

A conversation with author Mary Higgins Clark

WEDNESDAY, 09 JUNE 2010 21:23



Exploring her latest suspense novel, religious convictions and living in New Jersey

BY JOHN ESPOSITO

NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM

The critically acclaimed writer and proud New Jersey resident, Mary Higgins Clark, is the author of twenty-nine suspense novels. Her books are worldwide bestsellers, with over 100 million sold in the United States alone.

The "Queen of Suspense" chatted recently on a wide range of subjects, including her riveting new blockbuster novel, *The Shadow of Your Smile*; a 50 year love affair with New Jersey; her devout religious faith; a belief in ESP; Bronx roots; some dark days; a happy and rewarding family life; self-publishing and much more.

JE: Congratulations are in order. Your latest novel, *The Shadow of Your Smile*, made its debut on the New York Times Best Sellers Fiction list on May 2nd in the number one position.

MHC: That's right. Thank you so much.

JE: This has not been an uncommon occurrence since your initial success in 1975 with *Where Are the Children*. It must be especially gratifying to know your work continues to be extremely popular.

MHC: Oh, of course it is. I mean, none of us, I think, takes anything for granted. You know, there are so many new writers, so many wonderful new writers. And to continue to hold an audience is very gratifying.

JE: Many of your books' titles, the latest being no exception, carry the names of popular songs from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, made famous by the likes of Frank Sinatra, Vic Damone and Tony Bennett. Do you have a particular affection for the songs from that period and do you personally select the book titles?

MHC: Well, you see what happened was many years ago, I think I only had four or five books out at the time and I was signing yet another contract with Simon and Schuster and my agent said, "Oh for Heaven's sake, they want titles for the next two books," so I just threw in *While My Pretty One Sleeps* and *Weep No More My Lady*. Well, *Weep No More My Lady* became the first one that was a song title and I liked it. Since then I've been using an excerpt from a song, if not a title. And it's worked very well.

JE: With respect to your book cover illustrations, I read somewhere that you utilized one individual to illustrate your very first bestseller and you have used him several times since. Is there collaboration with your various illustrators to depict a specific theme? How does that all work?

MHC: Wendell Minor, who is an illustrator and simply a fine painter, did the cover for *Where Are the Children*. I credit that cover, that Edward Hopper look of darkness and the small red mitten on the grass as really helping to put that book over. It was both in hard cover and soft cover. That haunting illustration has been something wonderful. And then he did three more of my books. You see, I don't select the illustrator, the Art Department does. That's not my job, if you will. But now, Wendell and I have done two children's books together. One of them came out last year; the next one will come out next year.

JE: Let's discuss your new book, *The Shadow of Your Smile*. Please explain how you arrived at the underlying premise. You touch upon it briefly in the Acknowledgments section of the book and perhaps you can elaborate further.

MHC: Well, very simply, a year ago in April, my friend, Bishop Paul Bootkoski, who is the Bishop of Metuchen, invited us to a beatification ceremony of a nun, a Carmelite nun, who had started many homes for the aged and infirmed. When the niece of one of the nuns, about ten years ago, was pregnant, she was told that in utero, the sonogram showed the baby was hopelessly deformed. The Carmelite nuns started a crusade of prayer to Mother Angeline McCrory. When the baby was born, she was absolutely normal. She is now eight or nine years old. And that, with a lifetime of service to the aged and infirmed, has had them put Mother Angeline up for beatification. And as a Catholic, I was so impressed by the ceremony that I thought I would absolutely love to see if, within the framework of telling a suspense novel, I could possibly include a situation where it's faith versus miracle. And that became *The Shadow of Your Smile*.

JE: I believe it's an accurate statement that in addition to your successful writing career, your family and religious faith, specifically Catholicism, are the most important things in your life.

MHC: They are.

JE: On the subject of faith, your heartfelt memoir from 2002, *Kitchen Privileges*, speaks to the power of prayer. You write how your mother and you prayed continually for your older brother Joseph's recovery from osteomyelitis at age 13, and your prayers were answered. In what other ways has your Catholic faith been such a beacon in your life?

