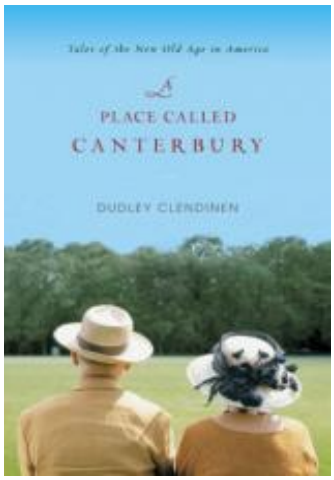
A Place Called Canterbury

by Dudley Clendinen



About the Book

Like so many members of the post?World War II generation, Dudley Clendinen sometimes imagined that his parents would live forever. It was an expectation he had to revise as his mother and father, who had once seemed so invincible, began to surrender to the passage of time. Yet even as they aged, they did not do so in the same ways as earlier generations. Thanks to advances in diet, medication, and elder care, people who grew up during the Depression and fought in World War II --- the Americans known as the Greatest Generation --- are living much longer than any generation before them. The longer they live, the more their children are drawn into their lives. Women and men who never expected to see their eightieth birthday are now celebrating their ninetieth or hundredth. They have become part of an unprecedented demographic phenomenon that Clendinen calls the New Old Age --- an experience for which neither they nor their children have been prepared.

In his work as a journalist and author, Dudley Clendinen has long been engaged in telling the stories of people in America who, like the rest of us, are too often invisible. In his latest book, **A Place Called Canterbury**, he has written a warm, witty, painful, real-life account of the challenges that face older people, as well as the children who become responsible for them, in a society that has enabled us to live longer without saying how.

A Place Called Canterbury is a nonfiction soap opera about two hundred feisty old people who have come together from across America, and the world, to live at Canterbury Tower in Tampa, Florida --- and about the staff that cares for them to the end. With all the compassion, sensitivity, and conflicted feelings of a devoted but sometimes bumbling son, Clendinen chronicles the last years of his mother, who, though felled by a pair of debilitating strokes, evinces no desire to let slip her hold on life. Trying to communicate with her, reliving memories of earlier, more vibrant times, Clendinen struggles to come to terms with the person his mother was and has now become --- someone who only partly resembles the charming, complicated, controlling woman he knew, but who still exerts a hold on him and still stirs depths of admiration, love, and frustration.

The unfolding relationship of mother and son is just one of many tales and themes in **A Place Called Canterbury**. In these exquisitely rendered, dramatic, and often very funny pages, we meet people like Karl Richter, the ?Archrabbi of Canterbury,? who escaped Nazi Germany as the storm clouds of World War II were preparing to burst; Emily Moody, a.k.a. the Emyfish, the arch, theatrical old New Yorker who spurs a movement to have the aged women of the complex pose nude for a calendar; the Sweetso, Canterbury?s combative, liberal, book-loving atheist from Pennsylvania; and Wilber Davis, the confused, gentle hearted ninety-year-old from Tampa who loves to dance, and who urinates in his roommate?s closet, misses his wife, and chases women around the nursing wing. Thoughtful, witty, and heartbreaking, Dudley Clendinen?s book is a microcosm of life, a story told by a son who chose to live out these last comic and painful years with his mother and her friends and keepers in a very special place, **A Place Called Canterbury**.

Discussion Guide

1. In **A Place Called Canterbury**, a book largely devoted to the stories of other people, how does Dudley Clendinen reveal himself and his own story?

2. How well do you think the author responded to the choices raised by his mother?s failing condition? Would you have done anything differently?

3. While reading **A Place Called Canterbury**, with what group of people did you most identify? The residents? The staff? The family members who had to watch their parents grow older and weaker?

4. Who among the residents of Canterbury seem best able to cope with the fears and frustrations of old age? What character traits seem most valuable in coping with this phase of life?

5. Because so many of the residents of Canterbury suffer from dementia, reading **A Place Called Canterbury** sometimes feels like a journey into a realm of unreason. When reasonableness in dealing with someone is no longer an option, what alternatives are there? How does the book deal with the circumstances that arise when the power of reason has broken down?

6. Some of the aged women at Canterbury adopt and then discard a plan to pose nude for a calendar. How did you respond to this idea? Were you relieved or disappointed when it was abandoned?

7. How does the loss of privacy and independence that goes along with aging affect the residents of Canterbury? What are some of the ways in which they preserve individuality in the face of all the supervision and regimentation that they must undergo?

8. Few people are able to consider aging and all that it entails without some feelings of uneasiness. Are there issues that reading **A Place Called Canterbury** made it easier for you to confront? On the other hand, what portions of the book caused you discomfort?

9. What role does the consumption of alcohol play in **A Place Called Canterbury**? Why is drinking so central to the lives of many of the people described in the book?

10. Routine gives shape and security to the residents of Canterbury. However, resistance to routine gives some of them a needed sense of autonomy. Do you see your own parents in some of the characters at Canterbury? Do they need to go somewhere like that?

11. Were you surprised by the stories of sex and romance at that stage of life? Did you find them touching? Encouraging? Disturbing?

12. Do you think your own parents or relatives would be as honest with you as some of the residents of Canterbury were with the author?

13. Do you feel prepared to deal with this stage of your own parents? or aunts? and uncles? lives? Have you talked with them about it? Have they given you power of attorney?

14. Are aging parents among the subjects that you and your own friends and peers are talking more about?

15. How would you feel about spending your old age in a place like Canterbury?

16. Would you like to read more about life at Canterbury after the year 2001?

Author Bio

Dudley Clendinen is a former columnist for the *St. Petersburg Times*, an assistant managing editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and a national reporter and editorialist for *The New York Times*. He is the editor of a book of essays, **The Prevailing South**, and the author of the text for a book of photographs, **Homeless in America**. With Adam Nagourney, he is the coauthor of **Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America**. He lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

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