Next Door*, I researched both fertility treatments and the job of a school psychologist. For *An Accidental Woman*, I researched maple sugar production. For *Flirting With Pete*, I researched both Beacon Hill gardens and persistent vegetative states.

Blueprints required research into architecture as an active career, and into carpentry. What tools does a carpenter keep on his or her truck? Do you know? I didn't, but as fate had it, I was doing a personal home improvement project during the early writing of this book. I milked my contractor's brain for all it was worth. Little details matter; they give authenticity to a book.

Sweet Salt Air required medical information that I wanted to get right. To that end, I was fortunate enough to connect with a doctor in the Midwest who specializes in the subject matter of my book. He gave me lots of information up front, but then, as I needed more, I would shoot him an email. Once, he answered me from Paris, where he was delivering a paper. He was great.

Sometimes it's hard to find a source. With *Looking For Peyton Place*, for instance, I needed information on Grace Metalious. But the woman wrote *Peyton Place* in the mid-1950s, when there was no *People* magazine, no E! Channel, no journalism-of-the-spectacular such as what exists today. Moreover, Grace died at the age of 39, giving journalists precious little time to conduct interviews and write articles and books. I found the few that were out there, scoured them for clues, then recreated Grace in my own book based on what I had read. After my book came out, I received a note from a member of the Metalious family saying that I had gotten it right. I treasure this praise.

On occasion, research takes on a life of its own. Such was the case with lobstering, which I researched extensively in the course of writing *The Summer I Dared*. When I finished the book, the thought of packing away all of that research broke my heart. So I organized the material and sold it as an independent book, *Does A Lobsterman Wear Pants?*

Do you do the research yourself?

I like to. It's fun, and when I do it myself, I learn as I go. Moreover, there are times that my research leads me in a different direction from the one I'd originally planned. Being the active researcher, I can follow that lead to my heart's content. Many a book of mine has taken a novel twist as a result of the research process.

Do you ever make mistakes?

In my research? Sure I do. I'm human. Some fans love pointing those mistakes out - and I am grateful, as in the case of the nurse-reader who pointed out that comatose patients suffer from intracranial pressure, not intracranial pressure. Or the car enthusiast who pointed out that Volkswagen Beetles don't have radiators. In such cases, I make sure that the correction is entered in future editions of the book. There are times, however, when readers "correct" things that can go either way. In these situations, I simply beg the reader to indulge me "my" way.

PERSONAL STUFF

Do you have any regrets about your career as a writer?

Sure. I wish I had started sooner. I wish there were more hours in a day. I wish I was a better writer.

Has writing taken more time and energy than you expected or wanted to give to it?

Actually, yes. When I'm writing a book, I can't seem to turn off the characters and their plot. They're with me round the clock, seven days a week. There are days when I wish I worked nine-to-five and could just come home, put it all out of my mind, and relax.

What keeps you writing?

The contract I signed? The money I get? These may both be factors, but they are minor ones. If I worked solely for the money, my books would show it. We've all read books like that. Right?

Two things, really, keep me going. First, I love playing with words. There is nothing more satisfying than writing a passage, editing it and re-editing it until every last word fits smoothly, neatly, and rhythmically—then reading the whole thing and thinking, "Wow, that's nice." It's a puzzle. The moment when all of the pieces come together is magical.

Second, my readers keep me going. I work in solitude, some of the time thinking that no one but me ever sees that magical passage. Then I get feedback from you all, and any frustrations I feel regarding the down-side of this career (the business side, the demands of social media, the fighting for placement in bookstores) go right out the window. Knowing that I touch so many people is mind-blowing. Come the day when that stops happening—when my books fail to move readers—I'll pull the plug on my computer.

What does your family think of your writing?

My family has been supportive of my work from Day One. Granted, I've always organized my time around their needs. Being self-employed and working at home enables me to do that. Nonetheless, they are eternally enthusiastic, even at times when I know that they have other things on their minds. I'm particularly grateful for this, given that my husband and sons are—well—male. They do love getting into the plotting. And they do love having people spot my books in stores and ask if we're related!

What is your favorite ...

Color? Green. I'm a forest person.

Season? Spring. New Englanders die for spring after the winters we have.

Vacation Destination? Big Sur, hence *Coast Road*.

Recreational Sport? Tennis.

Form of Exercise? Aerobics. It's the least of the evils.

Entree? Lobster. Cook it any way you like.

Dessert? Strawberry Shortcake, but only on an authentic biscuit. Yum.

Candy? Heath Bar. Wouldn't have made it through pregnancy without them.

Old book? *Peyton Place* by Grace Metalious. Forget sex. Think character development.

New book? Sentimentally, *Three Wishes*.

Writing time? AM. I'm definitely a morning person.

Holiday? Thanksgiving, when we're all together, no matter where.

BOOK GROUPS

Are you in one?