MHC: Well, it has always been a beacon in my life. My mother was a very devout Catholic and, you know, I've always said the Lord loves cheerful saints and Mother was a cheerful saint. My father died, leaving her with three little kids. There is no question that my brother Joseph was her heart. She would have thrown herself literally across the railroad tracks for the three of us, but he was the firstborn son, and he couldn't do enough for her and then he died at 18. He was spared at 13 and died at 18. She at least had that other five years, but six months later she had a graduation party for me from high school. She took off the heavy black dress and had a black and white dress on. She said Joseph had a party last year and you will have one now. So, she lived faith, even when her heart was broken.

JE: I came across a wonderful article you had written about your mother, Nora, for *Woman's Day* magazine in 1989. She was a terrific lady by all accounts.

MHC: My Wild Irish Mother (laughter). You don't know how many people said, "Are you sure you weren't writing about my mother?"

JE: As a mystery and suspense writer, some of the topics that you've dealt with include ESP, psychic phenomena, parapsychology; schizophrenia, in vitro fertilization, human cloning and reincarnation. Have you ever felt at odds with the Catholic Church, given some of these subjects may cross the line as to Church teachings?

MHC: I didn't know when I wrote about in vitro that it was considered a "no, no" by the church. I frankly didn't know that. I mean when a husband and wife try to conceive a child, we are not talking about a mail order donor sort of thing. But when a husband and wife try to conceive a child, I would have thought it would be perfectly okay, to use whatever medicine they could. But as far as psychic, I think some people have a glimpse into the future. I do believe that. My own mother, for example, as I think I mention it in *Kitchen Privileges*, would get a feeling about someone and God help that someone if something were to happen. In fact, my uncle used to breeze in and out of town; he always traveled. He'd stay out of touch and then he'd be in touch and see everybody. He never married. The girl he was going to marry was buried in her wedding dress a week before the wedding in the 1917 flu. But mother just said, "I have a feeling about Jenny. Something's happened to her." I said, "Oh for God's sake, Mother." Well, she went to the different hospitals to see if there was any record. And my uncle had had a stroke. He must have been mugged because he had no identification. He was found sitting in front of the house where they had lived for many years in Manhattan and he was about to be buried in Potters Field. That was another one of the family stories.

And then there was the picture of my brother, Joseph, in his dress blues, after the six week boot camp. My mother got the picture and threw it down and said, "He has death in his eyes." He was dead six months later from spinal meningitis, which he contracted while in radio school in California. He was about to be shipped out to the Pacific. Well, it was a heartbreak. So I do think that some people have a glimpse into the future. But I don't believe in psychics, as such, you know, go to a psychic and they'll tell you what to do. I've taken courses for the sake of writing, many years ago, and it was fascinating.

JE: How then did you come upon writing mystery and suspense? Was it something that you were interested in from the time you were a young writer?

MHC: I didn't realize the first two short stories that I sold were suspense stories. It was only because I had an idea for them that I wrote suspense stories. One of them was called, *Stowaway* and the other, *Deadline for Paradise*. I didn't realize that I was gravitating toward suspense. I wrote the usual "boy meets girl" stories that *Good Housekeeping* and *Redbook* were printing in the fifties and early sixties and then the magazine market simply disappeared. There were no magazines that had fiction in them. They were all fact. Look at them. Try to find...all right, the *New Yorker* does two or three, totally different. I mean they do literary short stories. They don't do the ones we wrote in the fifties.

JE: It's disappointing that the short story no longer carries the weight it once did in the book publishing industry. If a successful novelist such as yourself or Stephen King, for example, chooses to write a book of short stories, it will undoubtedly sell well, but for the unknown writer, it would be very difficult to earn a living.

MHC: Absolutely. Very difficult. There just isn't the market. Maybe it will come back. I hope so.

JE: Hopefully, its popularity will return some day.

