

One Night Two Souls Went Walking

Author Interview with Ellen Cooney



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When did you first ask, What is a soul?

When I was tiny and all I thought about was flying. I feel so lucky that the basic raw materials of this novel came directly from my own memory vaults. I remember so clearly being grabbed by an aunt of mine at my grandparents' house—I was about five—grabbed by the arm just before I jumped out a second-story window, which I'd chosen because it had no screen, which I'd known I would not be able to remove. I'd thought it out. The plan was to exit through the window and go up, not down. It wasn't that I compared myself to a bird. I didn't imagine my arms could act like a wings. I longed for the moment I'd enter air and start flying; probably it was more like floating. Well, I got into a lot of trouble, which led to asking myself, why was I sure in

the first place, and what's inside me, in fact inside everyone, that's not the stuff of anatomy and biology and everyday life? I would call this "consciousness" for quite a while, but I love the word "soul." I love what it's like to consider this part of ourselves completely without ownership by any religion, like, what is a soul really and why is it so necessary to imagine we have one? I started writing poems, plays and stories at seven and eight; I was a word kid, a baby writer. And I could feel when I wrote creatively, it came from my soul, and I was flying. I could feel my soul with *words*. Even with all that, I was surprised to find myself, at the age of 64, realizing I was writing a new novel in which souls are a big deal—how they work, how they matter, how they can break.

How did you come to believe that animals have souls, that their souls can be broken too?

What I came to believe is that there are people who think animals have no interior life at all. Personally, I live with dogs who were rescued from abusive, cruel places. I literally witnessed their spirits come to life, their self-ness become activated. I only hope that in their souls is a function to delete all memories of the broken-ness. Actually I wish we had that too.

Can broken souls be repaired? What kind of healing is that?

The main character is a hospital chaplain, a physician for souls. She has a sort of motto, or mantra, about believing in expecting light, even when it seems there's only darkness and thus it will always be. Sometimes it feels to her that having hope in healings is futile, that her motto is just empty words, basically signifying nothing. But she keeps on. It's her job. And she knows her own soul is damaged. The kind of healing? Hard to hope for, actually. Hard to try for. You're dealing with things that don't show up in, like, a lab test or a scan. You're dealing with invisible essence, stuff that's even unreachable I think through other forms of therapy. It's about fighting for hope against the incredibly powerful forces of despair, for lightness against a terrible heaviness that manifests in so many poisonous ways. How is the fight carried out? Well, first, in your own imagination. If light isn't there, you have to imagine some, to carry you through until it's for real.

Can stories heal the soul?

As a human as well as a fiction writer I say yes. It's both stories we read and absorb and stories we create for ourselves. In this novel are stories of people the chaplain is ministering to: ordinary people revealing inner lives, inner stories. Of these, there are stories of what they imagine their afterlife will be like, their ideas of heaven, none of them about conventional religious doctrines. There's an end-of-life woman whose actual life was dull and oppressive, and she has every reason to be bitter and without hope, yet as her passing approaches, she turns out to have a story that's as full of light as anything can be. And that's just one example. Even saying something like, "Well, we have a soul," is a story. A pretty good one. A *necessary* one.

This is your tenth novel, and you've also published many short stories. How is this related to your previous work, and how does it differ?

All my novels have girl and women main characters living their lives, both outer and inner, as people, not defined in terms of gender roles. Everywhere in my work are women at work, women thinking, imagining, creating, resisting and yes ultimately often winning the battles to have their own agency, their own powers of self. I'm very realistic about it all, very down to earth. What's different this time—and my same style is here, my same tendencies to write layers of meaning in ways that are accessible and look simple, my same love for making sentences and paragraphs have melodies and beats that a reader hears and feels intuitively—well, the different thing is that the narrative is built in a way that allows it to fly. Or at least, to float. And I have to add a mention of a related-ness. My novel before this is about dogs. Dogs are main characters there and I have dogs again: two of them. They're hospital therapy dogs, very individual and creative, with powerful souls, and one of them is a ghost.

A teenage boy in the novel wants to be asked what is holy to him. So, what does holy mean?

Originally I used the word "sacred," then found that "holy" works better, and feels more solemn. It's something immutable, transcendent, rare, utterly genuine and outside of our regular every-day-ness. Again, once you free this from the domains of religion, it's pretty interesting what happens. What's holy to one person can be nothing to another. The chaplain of my novel called it, as a child, "the other thing," having become aware that there are such things as perceptions and responses coming from a deep place inside, like tapping into another

dimension and entering, however briefly, however joyfully, a state of joy, of what it's like to confront something sublime.

How do you tell stories about that?

I just did, in this novel. It wasn't easy. Altogether it went through eleven drafts. Finally I was able to settle into a set of characters, a time frame—the novel takes place mostly in one night, as the chaplain is on duty in a medical center on the night shift. I found that falling into my own narrative style and how I've evolved all through my years at this—and being open to simplicity and directness—I was able to keep telling myself that just because my journey of this book got really dark, and I was probably crazy to imagine it might end up as an actual novel, well, it didn't have to mean no light lay ahead. So there are a few things I have in common with the chaplain, different as she and I are.

How did you come to choose ministry in a hospital?

I grew up as the daughter of a nurse. I knew lots of them. Our town's hospital was very near our home, and I held part-time jobs there as a teenager. I became a mom when I was still a teenager; my son was born with a physical disability and had to go through a great deal of medical care including surgeries. All those first-hand experiences in hospitals happened when I was still growing up, still impressionable like wet clay. For a long time I'd hoped to write about a woman minister—I grew up Catholic, which anyone reading my novel could figure out pretty easily. When my son was very young I took him to an Episcopal church in Boston, which we attended for years, and there I met, for the first time, women clergy. I lucked out about putting those two things together.

What is the core of the story you wanted to tell—what is the “soul” of your story?

The soul of this novel about souls is souls. That's not me doing a Gertrude Stein thing. Readers might be emotionally touched by different characters, such as the bank teller who explains to the chaplain an angel is at the foot of her bed, or the librarian who was profoundly traumatized by something to do with a wrecked submarine. Or the chaplain herself. Or the dogs! Overall I wanted to tell about things that are intangible, invisibly present, more fragile than we realize. And, these days, given the political peril we're in, and how bleak it can seem for the very

ideas of democracy, equality, truth, decency, I feel that a novel is an excellent place to create and incubate the powers of hope, of light, unsentimentally and honesty. Of course I would say that because I'm a novelist. But I believe it. I hope it's all there in the telling.