Absolutely. My book group, which consists of readers, not writers, has been together for twenty-nine (yup, 29) years. We pick our books each June for the following year, read a mix of fiction and non-fiction, and yes, there are some books I do not want to read. For the sake of the group, I force myself. Nine times out of ten, I'm glad that I did. In the case of the one time I am not, at least I've had a fun evening with friends, wine, and whatever other goodies the evening's host sets out. Does my book group discuss my books? No! I don't let them. I've already read my own books!

Do other book groups discuss your books?

Gratifyingly so. Rarely does a week pass when I don't hear from one group or another. Naturally, I'm biased, but I think my books are wonderful discussion books. I write about real people and real problems, and book groups are made up of real people with real problems, so the identification is strong. Moreover, my books are vertical, rather than horizontal. In other words, rather than having a linear plot based on action such as in a novel of suspense, my plots consist of multiple threads driven by my characters' emotional needs. Digging down into my books opens up food for thought. Peeling away the layers, as book groups do, exposes the reader to aspects of the book that she may not have realized were there. It's all about enhancing the reader's experience.

Are there Reading Group Guides for your books and, if so, who writes them?

All of my recent books have Reading Group Guides. In several cases, my publisher has written the Guide, but most often, I write it myself. This isn't rocket science. Being in a book group myself, I know the kinds of questions that spark a discussion. So I write them down as they come to me in the course of writing a given book.

How can I get a copy of the Reading Group Guides?

Several ways. For a guide to a particular book, click on the title on the main [Books](#) page, then click again on Reading Group Guide.

Do you have a fan club?

I guess my Facebook following is as close as it gets. I post news there, links to my blog, and free offers in advance of the publication of a new book. Readers post regularly on my wall, and I answer as many questions as I can.

Why doesn't Oprah name one of your books to her club?

Beats me!

Promoting my books

What is touring like?

Touring is tough. Contrary to popular belief, there is nothing glamorous about it. It is grueling and lonely. An example? Several years back, I was on tour for a week. Smack in the middle of that week, I awoke at 4:30am in Cincinnati to take an early flight to St. Louis, where I was met at the airport by a media escort, who preceded to take me to 15 different bookstores to sign stock (anywhere from 25 to 100 books of mine that they had on hand). We landed at a final bookstore at 7pm for a speech and signing (only eight people came), then I was dropped back at the airport at 8:30pm for a 9:30 flight to Minneapolis that didn't take off until 2am because of thunderstorms in the east delaying all the planes. I checked into my hotel room in Minneapolis at 5am, caught two hours' sleep, then had to get up for a 9am television appearance.

Ah, but the joy (I'm being facetious, here) didn't end there. From Minneapolis I flew on to Los Angeles. I had begged my publisher not to send me there. I would be arriving late Thursday of the Fourth of July weekend, with the only booking a Friday evening signing at a chain bookstore in Thousand Oaks. Had the signing been canceled, I might have returned home Thursday night. Instead, I would be arriving home Saturday night, on the Fourth itself. My publisher insisted that I go, claiming that the bookstore had already done publicity.

In fact, that publicity consisted of a flyer in the store window. Four people stopped by (coincidentally, and not by design). None bought books.

Was this the best use of my time? I don't think so. Mind you, I love meeting my readers. If there had been twenty or thirty of them at that store in California, I would have felt satisfied.

There are those who say that an author owes it to her fans to do signings. I disagree. I owe my fans the best book possible. For me to deliver that means time here at home, nurturing time with family and friends, leisurely time by myself, quiet time to write. Touring is the exact opposite of all that.

Where have you visited when on tour?

I've been all over New England. I've been to New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Washington DC.

I've been to Charlotte, Atlanta, Charleston, and Mobile.

I've been to Miami and West Palm Beach. I've been to Houston and Dallas, St. Louis, Kansas City.

I've been to Denver.

I've been to Cleveland, Detroit, Cincinnati, Minneapolis.

I've been to Seattle and San Francisco. I've toured through England, taking the train out of London each day to visit towns like Coventry, Sheffield, Liverpool, and Hull.

I've been to the International Book Fair in Germany, and once even did a Readers' Party in Italy!

Do you have any future touring scheduled?

I do blog tours. Does that count?

Periodically, I give speeches, do radio or TV interviews, and take part in individual signings. I'll post these dates on my events page, as well as on Facebook, allowing as much time as possible for you to try to attend.

Most often now, when I travel, it's to talk about breast cancer. I'm a survivor. My speech is motivational, but I do talk about my book ***UPLIFT: Secrets From the Sisterhood of Breast Cancer Survivors***. The book is like a support group, offering practical tips and upbeat anecdotes from more than 400 survivors, their families, friends, and coworkers. I compiled the first edition in 2001 and have added new material in three subsequent editions. There is nothing medical here, nothing frightening. And the entirety of my proceeds fund a breast fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital. Does it get any better than that?

TV adaptations of my books

Will any of your books be made into television movies?

One was! Lifetime acquired the rights to ***A Woman's Place***, and produced a movie starring Lorraine Bracco under the title "Custody of the Heart." Many other of my books have been optioned for MOWs (Movies of the Week), including ***Coast Road***, ***Three Wishes***, and ***For My Daughters***.

