

An Interview with Maura Casey

Q: “Saving Ellen” explores deeply personal family dynamics, including illness, addiction and recovery. Why did you want to share these intimate details of your family and childhood?

First, I wanted to tell a story. After I read all my diaries from that period I realized they contained a distinct narrative arc, and alcoholism – which affected my family for generations – was part of it. Addiction is a universal disease and struggles with it are nothing new. But through the journals, I could trace the beginning of my own love affair with alcohol starting when I was a teenager. As I wrote, I realized that booze was a character in the book just as much as any member of the family. Without discussing those details, the story would be incomplete.

Q: What was it like growing up in Buffalo, New York, during the 1960s and ‘70s?

Buffalo’s experience correlated with that of many Rust-Belt cities. Post WWII it was a boomtown, the 15th largest city in the United States and prosperous, around 1950. Then it experienced the one-two punch of industrial decline and loss of population by the 1970s. Now its population is growing again and it is having a rebirth.

I always had a deep love for the city. But Buffalo in the 1960s also had a blue-collar, patriarchal ethos that I rebelled against.

When I was growing up, women simply did not have the choices that they have today. Women could not be altar servers or even sing in our church choir; virtually all sports were closed to women; jobs women obtained paid little and were sharply segregated by gender; want ads had skimpy columns of “jobs for women” and far more full columns of “jobs for men.” My sister’s desire to row like our brothers at the West Side Rowing Club, which was closed to women for decades, became a sub-plot of the book.

With all that, Buffalo was and is a tight-knit, kind community, a place where everybody knows your name. I was in the city in October of 2024, and at the small hotel where I stayed a stranger walked up to me and said, “You were a year ahead of me at our high school.” And she was right! That never happens to me in New England.

Q: In your book, you describe your father as deeply flawed but capable of redemption. Did your perspective on him change as you wrote this book?

My father was deeply Catholic, and he knew he screwed up. He never stopped feeling guilty about how he mistreated the family in the throes of his alcoholism. It literally kept him awake many nights. And he was honest with us later, and apologetic. My view of him changed over the years. As I grew older, I became more forgiving. I never envied him or the hell he experienced in the years of remorse he felt.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from your mother's story of courage and sacrifice in donating her kidney to your sister, Ellen?

Kidney transplants are now ordinary, but kidney disease is still debilitating. I appreciate all that patients and their donors go through. Like my own mom, women everywhere are far more likely to donate than men. (Source: "When Death becomes Life: Notes from a Transplant Surgeon" by Joshua Mezrich, MD, page 297)

As I researched kidney disease and treatments in those early years, I was repeatedly reminded of how few choices there were in the 1960s and how primitive treatment was. Ellen got sick during an era in which the only real treatment was playing for time. Doctors tried to keep patients alive long enough until something could be figured out.

Mary Hawking, Ellen's doctor, told me that the question at every medical meeting was, "Can we give Ellen one more summer?" So the choices were few. My mother was really desperate to grasp any way to save Ellen. Her choice in donating her kidney was a natural one as a mother and as a person who was fundamentally unselfish. But she certainly didn't tell us everything. I had to write the book to find out the rest of the story.

Q: You mentioned that re-read your childhood diaries while researching the book. What was it like to revisit your younger self? Were you surprised by anything? Did you still relate to the younger you?

I had crates and crates of diaries that I had not re-read in 50 years, so one boring Covid lockdown day I decided to read them. But it took me days to get through them. As I read, I was stunned to discover that I was a little reporter even as a teenager. There are pages and pages of dialogue, scene-setting, and the hilariously funny comments my mother made, which I carefully wrote down and which made me laugh 50 years later.

I feel deeply grateful to my younger self for leaving this record, even though I know that I wrote as a form of therapy for myself. But as I read decades later, the writing of my teen self made my mother come alive again. My sister, too, became more vivid to me. With age, I have gained the wisdom and perspective that comes from having had a career and a family of my own. But it is clear to me that writing the journals helped make my writing career possible. The process also helped me sort out my childhood experiences in a constructive way that made me become a better human. I'm a big fan of journal writing!

Q: What was it like reconnecting with Ellen's doctor, Mary Hawking? How did that shape your approach to your memoir and understanding your family's experience?

It has been wonderful to reconnect. When I finished the first draft of my book, I wanted to do a deep dive into the early days of transplants. I decided to reach out to Mary, with whom I had not been in contact for decades. Finding her was simple because her brother, Stephen Hawking, is still so famous. I guessed correctly that he had a foundation, found the website, saw Mary was a board member, and emailed the executive director. Within

five hours that same day, Mary emailed me with the subject line, “Lovely to hear from you!”

She and I are time capsules for the other. She remembers me as a 12-year-old who walked her dog every day. I remember her as a young doctor who wasn’t afraid to get to know her patients and their families. She had a question for me, though, that had bothered her for nearly 50 years: What happened to her dog, Bran, the huge German Shepherd that she could not bring back home when she left America because of England’s strict quarantine laws? My mother arranged for Bran to have a new home with a family with two teen boys. I was happy to tell Mary that Bran was adored by his new family, had lots of room to run on acres of land, and died of old age after a happy life.

For the book, Mary filled in critical medication and treatment details. Because her parents kept correspondence, she even had the letters she wrote to them from Buffalo, and referred to them for more information. She was an invaluable source.

