

# A rewarding experiment

BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

My book, "La Penultima (With A Rose In Its Eye)," came into being spontaneously and unintentionally. I didn't sit down to write my life story. But that's what I ended up doing. I worked on it for five years, and the result has given me a perspective that allows me to have more compassion for my own life. I can see the balance between my celebrations and my deep regrets. Life is not all one thing or the other. I highly recommend this process.

I could even call this book the story of a mental health journey. If it's not an account of my bouncing to total wellness, it's at least a composition describing my movements toward happiness.

How La Penultima happened was that in 2019 I started having moments—flashes—bursts of insights, memories, observations, truths, anecdotes, ideas that were very acute. They had a certain sound to them and were worded in a certain way (they seemed pithy and zippy). They had a character and a quality. So I started writing them down. I called them my fragments. I thought if I could just write down the fragments in the order in which they were received and print them up, I'd have a book. It would be so much easier than the last book I wrote, the life story of a friend of mine, which took 19 years. But a dear friend of mine, Sara Taber, who is a professional editor and has also written quite a few published books, and who was very excited about these fragments, said they definitely had to be organized. There had to be some overarching structure. So, my solution was to write a short narrative autobiography, about seven or eight pages, and divide it into sections and make each section the beginning of each chapter. And then create a collection of fragments related to the theme of each chapter. Since the chapters were collections, much like paintings in a gallery, my friend Terry suggested calling the chapters galleries, which I did. Despite my great attempt at structure, there is still a random feeling of chance juxtapositions in each gallery, surprising and unexpected combinations such as the chance combinations one often hears in avant garde music, where the composer gives up control. In Penultima there are photo collages at the beginning of each gallery, and although I selected every single photo that appears, I let go and let Google determine their arrangement on the page. That was fun.

The process of creating Penultima was like any artistic endeavor, in that you usually start with something that "comes to you," an idea that pops into your head. From then on, you are molding and sculpting and forming and shaping until you finally get it, or you just quit and say, "OK, it's done now."

In La Penultima it might seem at times that I'm determined to spill my guts, and, as appealing as that might be, it was more like I took the material that came to me and made something out of it even when it was embarrassing or inappropriate and maybe outrageous. If I started having flashes again in, say, five years, they would be different fragments and I'd have to shape something different out of them. Right now Penultima is my "definitive" life story, but it may not always be.

In noticing the nine different themes that I identified among my fragments, I gained some clarity about what's important to me in life: my ethics, values and morals, people and their fascinating stories, pain that has crippled me, the people I love, what gives me joy, and how I long to save the world. My galleries, that is, my collections, are about floating outside of space and time; being deeply impacted by the cultural experience of religion; embracing the big, big, big world; analyzing my capacity for stupidity and carelessness; how art sears my soul; the meaning of blood ties; the relationship between justice and peace; sex, taxes and other practical problems; every kind of love that makes you happy and smart.

It was hard to get this whole project done. During the five years of putting it together, we had the pandemic, I had a semi-heart attack and got four stents put into my heart, I got a new grandbaby who is now 2 1/2. I wrote a suite for solo piano which I performed for small groups of friends. My second daughter went through cancer treatment and is doing well.

Now I wonder if I want to print the books that I've already written. It's quite an elaborate enterprise. My friend that I finished the book about in 2012, died in 2016. She and her wife, Betsy, were not sure about it, but finally in about 2020 Betsy gave me permission to try to print it. I'm still thinking about it. During my 25 years at the newspaper (Southside Pride in Minneapolis, a counter-culture, anti-war and social justice community paper) I wrote dozens of columns (called Spirit and Conscience) about social justice and the environment that I'd like to print as a collection sometime, but I might not do it. I still write the column sometimes.

There is so much living, and cooking from scratch, that comes between me and my books.

+++++



**Wednesday, May 28, at 7 p.m., Book Reading**

**Eat My Words Bookshop in Nordeast**

**214 13th Ave NE**

**Minneapolis, MN 55413**

**[www.eatmywordsbooks.com](http://www.eatmywordsbooks.com)**

**(651) 243-1756**

**\*\*Tuesday, June 10, at 6 p.m., Book Reading**

**Boneshaker Books in South Minneapolis**

**2002 23rd Ave S (23rd & Franklin)**

**Minneapolis, MN 55404**

**(612) 208-6669**

On the back cover of the book, I wrote a book description. It came out like this: Elaine Klaassen has been writing for the Minneapolis community newspaper Southside Pride for many years. The more personal, particular lens through which she writes in *La Penultima* is that of a heartbroken human who wears the mantle of a heroic Mennonite upbringing; a semi-professional pianist who grappled with the perfectionism of classical music; someone blessed with a soulmate's brief companionship; a U.S. resident/citizen who lived in Spain during the '70s; and a poetic soul who is excessively curious about what other people do, say, think and feel. Her writer/editor friend Sara Taber (author of *Born Under an Assumed Name: The Memoir of a Cold War Spy's Daughter*) says Elaine's view is "passionate, thoughtful, kooky, open to this tumbling world, unsettling, vulnerable, practical, haphazard and zigzaggy, full of despair, wonder, resignation and beauty—a crazy quilt."