MHC: I had been widowed (in 1964) and started writing radio shows for a living. And that was when I wrote a series called, Portrait of a Patriot. Each day it was a different patriot. Four minute profiles of famous people. "He was the tailor from Tennessee who became President of the United States. Do you know who he is?" And when I finally did George Washington, I think it was something like, "At 16 his mother said, 'Unpack your bags, you are not going to sea.' Do you know who he is?"

JE: I suspect that the Washington profile written for the radio show provided you with the incentive to write your first book in 1968, a quasi-biographical novel, titled *Aspire to the Heavens: A Portrait of George Washington* (reissued as *Mount Vernon Love Story* in 2002). The book discusses George's affection for Sally Cary and later, his love affair with Martha Custis, whom as most Americans know, he married. It's interesting that this introductory novel is grounded in historical romance, a quite different genre than mystery and suspense, which proved to be the venue that propelled you to the ranks of best selling author.

MHC: I became so intrigued by George Washington that I thought, "We don't know that man. We don't understand that man." I always thought he married an older woman for her money because you see the pictures of them with young children. Those were her grandchildren, not the children. She was older, eight months older. She was 27 to his 26.

JE: Were you able to dispel rumors that Washington had an intimate relationship with Sally Cary outside his marriage?

MHC: Oh, Sally Cary Fairfax was his best friend's wife. When he was 16, she taught him how to dance. Washington probably always had a crush on her, his first love. But there was never a relationship there. Sally was devoted to her husband, George Fairfax. And they were best of friends with George and Martha for 20 years before Sally Fairfax and her husband moved to England to try to dissuade the British from the Revolutionary War. And he was an heir to Lord Fairfax over there.

JE: So how and when did you make the leap from historical fiction to writing mystery and suspense?

MHC: It took three years to write *Aspire to the Heavens*. After I wrote that book I got \$1,500 for it, never another nickel at that time. And I thought, "Well it proves I can write a book. I know I can write a book and I've gotten good reviews, but let's write one that will sell." And that was when I looked at my bookshelves. From the time of Judy Bolton and Nancy Drew, then Agatha Christie and Josephine Tey, and Ngaio Marsh and Mignon Everhard and on and on we go. I realized that my reading of choice had always been mystery, suspense. And I was always, as a kid, trying to keep up with the author. I did not realize I had been training myself to write suspense, so that was when I decided to try. In the one of the few writing classes I took, the first one, where I wrote the first short story, the professor said, "You don't know what to write. I can look at your faces. I'll tell you what to write. You see a newspaper article, a story, you know? It's really interesting. You're intrigued to follow it. If there's something in the family, an old family secret that everyone's been telling for years." He said, "Reread an article in the Times, something that intrigues you." He said, "Take the true case. Ask yourself two questions. Suppose and what if? And turn it into fiction." And I added one more question, which was "Why?"

JE: It's a worthwhile technique that should benefit all writers.

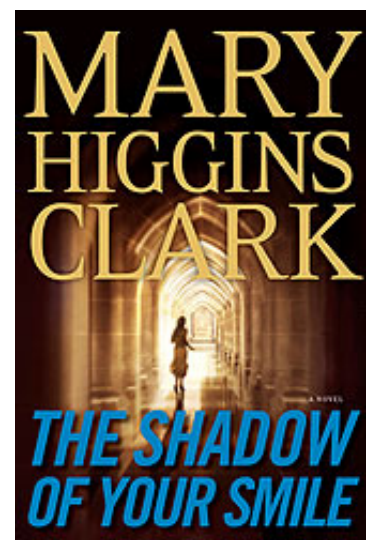
MHC: When people say, "I know I can write," I tell them, "Take a look at your bookshelves. What do you like to read?" "Oh, I like to read everything." I say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we're all eclectic." What do you grab when you're getting on a bus or a plane? What do you choose when you just want to curl up at the end of the day with a glass of wine or a cup of cocoa? For me, it was always, always, always, suspense.

JE: I have had a strong interest in the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe since grammar school. Poe came to mind as I read many of your books over the years. When I mentioned earlier about your use of ESP, schizophrenia, the split personality and the twist ending, I think of Poe's own short stories, such as *William Wilson*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*. Did Poe's works influence you as a young writer?

