

## **Elizabeth Harper Neeld Talks About Her Life**

I was born in a farmhouse in the middle of a cotton field forty miles below Atlanta during an ice storm on Christmas Day. My parents and grandparents jokingly said they never forgave me for interrupting their Christmas dinner. I love that my roots go deep into the red clay of Georgia where I was born. These roots then sprouted around the base of Lookout Mountain in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, area where I grew up and lived until my early thirties.

Growing up as the daughter of a preacher father and a gentle, wise mother, I was blessed with a life alive with language: The beautiful verses of the King James' Bible, family stories told as only my father with his Irish heritage could tell them, poems and allegories written and recited by my mother, books saved for me in the Rossville, Georgia, library by Mrs. Miller, the librarian, who was the first person to suggest that someday I would probably write books myself. I am so appreciative for and feel so blessed by this "river of language" into which I was born.

I've done many different kinds of work since I first became employed at age 14. During junior and senior high school, I sold fabric and dress patterns in what was called then a "dime store." I mixed paint and typed receipts in a hardware store to put myself through college. I taught seventh grade reading and ninth grade English where I had my first impromptu visit from the principal to see how I was doing—at the very moment that one of the seventh graders was hanging from a steel girder in the ceiling of the classroom where he had climbed to entertain his classmates! I taught high school English and became head of the department. Then I moved to the first community college to open in the hills of East Tennessee where I was head of the humanities division and teacher of writing and literature. From there I moved to New York City where I worked for three years as Director of English Programs for the Modern Language Association on Fifth Avenue. Texas A&M then recruited my husband and me to come to the university to set up a Ph. D. and M. A. strand in the graduate program of the English Department. Creating and directing that program, teaching, and serving as assistant to the president of the university occupied the next seven years of my life (it was during this time that Greg died). Then I resigned to write books full

time, which has been my life's work since. (In between books I have consulted with many Fortune 500 and 100 companies in the U. S. and many companies abroad on the subject of dealing with organizational change.)

Jerele, my husband with whom I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary in 2008, and I like to travel. We also enjoy going cooking for friends, going to art galleries, and participating widely in our Austin, Texas, community. We also adore our Japanese Chin puppies, T.K. and Nori.

### **Favorite books:**

As a child, I loved all the "Twin" books: *The Scottish Twins*, *The Colonial Twins*, *The Eskimo Twins*, Etc. As an adult I have started collecting these books and, so far, have been able to find and buy three of them. *Caddy Woodlawn* and *Baby Island* were also books that I read again and again when I was a little girl.

*Gone With the Wind* became part of my personal legend after I read it in my early teen years. After all, Tara—had it really existed—was located in the same county where I was born. Scarlet and I could have walked on the same red earth! *Family of Pride*, a collection of letters written over fourteen years—before, during, and after the War Between the States, by members of one family whose home place was in Liberty, Georgia, is a testament both to the complexity of the issues of the era but also to the courage and resiliency of the human spirit, as demonstrated by people on many sides.

Any espionage novel that Henning Mankell writes I buy the minute I find it. *Embers*, a novel by Sandor Marai and recently translated into English from Hungarian, is one of the most powerful statements I have ever read about the cost of not forgiving. *Little Altars Everywhere* by Rebecca Wells is the only novel in my life that I ever turned from the last word in the book to the first word in the book to begin reading again.

The theology books of Elizabeth A. Johnson, the spiritual classics of Evelyn Underhill, and the fascinating, intelligent, and deeply inspiring medieval spiritual writings of Lady Julian of Norwich and Hildegarde of Bingen—both as applicable

today as the day they were written—all are part of my morning and evening quiet time reading.

And at bedtime? Any cookbook known to human eye! Among my favorites: any recipe collection by Lee Bailey; Nada Selah's *Seductive Flavors of the Levant*; *The Rancho Chimayo Cookbook: Traditional Cooking of New Mexico*; *Soup and Bread: A Country Inn Cookbook*; and *Frida's Fiestas: Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo*.