

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 Help You Leave Him* is the second, *Death Will Get You Sober* the first. My protagonist, recovering alcoholic Bruce Kohler, also appears in two published short stories so far. I hope to keep writing about him and his sidekicks, Jimmy the computer genius and Barbara the world-class codependent.

Q. What is *Death Will Help You Leave Him* about?

A. A friend becomes the prime suspect when her abusive boyfriend is found dead in her East Harlem apartment. Bruce has to juggle a murder investigation, staying sober, a crush on the bereaved girlfriend, and the lure of his compelling but destructive ex-wife, who's on her own collision course.

Q. What else have you written?

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. Your short story, "Death Will Clean Your Closet," was nominated for an Agatha award for Best Short Story in 2007. Have you been writing stories all along?

A. No, in fact, "Death Will Clean Your Closet" was the first short story I'd written since college. It appeared in the anthology *Murder New York Style* by members of the New York Tristate chapter of Sisters in Crime and was subsequently nominated for the Agatha. The theme of the anthology was "New York neighborhoods," and the series is very much rooted in New York City. I wrote the second story featuring Bruce and his friends, "Death Will Tie Your Kangaroo Down," for the CrimeSpace First Annual Short Story Contest; the theme was "Australia." That story appears in the August 2009 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Since then, I've written several more short stories, some in the series and some stand-alones.

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 alcoholism field?

A. My second year internship was at Smithers, a legendary alcoholism treatment facility. After working with severely mentally ill clients, I found the addictions field, with its potential for full recovery, both inspiring and hopeful. All my full time jobs since I got my master's have been 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. 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 day job directing a program for homeless alcoholics and addicts on the Bowery 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. What prompted you to write a mystery series about recovery?

A. First, 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. 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 alcoholics, addicts, and codependents. 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 mystery?

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. I start with the 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. Now, a new title will tell me the theme: *Death Will Help You Leave Him* is about relationship addiction. It's easier now that I have my main characters in place: Bruce, Barbara, and Jimmy. The three of them 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 with suspects, a murderer, and one or more victims. 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. I’ve learned how to promote my book and gotten great help in doing it from members of the e-list Murder Must Advertise, my publicist, PJ Nunn of Breakthrough Promotions, and the publicity and library marketing staff at St. Martin’s, its mystery imprint, Minotaur Books, and its parent company, Macmillan. And I’ve formed valuable friendships with writers and other mystery lovers—readers, librarians, and booksellers—on DorothyL and CrimeSpace.

Q. What do you do to promote your books?

A. Everything I can. My book tour for *Death Will Get You Sober* took me to bookstores, libraries, and book clubs in 20 states, and I hope to return to some and add others for *Death Will Help You Leave Him*. I have a website at www.elizabethzelvin.com and I blog with five other mystery writers on Poe’s Deadly Daughters. I’m constantly connecting with readers on e-lists and social networking sites as well. I’ve given out thousands of bookmarks, done mass mailings of postcards and emails, and I love attending both mystery conventions and the big librarians’ conventions, where MWA and/or Sisters in Crime always have a booth at which I can give away copies of my books. I read somewhere that it’s good to send a letter to your 100 closest friends urging them to buy the book, both for themselves and as gifts, and to tell as many people as possible about it. For me, that was my holiday greeting list. I don’t think anybody minded. My friends know that this is a very big deal for me—the realization of a lifelong dream.

Q. Are you working on Bruce’s next adventure in crime and recovery?

A. The next manuscript is already written. It’s called *Death Will Extend Your Vacation*. Bruce, Barbara, and Jimmy take shares in a lethal clean and sober group house in the Hamptons. And I’m working on the next one, *Death Will Finish Your Marathon*.