MHC: Oh, of course, you know being in the Mystery Writers of America, (the premier organization for mystery and crime writers), the sanctuary of Edgar Allan Poe. It's the cathedral. But just two years ago, I was one of the writers asked to write a short story, something related to Poe in some way. So I wrote *The Tell-Tale Purr*. And, in fact, if we have an extra copy, I will send it to you.

JE: I appreciate that very much. Thank you.

MHC: It begins with the words, "Grandmothers ought to die." (laughter)



JE: Who are the writers that you enjoy reading today?

MHC: I'm always doing research for what I'm working on. I have a stack of books here on saints that I read while doing this new book. I'm going to get Scott Turow's. I think *The Help* was a wonderful book. I have one of the ones that can be for nice easy reading, the biography of the Queen Mother of England, whom I've always admired. That's the kind that you can read, because I love biography. I'm rereading David McCullough's book on Theodore Roosevelt, *Mornings on Horseback*. Wonderful story. I just read the latest one by the gal who wrote *The Liar's Club*, Mary Karr. Her new one is *Lit*. So I just read *Lit*, I just read *The Help*, I'm browsing through the Queen Mother and Theodore Roosevelt. And of course, Harlan Coben, who is my good buddy. And Susan Isaacs. I read the advance of her book and loved it. I'm always reading.

JE: I would like to spend some time discussing your life in the years before the writing career took hold. You mentioned earlier about your strong religious convictions in the wake of tragic events. In addition to losing your older brother, Joseph while you were still in your teens, you suffered the loss of your father, Luke, when you were only 11 years old. And years later, your happy marriage of 14 years to Warren Clark, which produced 5 children, would end sadly. In 1964, Warren died of a fatal heart attack after many years of heart problems. Left with young children in your mid thirties, you had come to experience the same fate as your mother, who years earlier lost her husband and raised you and your two brothers, Joseph and Johnny. Such hardship is often too difficult for many to ever rebound. But your life in the years following Warren's death demonstrated a resilience to overcome adversity and a perseverance to move forward. To that end, I would like to read a sampling of your prior jobs and professions, which served as a means of support for your family: babysitter, switchboard operator, secretary in Remington Rand's advertising division, a catalog model, television commercial actress, Pan Am international flight stewardess, radio script writer ...

MHC: Jack of all trades, master of none!

JE: I would take an educated guess that while engaged in a good number of these professions, there was always a typewriter close at hand. And then you went on to graduate with the highest honors at Fordham University, summa cum laude! I understand your mother also went to Hunter College. It was a wonderful accomplishment for someone in her generation to go to college.

MHC: She didn't graduate, but she was always taking courses there. She was very smart. My grandmother, who had nine children and a couple of orphaned nieces and nephews, went to her grave saying, "I know I could write a book." She wanted to be a writer so much. It was funny. In the census of the late 1880s, everyone else wrote, "housewife" for occupation. She wrote, "washes and irons."

JE: Let's talk a little bit about your home life, having grown up in the Bronx and now living in Manhattan and New Jersey. Is city life still a big part of you?

MHC: Oh, I love New York City. I spent a great deal of time in the apartment before John and I were married. (Mary and John Conheaney were married on November 30, 1996.) I have an apartment on Central Park South. And it's only three rooms. Home has been New Jersey since I moved when I was expecting Carol and that's fifty years ago. But I've always had one foot on either side of the Hudson. I'm a New York kid. I'm active in the Archdiocese of New York, as well as active in many Catholic activities in Metuchen and the Archdiocese of Newark.

JE: Do you ever return to the Bronx?

MHC: Oh, yes, sometimes. In fact, I'm speaking out there in Throgs Neck next week for the Little Sisters of the Poor. I'm their dinner speaker. We had a cottage in Silver Beach, which is right there and my mother sold it for \$800 after my father died.

JE: What are some of your recollections about life in the Bronx?

