

IN SEARCH OF UNDERSTANDING

by Ellen Gilchrist

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Some events impact our lives in ways that alter our view of ourselves and the world around us. For the characters in Ellen Gilchrist's new novel, the aftermath of 9/11 has been like an ever-present cry that continues*



Ellen Gilchrist,
author of
A Dangerous Age

Early one morning in September 2001, I drove out to my local gym in Fayetteville, Arkansas, to exercise. I parked in my usual space and ran in the door and up the stairs to see if a treadmill would be free at this popular time of the day. Rather than exercising, everyone in the gym was standing around watching a line of television sets. As I joined them, the second plane flew into the World Trade Center.

A young woman who was my Pilates instructor was surrounded by the other trainers. Her husband, along with several colleagues, was at that moment in the World Trade Center for an early morning business meeting. He had called her that morning and told her about the towers, how beautiful they were, how impressive, and how excited he was about the business he was conducting. Now, we all

to echo all around them, sometimes a close scream, sometimes a distant whisper. As the author explains here, the novel has been for her an effort to decipher that echo, and in the process to find understanding.

watched as this young woman's long vigil began. We watched as the world we knew came apart on the line of television sets, and we watched a wonderful young woman we loved wait to see if it would also be the end of her personal happiness.

This particular story had a happy ending. Her husband was able to escape the building and make his way home during the next two days. He and a colleague had done daring things to achieve their safety, and their journey home culminated with a seventy-five-year-old physician, the man's father, driving from Fayetteville to Atlanta to meet them. In the midst of our dismay over the events in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania, we took comfort in the courage and bravery of the folks from Fayetteville.

This story haunted me as the months rolled on. I became obsessed with news about Al-

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Queda and about weaponized smallpox and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I watched news programs by the hour and read hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles. I was torn between sets of ideas and felt that there was information I needed that I did not have. Unlike during most crises in the United States, I did not call senators and representatives and the White House and tell them what to do. I didn't know what to suggest. I

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I kept wondering how reporters and editors must have felt as they strove to report the unclear and incomplete news from around the world concerning the threats against the United States. How did they keep their emotions from taking over?

During this time I began to write a series of stories about a group of women cousins

in my fictional Hand-Manning family from North Carolina. These cousins were all nieces of an earlier character, Anna Hand.

So the novel began to weave itself in my mind. I believe that poetry and literature help us understand our lives. As I have grown older, I have found that writing fiction helps me understand the world in which I live now, especially the quiet, lonely place where each human has to make his peace with the powerful forces that play upon our lives, and over which we have very little real control.

Olivia, Jessie, Tallulah, Winifred, Susan, and Louise are the cousins who live in this novel. Perhaps their stories are all a drama I invented to help me believe that good can come of evil, that life can triumph over death, that the seas will calm and the vessel will right itself. It has meant a great deal to me to write this book, and my hope is that readers will come away from it with a new understanding of how our lives have been forever changed. ■