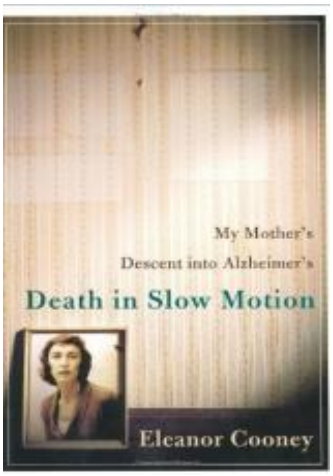
Death in Slow Motion

by Eleanor Cooney



About the Book

Azheimer's is death in slow motion," says Eleanor Cooney in this jarring and unsentimental memoir about caring for her mother, "and it has the ability to kill love while the person you love still breathes."

When it was all but certain that her once-glamorous and witty novelist-mother had Alzheimer's, Cooney moved her from her beloved Connecticut home to California in order to care for her. In tense, searing prose, punctuated with the blackest of humor, Cooney documents the slow erosion of her mother's mind, of the powerful bond the two shared, and her own descent into drink and despair.

"She was always my favorite person," says Eleanor, "hip, cool, brilliant, funny, sane -- my ultimate confidante and sympathizer." Now, overwhelmed by the Chinese water torture of endless small worries, endlessly repeated, that dementia thrusts on victim and caregiver, Cooney resorts to booze, tranquilizers, and gallows wit to blunt the edges of the relentless loss and the demands of ministering to this devastating disease.

But the coping mechanism that finally serves this eloquent writer best is writing, the ability to bring to vivid life the memories her mother is losing. As her mother gropes in the gathering darkness for a grip on the world she once loved, succeeding only in conjuring sad fantasies of places and times with her dead husband, Cooney revisits their true past. **Death in Slow Motion** becomes the mesmerizing story of Eleanor's actual childhood, straight out of the pages of John Cheever; the daring and vibrant mother she remembers; and a time that no longer exists for either of them.

Deeply moving, shockingly honest, and framed by wounded love, Cooney's tale reveals in remorseless prose the true nature of the beast called Alzheimer's, and with it, the arcane processes of the writer's craft and of a splendid mind's disintegration. "Alzheimer's," Cooney writes, "you'll never be the same once it's paid you a visit."

Discussion Guide

1. What are your first impressions of Mary Durant as she is described through her daughter's eyes? How does your opinion of Eleanor Cooney shift throughout **Death in Slow Motion**?

2. The chapter titles capture a variety of tones, from anger to deadpan humor. How would you characterize the overall tone of the book? What aspects of Eleanor's experience were exceptional? What aspects seem universal?

3. The book's Connecticut and West Coast settings sharply contrast with one another. Mary loved Connecticut and her lively neighbors so much that she chose them over her second husband's Hollywood home, but Eleanor and her brother associate Connecticut with melancholy. What effect do these opposing landscapes have on the depiction of Mary's life story? What emotions do you associate with the landscape of your youth?

41. Besides the storyline mentioned in the subtitle, "My Mother's Descent into Alzheimer's," what are some of the other transformations described in the book? While Mary descends into the disease, are there any ascendant qualities to this chapter of her life?

5. How might you have reacted to Eleanor's situation if you had been in Mitch's shoes? How do Mary's "supporting men" differ from one another, from her husbands to the male patients at Sheffield House?

6. One of the most wrenching tasks Eleanor faces is the excavation of her mother's possessions from the house in which she'd lived for forty years. The senseless destruction of her mother's favorite typewriters is especially significant. What artifacts best define your life? Describe a meaningful token that you have inherited from a relative.

7. What has your family's approach to eldercare been? Ideally, how would your own final years be spent? What is your opinion of the American system for dealing with long-term illness?

8. The effects of Alzheimer's can be as varied as those afflicted with it. In what ways was Mary's experience with the disease shaped by her former career as a writer? Do you believe that Eleanor's life as a writer prepared her for the challenge of caring for Mary, or did it exacerbate an already difficult situation?

9. Eleanor Cooney has written several works of fiction. Discuss the novelists' techniques that may have influenced her telling of this story.

10. How does Eleanor portray the dynamic between her brother, her mother, and herself? What is the impact of Mary's illness on this tiny family unit?

11. What does Mary's eviction from The Hostel indicate about the extent of her condition? What are your theories about why the brash side of her personality emerges there?

12. Rather than recalling time in a linear way, Eleanor incorporates carefully chosen flashbacks with the present. How does this tactic influence your assessment of the book's characters?

13. What is the effect of ending the book with the anecdote about Mary's overnight stay with another patient? How does

this scene compare with your early assumptions about the conclusion?

14. The book's epigraph, a quote from Nelson Algren, begins with the words "all was well." Is "all well" in the final chapter of **Death in Slow Motion**?

Author Bio

Eleanor Cooney is the author of four previous books, all coauthored with Daniel Altieri: **Deception: A Novel of Mystery and Madness in Ancient China**; **The Court of the Lion: A Novel of the T'Ang Dynasty**; **Shangri-La: The Return to the World of the Lost Horizon**; and **Shore of Pearls: A Tale of Seventh Century China**. She lives in Mendocino, California.

Critical Praise

"Well-written [and] harrowing."

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