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SHE WRITES WITH HUMOR, KINDNESS AND HONESTY

Author: *Janet Wiscombe / Staff Writer*

Taken out of context, award-winning novelist Carolyn See's ravings about some of the people in her life may sound nasty.

On her mother: "She is dreadful. Intractable. Malice personified. She is the demon of my life."

On her second husband: "All I have to do is think about him and I get mad all over. He dumped me for a secretary, although he insisted on calling her an editorial assistant. So I've used him in my books like a bar of soap--over and over and over. I still think, 'You --- ----! How could you have left me!'"

She is amused by her own faux rage. Carolyn See is not an angry person.

"I'm not passionate," she offers with a big, neighborly smile. "I'm friendly. I'm very attached to people. I have a hard time letting go. My one passion is grudge holding."

See, whose several books include "Golden Days" (1986) and "Making History" (1991), is seated in a booth at the stylish Crocodile Restaurant in Santa Monica. She has come to talk about everything from the book she's working on ("Dreaming: A Family Memoir of Drugs and Drink") to men ("If you're a white guy, all you've got to do is breathe and doors open to you.")

On April 23, she will be in town as one of the speakers at the Long Beach Public Library's "Writers By the Sea" lecture series, beginning today. She says she hasn't the foggiest notion what she'll talk about. She'll figure it out when she gets here.

Never one to take herself too seriously, she describes herself as a frivolous person, a woman with a decided inability to take things seriously. It's a quality she learned from her dad, a fun-loving man who left her mom when See was 11, hated work, drank too much, loved women and books, displayed a giant nude of Marilyn Monroe in the living room and "had a wonderful sense of humor."

See describes him as a kind of zen artist from Texas whose home was always a lively, happy refuge. Her mother, on the other hand, never had a good time. She eked out a living as a secretary by day, cried by night.

"We were desperately poor," says See, 60, a child of the Depression. "We had oilcloth in the kitchen. We had a chenille bedspread with worn little knots. There was nothing in the refrigerator except Mallomars."

In the book she is now working on, See is taking a new look at her family roots, roots that go back to the American Revolution, roots that were abundantly irrigated with alcohol. "My family on both sides came to this country as working class and they never got anywhere," she says. "It was an old American family with a lot of pretensions and no money."

"My dad had terrible tragedies in his life. He was self-educated and loved literature. He read 'Captain Horatio Hornblower' to me when I was very young so I would understand 'Moby Dick.' We lived in genteel poverty. We had nothing except an old square piano and my grandmother's pearls."

In recent years, See has gotten reacquainted with her younger sister, who is the central character in "Dreaming." The two have seen little of each other since the time 25 years ago when the younger sister and her Hungarian husband moved in. He proceeded to deal drugs out of See's house.

At the time, she was a single mom with two young daughters from two different marriages and a job as an assistant professor at Loyola Marymount University.

"My sister was a heroine addict. She spent time in jail. She was involved in wild stuff - stuff that curls my hair, to put it mildly. She also had an amazing life and a lot of fun. Now she's clean and sober. She's an incredible entrepreneur who knows a lot about money and where cash from drugs goes. It's fascinating. I've learned a lot about the hand the government has in all of this, the ways drugs are used to keep the middle and working class in line."

See grew up in Pasadena and attended California State University/Los Angeles when it was 12 Quonset huts ... and tuition was \$2.50. She eventually earned a doctorate in American literature at UCLA. Her first of six books, "The Rest Is Done With Mirrors," was published in 1970.

In her books, she writes about life in Southern California, divorce, her mother, the death of a child, love and redemption. And she is perhaps the only author on the planet who has written a novel about nuclear holocaust that has a happy ending.

Critics have praised her for her spiritual effervescence, humor, kindness and bedrock honesty. One reviewer declared "Golden Days" the most life-affirming novel she'd ever read.

For the past 20 years, she has lived happily with author and scholar John Espey. "After two circus marriages, I really doubted my ability to be a decent wife," she says of why she and Espey, who is 81, never married. "I'm much better than I was before. Thirty years ago I was a holy terror."

It's not an easy image to conjure up. See is a down-to-earth, self-effacing, optimistic, lovable feminist who neither shies away from ugliness and pain nor dwells on it. She is a realist with an easy laugh, a quick wit and an eye for the zany. She views silliness and fun not as luxuries, but as life's most basic and vital components.

Her constant goal is to crank out 1,000 words a day at her Topanga Canyon home, and if she can get it done in an hour, so much the better. She often drinks champagne while at the keyboard, but switches to red wine and tomato soup when the pressure is on.

"I've found that the most tranquilizing," she says. "It melts the terror."

She attributes much of her spirit and early ambition to her looks. In high school, she definitely was not the queen of the hop, and didn't try to be. "I didn't bust my chops to get to the prom," she says. "I wasn't a wart hog, but I didn't get worked up by every Revlon ad I saw either."

"I found it quite easy to be who I was - which drove my second husband crazy. It made him nuts. I was never like Jackie Onassis. I like to talk. I have an opinion. I don't keep my voice down."

See says that one of these days she'd like to move beyond what she refers to as her status as a semiknown author. Women writers are having a tough time, she says. Some of her male students act as though they'll catch something if they read female writers. Most reviewers and agents and publishers are men.

"Men are scared, really scared of women the way women are afraid of snakes," she declares. "I am paid half of what men get for reviews, magazine stories and books. I don't call it the glass ceiling, I call it the glass colander."

"But the guys are goofing off. The women are getting the job done and may end up running the store."

Years ago, See says, a wonderful friend - a guy who'd studied est in prison with Werner Erhard - helped her learn how to invent her own universe. Then as now, she's tried to do just that while never forgetting what's most important. "What I want is a family that glitters and is stable," she says. "And it does, and it is."

Oh, and there's another thing that would be nice, she adds ebulliently, "I want to win the Nobel Prize--or be too good for it."