

## Interview Questions and Answers Elizabeth Zelvin

### **Q. How long did it take you to get your first novel published?**

A. Fifty-seven years. I first said I wanted to be a writer at the age of seven. It took longer to get that first novel out than I expected. From completion of the first draft of *Death Will Get You Sober* to its launch took about six years.

### **Q. Are your mysteries a series?**

A. Yes. *Death Will Get You Sober*, *Death Will Help You Leave Him*, and *Death Will Extend Your Vacation* all feature recovering alcoholic Bruce Kohler and his friends, Jimmy the computer genius and Barbara the world-class codependent. Besides the three novels, they appear in four short stories: “Death Will Clean Your Closet” and “Death Will Trim Your Tree,” both nominated for Agatha awards, “Death Will Tie Your Kangaroo Down,” which was published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, and the forthcoming “Death Will Tank Your Fish.”

### **Q. What is *Death Will Extend Your Vacation* about?**

A. Bruce, Barbara, and Jimmy take shares in a clean and sober group house in the Hamptons, and several murders follow. The serious theme underlying the fun and the puzzle is eating disorders, and environmental issues also play a part.

### **Q. Are you writing any novels or short stories in addition to the recovery series?**

A. My Young Adult historical suspense novel, *Voyage of Strangers*, is making the rounds. It’s the sequel to two short stories about Diego, a young *marrano* sailor on Columbus’s first voyage, that appeared in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. In the novel, Diego has to get his sister Rachel out of Spain a step ahead of the Inquisition. They both end up on Columbus’s second voyage. The theme of this series is intolerance and being an outsider: the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the genocide of the Taino who lived on the islands Columbus “discovered” both took place during this period. Several of my short stories on other topics have also been published since 2010.

### **Q. What have you written apart from fiction?**

A. My first published work was poetry. My poems have appeared in numerous journals, and New Rivers Press published two collections, *I Am the Daughter* in 1981 and *Gifts and Secrets: Poems of the Therapeutic Relationship* in 1999. I’ve also published a lot of professional material on addictions, codependency, and more recently on online therapy. The 1997 book I coedited, *Gender and Addictions: Men and Women in Treatment*, was a main selection of the Psychotherapy Book Club.

### **Q. Was *Death Will Get You Sober* your first mystery?**

A. It was the first published, but I wrote three mysteries in the 1970s that didn’t sell. Now I’m not sorry, because I’ve learned a lot about both life and the writer’s craft since then.

### **Q. Three of your short stories have been nominated for the Agatha Award for Best Short Story. Have you been writing stories all along?**

**A.** No, it happened more or less by accident. I wrote the first one to submit to an anthology in which I thought I had a good chance of getting published. It was accepted and nominated for an award, which encouraged me to write more stories. I fell in love with the short story form and kept on going. I found that even 3,000 words is surprisingly spacious and that writing short allowed me to experiment with different subgenres and voices without a huge investment of time and energy or too much of a stake in the outcome for any particular story. I've also become a short story reader. There's a renaissance in writing them going on now, though unfortunately not a boom in print markets. The good news is that there are more and more opportunities to publish online. I'm proud to have several stories in *EQMM* and in various print anthologies, and I'm also proud to have stories that no print market wanted in some highly regarded e-zines.

**Q. What made you decide to be a writer? Who were your early influences?**

**A.** My favorite book when I was a child was *Emily of New Moon* by L.M. Montgomery, the author of *Anne of Green Gables*. Like Anne, Emily was a little orphan girl on Prince Edward Island. The difference was that Emily had a burning desire to write. I discovered *Little Women* a little later. Both Louisa May Alcott's Jo March and Emily of New Moon had to deal with a lot of discouragement and rejection, but nothing could stop them from writing. The third book that made me a writer was *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which first came out in English when I was eleven. Of course, I immediately started a diary of my own. Anne taught me the importance of writing honestly about your feelings. That's been valuable to me not only as a writer, but as a therapist as well.

**Q. How did you go about pursuing a writing career?**

**A.** I spent fifteen years working for various publishers editing text and reference books, including a beautifully edited but mind-numbing accounting textbook. That didn't get me any closer to being a published novelist, though it made me a crackerjack editor. Getting my poems published was a great achievement, but it didn't pay the rent. The only time I made any money was when I won a CAPS fellowship from the New York State Council on the Arts in 1983. They gathered sixteen poets in a room and handed us each a check for \$5,000. The room was filled with happiness so thick you could cut it. Eventually, I started looking around for another way to make a living.

**Q. How did you become a therapist?**

**A.** My fascination with people's inner life led me to the helping professions. That fascination drives me as a writer too. Both writing and therapy are about the emotions and human connections that interest me most. In practical terms, I went back to school, to Columbia University, for a master's degree in social work. In social work school, they throw you right into the deep end of the pool with a professional placement three days a week while you're taking a full course load the other two days. When you get out, you go to work for some kind of social service agency or clinic. After you get some solid professional experience, then you're ready to think about hanging out a shingle as a psychotherapist.

**Q. How did you get into the addictions field?**

**A.** My second year internship in social work school was at a legendary alcoholism treatment facility. I found the addictions field, with its potential for full recovery, both inspiring and hopeful. I had a number of jobs in alcoholism treatment, first as a clinician and then as a program director.

