

HOME ART BOOKS RECIPES SPORTS BLOG ABOUT CONTACT STORE

INTERVIEW WITH CATHIE BORRIE, AUTHOR OF THE LONG HELLO

THE TRAVELER'S
BLOG

by **Stephen Woodfin**

BLOG

The Unknown
The Unexplored
The Unexpected
The Unexplained
The Unforgettable

BOOK REVIEWS

Books for the Road
The Business Traveler
A Legacy Saved

INTERVIEWS

BLOGGERS

Frank C. Etier
Whit Gentry
Maryann Miller
Don Newbury
Caleb Pirtle III
Don Rush
Jory Sherman
Stephen Woodfin
Brooklyn James
Gerald Crawford
Andre le Gallo

In another blog I reviewed Cathie Borrie's wonderful, literary memoir about her experience caring for her mother during her mom's seven-year journey through Alzheimer's (AD). Cathie was kind enough to share this interview.

Woodfin: I found your book, *THE LONG HELLO*, to be a stunning work of literary virtuosity. For those who haven't read your memoir, please give us some personal background on yourself.

Borrie: Thank you, Stephen. Briefly, I was born and raised in western Canada and have spent time in the arctic, the prairies and Baltimore! I was sure I was going to be a famous actress so attended theatre school but when it became evident there was a dissonance between what I imagined and what was true I moved on to nursing school. I built on my nursing by studying for my bachelors in nursing at university then worked in research and teaching. A highlight in my career and experience was attending Johns Hopkins for a MPH degree. I worked in various jobs in health and then went back to university to receive my law degree. (Couldn't get the love of drama out of my blood!) Law helped me in my consulting business and also in the small retail business I ran for seven years. This career journey stopped when my mother received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's. I cared for her for 7 years.

Woodfin: How long after your mother's death from Alzheimer's was it before you began to write about it, and what motivated you to tackle the subject matter of the book?

Borrie: I began to write about the experience during the time I cared for my mother. As she walked down memory lane, I followed, and soon found myself jotting down notes about our earlier family experiences - good and bad, happy and sad.

As her disease advanced her language became lyrical, even poetic, and it tapped into my own literary imagination. I had always wanted to write but was very caught up in my other "careers". It took my mother's illness to release the writer in me.

I found conversations with my mother so interesting that I began to tape her. Later, I had these conversations transcribed and then incorporated her voice into the memoir.

Believing the negative stereotypes surrounding Alzheimer's - *the long goodbye the empty shell, the endless forgetting* . . . I was astonished to discover an emerging voice in my mother I had not expected, a voice of insight, humor and an astonishing poetic sensibility. I thought this represented a cultural shift in



Cathie Borrie and her mom, Jo

how we view people with Alzheimer's and felt, as a story, it needed to be told.

During her illness I began to run workshops and give talks on caregiving. The response I received encouraged me to continue writing and I was accepted into a Writers Studio program for creative writing. Five years later: *The Long Hello* was published. Since then I have been presenting a more positive message about the Alzheimer's experience, all over the world.

Woodfin: The relationship between you and your mother underlies THE LONG HELLO. Did writing THE LONG HELLO change your memory of that relationship, enhance it, crystallize it?

Borrie: Yes, you are quite right - it is very much a book about more than Alzheimer's and caregiving. I know it would not have been written had my mother not had the disease so it serves as a central core, but it is not in any way the whole story. Writing my story, our story, was a challenging, tumultuous, joyful experience. As an adult looking back on our family circumstances, writing about them gave me an insight I could not have seen as a child, as indeed no child can. My understanding of various events began to gel as I both listened to her stories of the old days and wrote stories of my own. Many were very sad, but there was also much humor. My mother and I were always very close and due to some of our family losses, probably more close than most mother-daughter relationships. More desperately close, if I may describe it that way.

Woodfin: What advice would you give an adult child who finds herself in the role of primary caregiver for a parent with Alzheimer's?

Follow. Follow. Follow. I spent many useless hours correcting, re-orienting, interrupting, initiating, deciding. Useless at best, and cruel. If you can drum up patience to take the time to listen (the most difficult thing to do), this honouring caregiving approach will reap benefits to you both. It's like a dance and your parent is, in some vital way, leading. Let them. *Follow*.

I recommend the taping of conversations. It is an honouring activity and gives you both something to do.

Woodfin: How has your mother's passing affected your life as you live it now?

Borrie: I think it would have affected it quite differently had I not written a book about it and had I not undertaken to spread a more hopeful message about this experience through presentations and interviews. Because of this I am reminded of her and of our story every day. Some days I wish this was not the case and that I could move on into other worlds but the obligation I feel to continue is too strong. My audiences and readers provide the encouragement I need.

As my mother said when she'd play the piano and I would sing - sometimes missing the high notes -

"Just
keep going, love! Keep going!"



[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [CONTACT](#) [STORE](#)

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