KNOPF Q&A

A conversation with

LILA SAVAGE

author of

SAY SAY SAY

Q: You spent many years working as a caregiver. Can you talk a little about the work you did and how you came to it?

A: It was very much like Ella's experience in the novel: I dropped out of graduate school and needed a job and my friend's grandmother needed help. And, like Ella, at first I thought it was the most amazing job possible. I made $15/hour when I started--the most I'd ever made--and it was to spend time with someone I already cared about. I had an aptitude for the work, I think-- and not just because I have always had an affinity for the elderly. I'm comfortable with boredom and quiet and I love to hear people's stories. I did that work for nine years and I worked with a number of families over that time, initially in the Twin Cities and later in the Bay Area.

Q: When did you know that you wanted to write about it? Was this always going to be a novel/how did that come into shape?

A: I've been interested in the meaning of work for many years now, especially with more working-class jobs, by which I mean the sense of identity, purpose, and intellectual or emotional rewards associated with different livelihoods. As an undergraduate I studied sociology and social justice. I thought I wanted to be a labor journalist or oral historian. I hadn't imagined writing fiction before I got the idea for *Say Say Say*.

I discovered I wanted to write about my caregiving experiences while I was still doing the work full-time and it was very challenging to write about it, both because I was tired at the end of the day and because it meant immersing myself in the world I had just left at work. Then the woman I was caring for had to move into a living facility and, for the first time in my career I qualified for unemployment. I wrote most of the novel while looking for work, but dreaded the idea of working full-time while also trying to write. Fortunately it was at this juncture that I was awarded a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford and was able to write full-time for the two years that followed. I think finding time and energy to write is a challenge most writers with day jobs face (and most writers do have day jobs.) The health insurance alone was so valuable to me. I had been writing fiction for less than a year when I received the fellowship and I still felt very uncertain and new to the form when I arrived but I was warmly encouraged from the start,

particularly by my mentor Elizabeth Tallent. The same is true of my experience at Iowa and working with the amazing Sam Chang. I'm not certain I could have finished the novel without support from these two remarkable writers.

Q: You capture the very intimate relationships between caregivers and the families they work with but you describe it at one point in the novel as "a strangely limited intimacy." Can you speak more about this?

A: I would of course grow close with my clients—I think all of them with whom I worked with for more than a few hours a week. I cared deeply for them but it was also always a job and one that it wasn't super easy to make a living doing. I had to set internal and external boundaries to be able to continue with the work. I didn't have illusions about the "help" being family. My mother did some cleaning work when I was growing up and while it wasn't really for a long enough time to develop a relationship with the family I definitely saw a distinction between the wealthy people she cleaned for and our actual family. That being said I remain friends with several of the families I worked with, less complicatedly now that they no longer employ me.

Q: You write, "With some clients Ella almost felt as though she were collecting their memories before they lost them." This is really beautiful. How does caregiving, in your experience, extend beyond physical care and what have you observed in caring for those with memory loss that surprised you about yourself or about them?

A: This is a difficult question to answer, I almost feel like it would be easier if I were less experienced! It all feels so normal to me now but surely I've been surprised. My maternal grandfather had Alzheimer's and I helped my grandmother care for him the summer before I graduated from college so I had some intimate experience with the illness even before it became my profession. Once I was working as a caregiver, most of my clients (though not all) had problems with memory loss. I guess one thing that surprised me was how personal and intimate some of the memories were that my clients shared and how lucky I felt to be entrusted with them. One woman, for instance, had me read out loud her unpublished memoir to her. It became useful as her memory got worse, I could remind her of events from her life or help her fill in details.

Q: Of Ella's relationship with Bryn you write, "She also learned that a man could demonstrate his love for a woman with the alert practicality and dutiful nurturing Ella had only ever observed the other way around. It so moved and surprised Ella that she was forced to wonder why." Caregiving is often thought of as "pink collar" work. Did you want to explore this presumption in your novel?

A: I didn't set out to challenge the assumption that caregiving is women's work because it usually IS performed by women, but I was interested in exploring the gendered aspects of the work. As I began to imagine and write two different caregiver characters in the book—one who does this professionally and one for whom caregiving is a personal task, a labor of love—the nature of this exploration evolved. In my very first draft of the novel Bryn was a woman with a female partner, but I found the psychology of female caregiving unsurprising and therefore less interesting, so I quickly realized this character, the caregiver in the marriage, had to be a man. Men are, according to a generalization, stoic in the face of hardship, and I knew I was curious about exploring the vulnerability beneath stoicism which is more surprising and

interesting from a man. So I think what the book is really doing is questioning not just the nature of caregiving as a gendered job, but also the ways in which gender norms influence the ways in which handle the greatest challenges in our relationships and lives.

Q: At the same time as you delve into the triangular relationship of Ella and Bryn and Jill you also are writing about Ella's relationship with her girlfriend Alix and how these relationships all intersect. How does Ella and Alix's relationship change over the course of the novel? How are these different types of intimacy related?

A: Alix becomes more threatened by Bryn's importance in Ella's life. There's sometimes an assumption made about bisexual women that they will ultimately end up with the power-holders in the culture (men) and of course it does happen sometimes. But Bryn, among other things, helps Ella reflect on both the similarities and differences between a more straight and conventional partnership and the one she has committed to. Ella is a very intimacy-oriented female character. The charge she gets from becoming closer with Bryn is exciting and it transforms her thinking perhaps but it cannot ever fully compete with the profound closeness she experiences with Alix. Of course, the sexual tension between Ella and Bryn grows out of the intimate task they share in caring for Jill, and exploring the way this tension comes about in Ella's work environment—and the way it plays out, in this closed circuit that's so emotionally charged—is another way in which I'm exploring the nature of caregiving, and the many natures of love.

Q: Have you always been a writer? And what are some of the books that have been the most important to you?

A: I've kept a journal off and on for most of my reading life. I used to write personal essays that I did nothing with except to show them to my friends. Nonfiction writers had more influence on me in my twenties/at the beginning of my starting to write, including Barbara Ehrenreich, Thomas Frank, and the historian Robin Kelley. It wasn't until my early thirties that I became brave enough to attempt writing fiction. Reading Michelle Tea helped me—both because much of her work draws so directly from her experiences and because the experiences were those of a working-class queer woman. Other major influences include Alan Hollinghurst (*The Line of Beauty* may be my favorite novel) and Audre Lorde. Finally I would say the poetry of my friend Essy Stone is a continual inspiration—her first book, *What it Done to Us*, is a chilling and stunning work about growing up queer, female, and working-class in Evangelical Appalachia. I get goosebumps every time I read it.

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