**Q. You had a private practice as well?**

**A.** Yes, for many years I juggled a day job with a psychotherapy practice. Many of my clients had alcoholism and other addictions, came from alcoholic families, or were in addictive relationships. I've also worked with a lot of people with eating disorders and survivors of sexual abuse. In fact, people in recovery make wonderful clients, because they are already committed to personal growth and taking a hard look at their own shortcomings, especially those who attend Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs.

**Q. What led you to doing therapy online?**

**A.** I left my last day job in 1999, when a beloved boss died. I was ready for something new, and I was lucky to stumble upon the new field of online mental health. I found that I loved working with clients via chat and email. As a writer, I'm both comfortable and expressive with the written word. For clients who choose online therapy or counseling, working in text provides both more intimacy and more safety than face to face contact. The freedom from geography makes for a varied clientele. I work with clients all over the world who might never seek help in person or have no access to professional services in their communities. And working from the computer allows for a lot more flexibility. Neither the therapist nor the client has to dress up or travel in order to meet. It's a lot like being a writer.

**Q. Why mysteries?**

**A.** I'm an avid mystery reader. When you pick up a mystery, you know you'll read a story in which something happens. The mystery structure—a crime is committed, someone investigates, there's a climax and a resolution—is like a sturdy coat hanger on which the writer can hang anything he or she likes. Dick Francis hangs horses on his coat hanger. Nevada Barr hangs national parks. My favorites are usually series with likeable, often endearing characters who have ongoing relationships with family and friends.

**Q. Why recovery?**

I choose to write about recovery, both because it's my area of expertise and because I am deeply moved and inspired by the courage and honesty of recovering people. I love the character arc of the traditional mystery series. Characters in recovery are a perfect fit, because they are committed to ongoing change and growth.

**Q. How do you work when you're writing?**

**A.** I work best in the mornings. If I can get right to the computer—and manage not to open my email first—I can use my morning energy to write at least 1000 words. I write a new first draft straight through, because I don't outline, so I don't know what will happen until I get the whole thing down. I have a sign above my computer that says, "Just keep telling the story." Some days I have to let other things come first: clients or the

complicated business of life in the 21st century. If I have a deadline, I can push myself to write later in the day, but it's harder. Sometimes a nap helps. I dress comfortably, usually in a sleep tee. And I have to be alone. I marvel at writers who not only can work in Starbucks, but prefer it.

**Q. Since you don't outline, how do you construct the story?**

**A.** "Into the mist" is a good description of how I write. With the mysteries, I started with a title. I talked about writing a mystery called *Death Will Get You Sober* for years before I sat down to write it. I knew it would be about recovering alcoholics. Each new title told me the theme or setting: *Death Will Help You Leave Him* is about relationship addiction; *Death Will Extend Your Vacation* took my characters to the beach.

My characters can start talking in my head at any time, and that's how I get going. As I write, I start to populate their world. In the mysteries, I have to come up with suspects, a murderer, and one or more victims. With the historical stories, I've had to do some research in advance. I start with the historical timeline of what really happened, certain characters from history, and some remarkably dramatic events that really happened. Then I weave in my fictional characters and their adventures as I write.

Once I'm writing the first draft, telling myself the story, ideas start popping up when I'm running around the reservoir or in the car or lying in bed: lines of dialogue, plot twists, ideas for scenes. I have folders bristling with post-it notes that start with "Maybe..." Or I'll use a little digital recorder to capture a thought if I'm running or in the car. Sometimes I use them, sometimes I don't. The story unfolds from an intuitive place inside me. Once I've got the first draft down, I can revise. And revise and revise and revise.

**Q. Where do you turn for help in writing and promoting your work?**

**A.** I'm lucky to have a tremendous support network both in New York and in cyberspace. I'm an active member of Mystery Writers of America and belong to both the New York Tristate chapter of Sisters in Crime and the online Guppies chapter for new and emerging writers. Guppies has been a great source of critique partners, information about the process of getting published, and a terrific cheering section. And I've formed valuable friendships with writers and other mystery lovers—readers, librarians, and booksellers—on DorothyL and other e-lists. More recently, I've joined the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.

**Q. What do you do to promote your books?**

**A.** Everything I can. I have a website at [www.elizabethzelvin.com](http://www.elizabethzelvin.com) and I blog with other mystery writers on [Poe's Deadly Daughters](#). I toured extensively with my first two books and still love to visit bookstores and libraries, as well as speaking to groups that are interested in my themes. I constantly connect with readers on e-lists and social networking sites. I've given out thousands of bookmarks and done mass mailings of postcards and emails. I love attending mystery conventions and the big librarians' conventions. Word of mouth is still considered the best way to sell books, so I try to

encourage everyone I know to buy the book, both for themselves and as gifts, and to tell as many people as possible about it—without getting obnoxious about it, I hope.

**Q. What are you working on now?**

**A.** Whether I write another mystery or another historical YA next depends to some extent on how the current works do in the marketplace. At the moment, I have several ideas germinating. In the meantime, I'm working on a CD of my songs, written over thirty years. The album title is *Outrageous Older Woman*.