Q: Writing about the intimate details of your family and personal life can be both challenging and cathartic. Did you find the process difficult to navigate, or did it feel freeing and therapeutic?

The most difficult memory for me to write about involved when I was raped at the age of 12. For my ability to write about it, I have Mary Karr’s “The Art of Memoir” to thank. Perhaps because she wrote about two sexual assaults in her memoir, “The Liar’s Club,” she has brilliant advice for anyone writing difficult scenes: Write out all the raw material first. Take as long as you want, but write every detail you can remember. Smells. Sounds. Emotions. Go for as long as you want. Then, put it in a drawer and walk away for a few days. Don’t show it to anyone. I loved that idea, and decided to try it.

When I really want to write thoughtfully, I use one of my typewriters – I have 12 – and I type. It slows down the process for me more than writing on a computer. So I chose my Underwood No. 5, a sturdy, 1925 machine, once used in a secretarial school in Chicago. I typed for three days. I ended up with 10 single spaced pages crowded with details. I put it in a folder, didn’t show anyone, and after a week, I read that stark narrative. It was an incredibly cathartic process. I really felt good about what I had written. Only a few of the details went into the book, but it was writing out the raw material that made it possible for me to write painful memories without being troubled.

Q: The struggles your family faced feel universal — illness, addiction, and family dysfunction. How do you think your story will resonate with readers who may have faced similar challenges?

Anyone whose family has experienced addiction or the heartbreak of caring for a member with chronic disease can relate to the scenes within my book. There is much more consciousness now of the pressures on not only the ill family member, but the other healthy ones, and the impact on the family unit as a whole. I wish we had more such therapeutic resources then, but I am glad they exist for people now.

Q: For readers who may be supporting loved ones with chronic illnesses or living in families affected by addiction, what advice or encouragement would you offer?

1. Whatever is going on is time-limited. It won't go on forever. Know that one day you will get past it.
2. Ask for help. What you are going through is not unique. There are many, many resources, many free. You deserve support. Take advantage of sources of help.
3. Some days you will need to take life, not just a day at a time, but 10 minutes at a time. Do that. Short-term thinking in crisis is your friend.
4. Take moments of serenity as the oases they are. Go for a walk. Smell a rose. Hug a puppy. As many moments that you can get like those, grab them. They will help you survive the difficult days.

Q: Your book features moments of humor amid significant struggles. How did humor help your family cope during difficult times, and why was it important to include those stories in your memoir?

Humor is food and drink to an Irishman. It is so much a part of who we are at our very core. My mother could be hysterically funny. Her humor was witty. My father had a storytelling humor. So we were all very, very funny, in different ways, but it also seems to me that our humor kept us from bursting into tears.

As a writer, it was important to me to mix the difficult moments with the times that were very, very funny. You can't read a book that is 100 percent grim. Life isn't like that, first of all, and such a book would end up being unreadable. And sometimes, in the middle of something really sad, something very funny will occur. I've seen that at funerals, and I think Irish wakes recognize that – they bring people together to laugh as well as mourn.

For example, in one of the key scenes of the book, my sister Claudia and my father get in a very physical fight. Claudia hits Dad with an iron frying pan. He threatens to call the police; my sister laughs and offers to dial the police for him. She says, "I can see the headline now: "Child Accused of Father Beating!" So the scene is both violent and funny.

Q: You spent decades as a journalist — was it difficult to shift gears and write an incredibly vulnerable and expansive memoir? What challenges did you experience in writing your first book? How did you navigate the transition from journalist to memoirist?

No, it was not really difficult. I have written journals since the age of 13. I was a memorist before I became a journalist. And most of my journalism career was spent writing opinion. It's not much of a leap from writing opinion to writing a memoir.

Q: Writing about your own recovery from alcoholism and sexual assault can be incredibly difficult. What was the most challenging part of writing those sections? How did you overcome those challenges?

What unites both experiences is a feeling of shame. Not guilt so much. And neither, by the way, are either deserved or constructive for victims of sexual assault.

As the late author Dr. Ernie Kurtz once explained to me, “Guilt is what you did. Shame is who you are.” (He wrote a very good history of Alcoholics Anonymous).

Now, there is no reason for an alcoholic or a sexual assault victim to feel shame, but we often do. It seems to be part of the package. The fact that I couldn’t handle booze without eroding my own place in the world, without damaging relationships, made me feel ashamed. It took me 10 years to realize, hey, I did something really great in recovering. In stopping drinking. I broke a chain of addiction that had been in my family for years, perhaps generations. I finally began to write about it when I reached 25 years without drinking. I wish I had begun writing about my own alcoholism in a personal way years before.

What finally made me want to write about the sexual assault I experienced was when Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford testified in 2018 against Judge Brett Kavanaugh during his nomination hearing for a seat on the Supreme Court. I related to her story of sexual assault and I wanted to support her courageous decision to testify. So I wrote an [opinion piece](#) for the Hartford Courant. That helped me overcome any residual, irrational, baseless shame I still felt about my own experience.

Q: Your memoir emphasizes themes of hope and reconciliation. Did writing this book bring you personal closure or healing?

Writing the book answered questions I had carried with me for 50 years. I was able to tie up loose ends, truly understand my mother for the decisions she made, and also understand kidney treatment and its impact on my sister Ellen. It was very gratifying.