Keep in mind, though, that these are all "options." What is an option? When a production company options a book, it buys the exclusive right to that book for a certain period of time, usually one year. During that period, it decides whether it wants to make the book into a movie, and attempts to sell the idea to a network or cable station. The money it spends basically precludes another production company from buying the book in the interim. I don't have actual figures, but I do know that production companies option many, many more books than they ever intend to make into movies.

Bottom line? While I would love to see one of my books on the big screen, I'll believe it when I see it.

Do you write the script?

No, thank you. I'm a novelist, not a script writer. Writing for the screen takes a whole other kind of talent. It also takes time, which means less time for my novels, and my novels are what I love.

Do you have a say about who plays what roles?

I suppose that I could be tough and insert in a screen contract that I have final approval over who plays what roles. But I don't want to do that. The truth is that I watch little television and wouldn't even know the casting pool. I'm far more concerned about the quality of the script. When it came to *A Woman's Place*, we specifically asked for award-winning playwright Marsha Norman. We did get her, and the script was wonderful. I am ashamed to say that I haven't yet watched the movie. Much as I loved the script, it had a new title and focused on only one small theme of the book. It wasn't really my story anymore, and since I rarely watch TV...

Foreign Rights

In what foreign languages are your books printed?

My books have been published in the following countries and/or regions: Argentina, Australia/New Zealand, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada (English and French editions), China, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latin America, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, and Yugoslavia. Counting the US, that's actually 35 countries/regions that have printed separate editions of my books, each with their own "patois," so to speak. I have also received editions of my books, different from all the above, for which I can't even figure out the origin. And the foreign sales continue.

Are you pleased with the translations?

I can't read them! On occasion, I've had a bilingual friend read both the English and foreign language versions of a book, and I've been told that the translation is good. Do I know from my own experience? No.

What foreign countries sell your books the best?

Brazil is huge, and my covers there are gorgeous. Behind that come France, Italy, Germany, and Japan. My publisher in the UK is putting in a great effort, so those numbers are rising, too.

Do you get fan mail from foreigners?

Thanks to email, yes. And Facebook. What an international world *that* has opened!

Advice to Would-Be Writers

Where do I begin if I want to write a novel?

Read. Read. Read. Find the kinds of books you most love. Read them once, twice, even three times. Study their structure by outlining them.

Then outline your own book, using that model as a guide.

Unfortunately, writing is a business. What that generally means is that if you want to sell a book, the books by other writers that you have loved, outlined, and used as a model should be current. A book that is new to the stores this year is a better indicator of what publishers are buying than a book that was published ten years ago.

That said, imitation is only one way to go. When I wrote my first book, what set it apart (I was later told) was that it had a fresh voice. Basically, I had taken the model from which I was working and had given it my own twist. This is what you need to do. Actually, my freshness was mild. Some of the most successful books in recent years have worked because they are totally new and different in both subject matter and approach.

The other thing you need to do if you want to be a writer is to start. That's it. Start. Sit down, set goals for yourself—even small ones, like writing a page or two each day - and do it!

If I am 51, am I too old to start writing?

Definitely not. I think the danger is more at the other end, when people are in their twenties and simply haven't had enough life experience to write a book. I started writing at 34, and couldn't possibly have written anything worth reading much before that. I just didn't know enough. There are exceptions, like the 15-year-old who wrote a fantasy novel, but that was fantasy. I do get a kick out of the occasional teenage celebrity who is contracted to write his or her biography.

How has the market changed since you started writing?

It's gotten tighter. There are more and more books vying for the attention of fewer and fewer publishers, and those publishers are more and more attuned to the bottom line. That means fewer new authors have the opportunities they might have had ten or fifteen years ago.

Counterbalance that with the fact that there's a whole new publishing world out there when it comes to e-books and self-publishing. This is a work in progress, still shifting and evolving.

Do you use an e-reader?

Absolutely. Since I still love to hold certain books in my hand, I go back and forth between e-reader and print. When we travel, the e-reader is all I take, for the sheer convenience of it. Naturally, when I get home and am reading a physical book again, come time to turn the page, I tap the margin ...

Are writers' groups worthwhile?

Far be it from me to say that they aren't. All I know is that they don't work for me. I've always been a solo practitioner. But then, I've always had the luxury of getting feedback on a book from an editor who is already committed to buying it.

Too often, I fear, writers go over their work ad infinitum with a writers' group as a means of postponing a submission. As long as the group keeps suggesting changes, the writer can avoid potential rejection by a publisher. Unfortunately, he or she also avoids a potential sale. Let's face it: you can edit forever. At some point, you have to fish or cut bait!

Do I need an agent?

I've always thought yes. A good agent can place a book with the right publisher and negotiate a solid contract. A good agent can guide a writer's career. The key word here is "good." My first agent was happy to take the money and run. He didn't want to work to find the right publishing house for my books. I don't think he believed in my work.

My current agent is a gem. I would not be where I am today if it weren't for her hard work.