

Shedding Light on Family

By: Kathryn Boughton

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Anyone lucky enough to have spent summers along the shores of a placid lake, lined by birches and echoing with the laughter of children, will respond to the word pictures Mary Carroll Moore draws in her newly released novel, "Qualities of Light."

Anyone who has lived through the awkwardness of dawning adulthood or through the tension of gathering divorce will equally understand the images she evokes of adolescence and the death throes of love.

The book, published by Bella Books in September and nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award, has been called by best-selling author Ann Bannon a "tender and lively coming-of-age tale told with delicate insight."

It is a remarkable effort for a first-time novelist, but Ms. Moore is no stranger to the publishing world. She has written 16 nonfiction books and two memoirs, not to mention many columns, essays, short stories and poetry. She earned her MFA in creative writing from Goddard College (it was her second master's degree, the first being in Russian) and teaches creative writing at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., as well as at The Loft Literary Center in her native Minnesota.

The road to being a writer of fiction was not a straightforward one for Ms. Moore, however. "I've had a checkered career-but in a good way," she said this week from her home in Roxbury.

Following studies in France in the 1970s, she went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in Russian language and literature at Boston University and a master's in Russian at San Diego State University. She taught Russian at SDSU and led trips to the U.S.S.R. "before it became the former U.S.S.R.." But when passage of Proposition 18 cut her faculty position, she cast about for a new direction.

"I had lived in France," she related, "so I went into teaching French cooking in the Bay area. That led to a first writing assignment. I was contracted to write a cookbook that won a James Beard Award, which was a very big deal for me. From the cookbook, I moved into nonfiction."

The nonfiction books had a heavy concentration on cooking, food and health, with titles such as "Prevention's Quick and Healthy Low-Fat Cooking," "Low-Fat, Low-Cost Freezer Cookbook," "Cholesterol Cures" and "Betty Crocker's New Low-Fat, Low-Cholesterol Cookbook." She even worked with Dr. Dean Ornish on a book about his heart health program.

Meanwhile, her active brain was cooking up a completely different kind of book—a story about a family of artists that was being torn apart by the dynamic tensions between a father absorbed in his art, a pilot wife who

increasingly longs to fly free, a daughter who fears the looming loss of her mother and who is coming to grips with her lesbianism, and a little boy who expresses his anxiety through petty theft. "Qualities of Light" explores what happens to this tightly knit but ready to fracture group when the adolescent daughter breaks family rules to give her little brother a solo ride on the lake in the family boat. The boy falls in the water, nearly drowns, and remains in a coma while his family keeps a rotating vigil at his bedside.

Ms. Moore said the book has only distant echoes of her own life. Points of commonality are the fictional family's cabin in the Adirondacks, a familiarity with family tragedy, and art. "I have been working on this novel for nine years," she revealed. "When I was in the Adirondacks one summer, I was taken with the idea of what would happen if a family had a tragedy and it was a family of painters. It's a story of blindness and perception-of people who are trained to see art, but who can't see the human spirit. [The teenage girl] Molly is the one who ends up making the difference, who allows the father to heal.

"It is completely fictional," she continued, adding that it was a challenging topic. "I did a lot of research on coma and coma effect on a family. I have a friend who works with brain trauma, and I looked at questions of do victims ever fully recover, what's the prognosis? & I was diving into different topics I had no ideas about, but I set a lot of challenges for myself and this book was one of them."

She said she had some empathy for the family she created because her own sister died suddenly, leaving a family behind. "I have a fascination with human psychology and the human heart and what happens when people communicate properly and when they don't. I never had a son or daughter who was a coma victim, but I have seen my sister die suddenly and saw what it did to her family. I feel there is a common element to tragedy-although I know someone who has lost a child would say I have no clue what it is like."

In an attempt to accurately portray what it is like-not to lose a child, but to live with the potential of that loss-she wrote and wrote and wrote. "I was amazed as I learned about how people try to function and how they can't do normal things [in the face of tragedy]," she said. "Kate [the mother] is a pilot, and pilots have to be aware of weather, but in one scene she is even unaware that it is not raining. I wrote many, many drafts of that scene because I wanted to show how disoriented she was. Sometimes tragedy that finishes is easier than tragedy that does not finish."

She said that Kate could be considered slightly autobiographical because her own mother was a pilot who flew bomber transports from Texas to Canada during World War II, freeing male pilots for combat. "I grew up with legends of women flying," she said. "Kate was my first character and is part of the sequel to this book. When I started this first novel I was getting my MFA in writing. The teachers said early on that it was two novels. So I divided it in two."

She said having another book ready going into production eases the "post-partum depression" authors often feel when a book is published. The characters in "Qualities of Light" all reappear in the next book, but the author admits to "playing God" with young Sammy, the boy in the coma in the first book. "Sammy is not a main

character here," she says, "because I am not that interested in him. Kate is about to leave her marriage in the next book and something happens that she has to make a big decision."

As many authors have noted before, the characters became so real they dictated the plot to a degree. "When my conscious mind goes to sleep a little, like when I am driving, I get snippets of conversation. I was very surprised by some of the twists and turns of this plot. I wanted to create something that would touch people, have them look deeply at themselves and the relationships in a family, but I found that I couldn't make a character feel real until I identified a weakness in myself that [he or she] reflects. For instance, when I realized that part of me fears being known, then I could make the father become alive and real."

She says that the characters "are just so involving, they don't leave me alone."

But, as in all relationships, they do leave her alone sometimes. She alternates between her computer in the winter and her easel in the summer, and finds that changing the focus of her art sometimes stimulates a return to writing.

"I can't be compartmentalized, and sometimes the two areas leak into each other," she said. "Some days no words come and I have to go to the easel. Sometimes the images I find inform the book. And sometimes, when I am zoning out while I am painting, I get ideas. So I wash my hands and run upstairs. It's a dance between painting and writing, and if I pay attention to the dance, it works well together. The dance is what keeps the magic going."

Ms. Moore studied art at Boston University, d'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and with Cape Cod Impressionist painter Henry Hensche. She says she works outside during the summer, but occasionally during the winter completes "starts" she made in warmer weather.

"My art came back to me when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in the late 1990s and has been an important part of my healing," she said. "While I was undergoing chemotherapy, I felt a resurgence of my childhood interest in painting."

Her paintings reflect her Impressionistic training, suggesting shapes, distance and atmosphere through the quality of light. Her work has won several awards and, appropriately, "Summer Light" was chosen for a breast cancer awareness calendar by Amoena Corporation.

She also responded to her cancer through her creative arts teaching, giving classes for breast cancer survivors at The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, Minn. She has taught writing workshops and classes in the United States, Australia and Europe since 1975 and is part of the Hopkins Art Center Author-of-the-Month program in Minneapolis, Border's Bookstore and Barnes & Noble's visiting author programs, and also teaches at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center.

"You can't teach creativity," she admits, "but I teach them book structure. People come in and learn the basics of how to put a book together, how to pull their ideas into the long form of books. Ninety percent of people who start a book will never finish it because they have no clue about pacing and transition, the kinds of things that make a book a non-stop read. And then we do writing exercises, read the works and give positive reinforcement."

While helping others to bring their writing to fruition, she continues to work on her own. She has completed the second novel about the Fischer family, "Breathing Room," just as "Qualities of Light" is coming out in a second printing. And she is doing promotional readings for her first novel, with the next one scheduled for Nov. 1 at 2 p.m. at the Hickory Stick Bookshop in Washington.

"I think I'm a fairly ordinary person, just with lot of passion for the arts," she said. "If it is a choice between watching TV and writing, I will choose writing. I am very driven to get what I have inside out."