

SLEIGHT OF MIND

by Kate Maloy

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Every Last Cuckoo* is a multigenerational novel about a household thrown together under unusual circumstances—a septuagenarian recovering from the loss of her husband, a handful of displaced teenagers, a mother and her young son whose home burned



Kate Maloy,
author of
Every Last Cuckoo

down, a battered wife with an infant, and a former Israeli soldier turned pacifist. Together they create a new kind of family, one that heals. Looking back, Kate Maloy realized that she dreamed up this household as an answer to her own later-life fears.

On my fiftieth birthday, a friend asked whether I felt any different, having turned the half-century corner. *Maybe*, I said. Things did look different. The view around the corner was broader than the one I was used to. I was no less immersed in my life and its challenges, but now I saw myself as one small dot among many. I sensed that a pattern would emerge if only I could connect all those dots.

This got me thinking about the second half-century of my life—what I would do with my time, how I might stay engaged with the world around me and maintain some independence as my physical strength declined. Meanwhile, having had my only child at forty, I soon found myself raising a teenager. The times of my life were colliding.

I wrote *Every Last Cuckoo* in the midst of the collision, and

though the sound of the impact echoes through the book, I was deaf to it at the time. I never sat down and said, *All right, I'm going to build myself a model for graceful, energetic old age, and while I'm at it I will resolve in fiction all the woes of my son's reality*—yet the parallels between my life and my novel can't be accidental.

There I was, considering the approach of old age, and there was Sarah Lucas, my main character, twenty years ahead of me, providing the perfect model. While I was lamenting with friends the warehousing of old people and daydreaming about a true community of elders that would include and give help to the young as well, Sarah was slowly opening her rattling big farmhouse to a variety of people needing refuge.

And who were the first to move in? Teenagers at odds with their families and the world—

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just like my own teenager. My son, ill suited to mainstream education and aspirations, was in pain yet unwilling to be guided, least of all by his mother or teachers, who represented everything he wanted to break away from. This was agonizing to witness, but I never quite saw that my anodyne lay in my fictional world, where other disaffected teens were accepted on their own terms, where they helped each other and found their way and in doing so traveled at least partway back home.

The fictional teenagers' parents, in relinquishing control over their children, were rather like cuckoos, which lay their eggs in other birds' nests and leave the rearing to the unwitting foster parents. Soon after I finished drafting the novel, I became something of a cuckoo myself, allowing my son to leave home and school at the urging of a well-known conceptual artist, a friend of his father, who would become his mentor. Letting go felt like lopping off a limb, all the more when the artist proved arrogant and mean. The foreign nest I had allowed my son to move into belonged to a malign species of bird.

Sarah, in the wake of heavy loss, and beset by lonely, burgeoning fears that no amount of thought or planning could ease, obeyed

an unexamined impulse and took up photography. The camera lens allowed her to peer at things that frightened her—evidence of death and predation in nearby woods—while leaving her grief alone to do its work. And it did. Over time, Sarah found herself healing and increasingly at peace, finally ready to occupy the new life she had been building all along.

Focusing on my craft did for me what that camera lens did for Sarah. I couldn't directly solve the riddles of aging or the anguish of my son's adolescence, but I could create a different narrative. I could set Sarah on a

path that showed how little control she had, yet how rich she could become by accepting that. Soon after, I followed her down that path. There I discovered that aging is a vital part of life, not a slow death. Even better, I began recapturing with my son the closeness we had always enjoyed before his troubles began. This, too, was a consequence of letting go and accepting.

They say art imitates life, which seems inevitable. What else would it imitate? But when life imitates art, when something we can't quite grasp—intuition? trust? faith?—assuages sorrow while our attention is elsewhere, that's not a given, it's a gift. ■

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