

Their Working Relationship

An Afternoon with Mother and Daughter Authors, Mary & Carol Higgins Clark



Photo by Theresa Artigas photography

I had the wonderful opportunity to spend an afternoon with mother and daughter authors, Mary & Carol Higgins Clark at Mary's beautiful summer home in Spring Lake. Although the weather was a bit dreary, the warmth and atmosphere of being in the presence of both these lovely, vivacious and surprisingly very funny ladies made us all forget about the raw day outside.

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“You and Carol have successfully written several Christmas books together. Why do you think many people assume if mother and daughters work together there is conflict?”

Mary: “The perception I think, is around, that you’re always rubbing against each other...maybe because with other collaborations there have been problems that were always well publicized.”

“There are people who have conflicts with their mother’s all the time,” says Mary. “I think the Irish sense of humor is what keeps us all going and we’re totally grounded in faith.”

Carol: “To work together with anyone you have to have a good relationship. So if one of us suggests something and the other doesn’t like it we feel so comfortable saying so. My mother and I want the same thing—the best possible story. I know people always joke and say that they couldn’t even cook dinner with their mother, but when we work together we get to escape into our fictional world and it’s fun, we can use humor and we end up laughing a lot.”

Perhaps some of the reason they work together so well is that they began working together gradually and have mutual respect for each other’s contributions.

Carol started in college retyping her mother’s books for her. Mary had her first book coming out and was trying to get her second script in to her agent but still had a part time job to help her support her family. This was before computers and the script had to be retyped to reflect her edits.

“I had a part time job at Channel Lumber over the summer and had some extra time”, says Carol, “so I said Mom, I’ll retype it for you”. In the course of doing so Carol would have to ask her mom questions because the manuscripts could be difficult to interpret with all the lines and squiggles amongst the edits. Sometimes Carol would make some suggestions as she read the plots and got to know the characters. In the course of working for her mother, she got to see the process of writing and learning more about it.

In one particular book Carol remembers, “Elvira”, a cleaning woman of a comedic nature who won the lottery. It was obvious listening to her that she became endeared to the character as she read the manuscript. Then she exclaimed, “My mother killed her off in the book!” Carol continued, “I said to her, you can’t kill her off”. Her mother said, “oh yes I can”, but then acquiesced and kept Elvira alive since it did not alter the ending of the story. Elvira’s character did live on to make another appearance a few years later in one of their Christmas books they wrote together.

Another notable contribution of Carol’s to her mothers work was in the book “Love’s Music, Loves to Dance”. A story about a young woman who was attempting to figure out who killed her friend by dating the same men that she did through the personal ads.

Carol says, “My mother had the girl go out on a date. So, I’m reading through the manuscript and she had a guy invite a girl to Rumplemeyers

That Simply Works

for a date.” [a restaurant famous for catering to children] “I said Mom, Rumplemeyers is a place you take kids for ice cream sundaes, not a date.” At Carol’s suggestion and with her help, Mary changed all the bars mentioned in the book to trendy dating spots. As far as Carol’s suggested edits, “My mother always welcomed that.”

Carol is releasing her 14th novel “Mobbed” this spring. “Mobbed takes place at the Jersey Shore, specifically Spring Lake and Bayhead. A celebrity, Cleo Paradise, rents a home here and has vacated the home unexpectedly leaving many of her belongings behind. The owner of the home, Edna, had received an offer to sell the house and begins the process of advertising a garage sale of all the contents of the home including Cleo’s. Edna, is exceptionally creative with the advertising of the garage sale and knows the value of a celebrity’s name attached to it and she expects to sell off Cleo’s belongings as well! She goes so far as to advertise the sale using one of the shore’s famous banner planes that flies up and down the coast! Regan Reilly, the central character in all of Carol’s books begins to wonder why Cleo left in such a hurry leaving behind so many things and proceeds to investigate. Although Carol’s books are mysteries, she injects a lot of humor and fun characters into her stories which I find very reflective of her own great personality.

In the cover photo you’ll notice that Carol is wearing a necklace with charms. Each charm represents a book she has written and the charms were given to her by friends, mom and some she picked out herself.

“Time is slipping by so quickly”

In 1989, Mary wrote a piece about her mother for Women’s Day Magazine. She wrote, ‘Time is slipping by so quickly. Months and seasons become years. My contemporaries and I ruefully discuss the fact that now we are the older generation.’

I asked her what advice she has for the women today that are the same age she was when she wrote that: “I just think that when you harbor injury, you are only feeding your own poison.”

I mean there are people who I would say I wish them well, but I’d walk across the street before I got together with them. That’s not family, but people who in some way did something really negative or something that was widely inappropriate. I wish them well, but

I don’t want to be in touch. As far as any members of your family is concerned... when the chips are down you stay family. You can talk it out. Don’t keep a grudge. It’s such a waste of time to have an estrangement. You don’t have to be living in each other’s pockets, but to have that kind of separation is so unnecessary. It’s energy to be mad at someone.”

The Year is Not Even Half Over...

So far this year, you were the Grand Marshall of the 250th St. Patrick’s Day Parade in New York, your 30th novel, “I’ll Walk Alone” was released and is on the Best Sellers List, and on June 5th you will be inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

“I think this is my last hurrah...between the Grand Marshall and the NJHF. People will think-- enough of her”, says Mary.

I’d have to disagree Mary, look at Betty White!

Mary says, “I wrote a radio series that Betty White was on. She’s delightful. She’s exactly what you see. She is fun to be with.”

The next project for these women?

Mary and Carol have just begun their book tours. Even though they are busy traveling they say it is an ideal time to collaborate on their next book together. They plan to work on their sixth Christmas book together and release it this December. ■

Publisher’s Note: Mary and Carol are among the most gracious women I have ever met. They instantly make you feel at ease and it’s as if you’ve known them your whole life. The afternoon was one of those memories I’ll always have that while it is happening you just want to ‘freeze it’ forever. I marveled at their very natural story telling abilities, their humor, oh Mary you should write an autobiography! I treasure the autographed book Mary gave me before I left that day of “On the Street Where You Live” which takes place in Spring Lake.

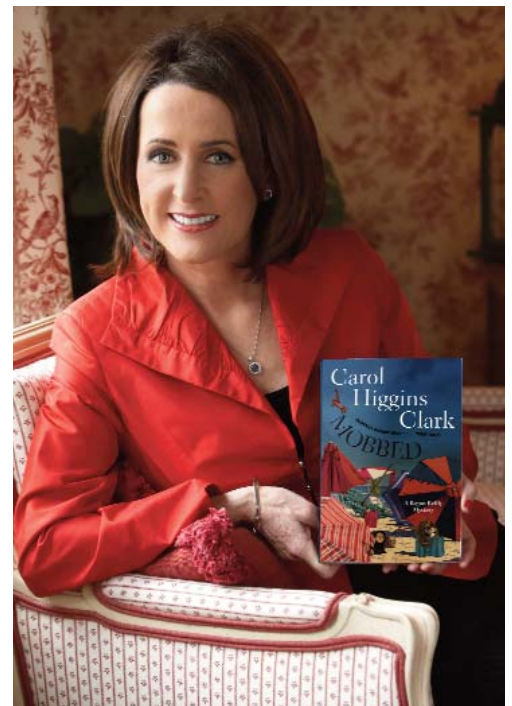


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