

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE ELLA LYON

**Readers often want to know where writers' ideas come from. Tell us about the genesis of your novel  *Holding On to Zoe*. Is the story imagined, based in reality, or some of both?**

Like so much of my writing, *Zoe* began in my journal.

My practice, when I don't have an ongoing project, is to come to the page and ask who wants to speak. Then I wait. Sometimes nobody shows up. Sometimes it's somebody I don't connect with. Maybe a guy who wants to tell me how the St. Lawrence Seaway was built. I try to be open to whoever comes, but if I really don't connect with the voice, I don't return to it the next day.

With Jules, I was captivated from the first page. Who was this narrator? Where did she come from? What was her story? Would she come back? Would I have the courage and stamina to go on her story?

If you compare this beginning with the final novel, you'll see that *Zoe* started out as *Lily* and the factory was different, too, but Jules and her situation were the same.

As for the story's basis in reality, I *do* live fourteen miles from a big Toyota plant—and I drive a little Toyota—but that's about it. Of course, Jules shares some characteristics and experiences of people I have known, but her story is her own.

**You've previously written about teens; *Sonny* in *Sonny's House of Spies* and *Lawanda* in *Hammer for My Heart*. How do you get into the mind of a teenage character?**

Well, I spent several years as a teenager, so I draw on those memories, especially the emotional intensity, the depth of questioning. Outwardly teens' lives today are a lot different from mine as a teenager, but the emotional landscape is still familiar.

In addition, I've raised two sons and I paid attention to them and their friends as teenagers. Paid attention as a mother, of course, but also as a writer. Took notes, in fact. That's what writers do.

I also speak in middle schools and high schools and soak up what I can of the current scene there. Students ask me questions and I ask questions, too. And, of course, I read.

**The therapist's role is an important one and her relationship with Jules comes about by accident. Was she an intentional character, or did her role unfold as the story developed?**

"Intentional" is an interesting word. If you mean did I plan her, No, but I was certainly relieved when Jules found her. I never plan characters. I try to learn all I can about them when they show up. Some of that learning is through

writing I do which is not for the book. Some is by reading. Some is through interviews. I did interview three therapists and a psychiatric nurse for this novel.

**Jules' mother is an unsympathetic character for much of the book, though readers discover she is also a troubled woman. How do you write a balanced character?**

I did a lot of background writing for Lana, trying to understand what could make her the way she is. I tried to let the reader see that she is suffering, too, and that it's her insistent denial of that suffering that makes her so harsh with, and blind to, Jules. This doesn't absolve her, but I hope it makes her behavior more comprehensible. Unless we confront and work to heal our own wounds, we will pass the consequences on to our kids. Lana tries to pave over those wounds with grit, bitterness, and work. Jules almost gets paved over, too.

**What do you hope readers will take away from their reading of *Holding On to Zoe*?**

First, I hope they are held by the story and that, at the end, they're glad they made the journey. I hope they feel less alone. Then I hope they feel larger inside when it's over, that they'll have more understanding and compassion for themselves and others.

As a reader, I always hope for an *ah ha!* moment when something that mystified or alluded me in my own life comes into focus through someone else's words. I search for something that will light up my inner world and then shine out in my life. I hope that for my readers, too.

***You've written poetry, fiction and picture books - do you have a preference for one over the other?***

Poetry is my foundation, my root-wad. The impulse to poetry—the love of words and the hunger for metaphor—is where everything else comes from. But I love all the genres I work in: plays, memoir, essays, op eds, songs, in addition to those you mention. And my journal is crucial.

***What were some of the challenges and rewards in writing this book?***

Since I'm the sort of writer who doesn't know where a book is going, that's always a challenge. I'm like the reader, except that when I turn the page, the next one is blank and I have to fill it. This means that I didn't know Jules' secrets until they revealed themselves. I don't want to give her story away by giving particulars, but it meant I was stunned and had to adjust myself and the narrative accordingly. This ongoing discovery is a big reward, too.

The first draft of the book, written in 2005, ended at what is now chapter 12 of 27 chapters, and everyone who read it said, “You can’t stop there.” So I didn’t. I began to revise backwards and forwards.

Then my mother became critically ill, so there were several months when I didn’t touch the manuscript.

Then, after the next draft was printed out and covered with handwritten revisions, I turned my iMac on one morning and heard a sound like someone pulverizing a CD case with a hammer. The disk drive had just self-destructed!!!! I had to get a new disk drive and have the manuscript scanned, only to discover that all the formatting was gone and it would accept no new formatting!!!

I won’t take you through all the hoops it took to get a workable manuscript again, but there were several.

When I came back to revising, I still had a lot to learn about the characters, and so I did a lot of writing outside the book. I interviewed Lana, Jules’ mother, for instance. I wrote a piece where her dad tells his story, etc. Since Jules is a closed narrator—you’ll know what I mean when you read the book—I had to find out as much as I could that she wouldn’t tell me.

Rewards? Writing always brings me joy, no matter how painful the story, because it takes me to the things that matter most, and it does so through the tiger-like strength and beauty of words. In this novel, I was deeply moved by the force of Jules’s spirit as she struggles to survive and thrive. At the end, she has come triumphantly to her true beginning, a place full of hope for us all.

***Are there any new projects you can tell us about?***

I’m revising a novel in poems called *Something Happened*. It’s about Emmy and Chloe, cousins who are also best friends. It’s set in the Sixties, in a family where love makes big mistakes and the wrong people are considered crazy.