MHC: Where we lived was always country. There was a farm if you go up Pelham Parkway and certainly, when I grew up there, which is all those years ago, it was country. The houses were brick and stucco, the Tudor style houses, and the men didn't park on the street. They drove and they put the car in the garage. And we kids were playing in the street all the time. There was no problem about that. But, you know, if you took the cars off the street, it would be the same as it was all those years ago. And they are nice homes. I mean, we lived in it for four years after my father died and then my mother couldn't keep up the payments, so we ended up in three rooms over the tailor shop.

JE: You mentioned earlier that you moved to New Jersey fifty years ago. I understand that you have homes in Saddle River and Spring Lake. It was interesting to read that your mother jokingly did not forgive you and Warren when you made the decision to move to the Garden State.

MHC: Oh, she never did. The minute she got halfway over the bridge she said, "Oh look at the air, isn't it beautiful?" It was a joke, of course. No, I love it.

JE: You state in your memoir that after Warren Clark's death, a part of you went dark and did not brighten for 32 years. That changed in March 1996 when you invited John Conheeneey to a St. Patrick's Day party in celebration of the publication of your then latest novel, *Moonlight Becomes You*. John had been a widower for two years and is a retired chairman and CEO of Merrill Lynch Futures. Tell me about your life with John and the family in Saddle River, New Jersey.

MHC: John and I were married 8 months after the St. Patrick's Day party and have been happily married for 14 years. He is a wonderful man. We have a beautiful home here in Saddle River. It's on four and a half acres. We have a tennis court and pool for the kids and John has eleven grandchildren. I have six, so the kids, you know, they're growing up so fast. They range from 4 to 27. But I love it when they're here and on the tennis court or in the pool. I just walked around the property the other day because they planted the summer flowers and I thought, "My God, it's a long way from three rooms over the tailor shop!"

JE: You also own a beautiful 1890's Victorian style house in the picturesque seaside town of Spring Lake, New Jersey.

MHC: Spring Lake is beautiful, as you know. The point is, New Jersey is the most beautiful state and I am so sick of the insults and "New Jersey" business. Think of how many books I have set in New Jersey.

JE: The locales in your books are primarily in New Jersey and New York. For your many readers who have little knowledge of New Jersey, your novels have promoted a positive awareness and well deserved exposure for the state.

MHC: Sure, the third book, *The Cradle Will Fall*, was completely set in New Jersey. *On the Street Where You Live* was set in Spring Lake. *All Around the Town* was set in Ridgewood. *No Place Like Home* was set in Mendham and others, if they were set in New York, somebody lived in New Jersey and something was happening. So I have been trying with my books to let people realize what a beautiful state it is.

JE: I would like to conclude our discussion today by speaking about the future of writing and specifically your thoughts on self-publishing.

MHC: Well, I don't think there's anything wrong with it, at all. Because sometimes, it will get picked up and it is somehow more attractive to read a book than a manuscript. They are easier to mail to publishers and say, "Look, I self-published this." I think it's a good idea to present something with a cover on it and in the framework of a book and it's not that expensive. You just do it in the hopes that maybe some people will give it to their local bookstores, which may carry it. The point is, it's an investment that may or may not work. It's that simple. The other thing is, you know, when older people say I always wanted to write, I say, "The best gift you could give to your family is to write your story." I mean, my grandkids loved my memoir. They say, "Now we know what it was like back then." And when older people write their own story and then self-publish it and give it to the family, what a gift it is! You know, people are always trying to find out what it was like with their ancestors and tracing them down. They use to be knocking on doors of cottages of Ireland to say, "I'm your cousin." But to write it down, you are giving them the generation before, as well.

JE: Considering the successes in your life, do you sometimes have to pinch yourself to realize all this has not been a dream?

MHC: I have a wonderful husband and family. I've been very blessed and I'm very grateful for it.

JE: I wish you continued success with *The Shadow of Your Smile*.

MHC: Thank you so much. It has been a pleasure.

John Esposito is a contributing freelance writer to NewJerseyNewsroom.com, who resides in New Providence.

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.