My friend Michael, who is somewhat biased, says about *Penultima*:

The scope of the book is immense and has all the depth, humor, despair, joy, and pathos you'll ever find in one place.

It's a unique form that I fell in love with immediately! I think I coined the term "controlled stream of consciousness." The writing is beautiful and courageous, and unafraid of vulnerability. I urge you to get this book if you are any of the following:

1. Human
2. Alive
3. Curious about others
4. A lover of good stories
5. Appropriately voyeuristic

This book description is my email signature: "*La Penultima*" is

a pointillistic picture of my 80 years so far: swaddled in a Mennonite cradle, comforted by friendship with Bach, molded by a sojourn in Spain, pierced through with a passion for justice, always longing and willing to walk through the mountains and the valleys of love. The following review of *Penultima* by Mark Connor, who used to be an editor at Southside Pride newspaper, was published in the December 2024 issue of Southside Pride:

Elaine Klaassen has written a book that captures readers in the freedom of her vision, grips us in the rhythm of her voice, and holds us in the arms of her love, releasing us in forgiveness and redemption. *La Penultima* is a memoir that had to be written, for Elaine herself and the people she's touched, recording in words the picturesque life of a woman whose influence—from Minneapolis to New York, from Kansas to Spain and beyond—has touched many through her gentle simplicity, rooted in Mennonite heritage that, even in defeat, reaches victorious consolation.

Much input from friends brought her book to the finish line. Thanks to the suggestion of her friend Terry, the nine chapters are called "galleries," in which the relationship between the separate fragments is like that of the relationship between paintings in a gallery; they are grouped according to themes.

A quote from her friend Gary, "Exposing your soul is the most valuable gift one can give to another," is a thread that runs throughout. In *La Penultima* Klaassen does expose her soul to us, at the risk of our judgment, winning our approval. She bravely bares her humanity, recounting hopes and dreams and triumphs and failures, turning even her transgressions into a grand wish and simple prayer for everyone.

The title of Klaassen's "memoir-like document" came from Miguel (raised Michael Joseph Hagerty in suburban Chicago), who, Klaassen explains, "was going to write a book called *The Penultimate* (*La Penultima*). It was going to be the last thing before the last thing. And I think it was going to be everything he knew up until the point where he knew everything he was ultimately going to know."

Elaine lived in Spain from 1969 to 1981, mostly with Miguel, and learning he died in 2010, she knew she'd eventually write this book. After studying piano with concert pianist Ricardo Requejo in Madrid, Spain, working as a professional piano teacher and composer and playing piano in various churches, Klaassen has spent most of her time helping and learning from the community around her. She has worked with community groups, Indigenous people and communities of color, collaborating on peace, justice and environmental issues, writing about much of it in her Southside Pride column. This is fueled by her Mennonite identity, even though in her early 20s she left a Mennonite marriage to a pastor as she entered the first coed graduate school class at the University of Notre Dame, radically witnessing to peace on a path she carved out on her own terms.

There have been "five important Michaels in my life," she explains. The other four include Mikey from grade school, "Mike, the father of my children; Michael who calls me a spirit: and Mischa, who now fills a bucket of happiness in my psyche." Although divorced at 65 from Mike, father of their daughters, she enjoys companionship with him, living in the same house divided evenly with separate entrances, and his generous provision of mechanical skills that keep her equipped with a smoothly running car. Unorthodox as that seems, it's indicative both of Klaassen's singular style and the adventurous story she relates.

As each gallery chronicles early childhood to the present, in reverse order, a memory in Gallery VII (Justice = Peace) entitled "World Hunger: 1971," recounts riding a motorcycle with Miguel into southern Spain, arriving late-night in Talavera when restaurants and stores are closed, and lamenting intense hunger. She admits, "Years later it blew my mind that our thoughts didn't automatically go to the plight of those who suffer hunger on a daily basis," and the personal quality of Elaine Klaassen, a quality evident throughout

the telling of her tale, is definitively clear—she has the conscience of a saint.

Hopefully, the book will be in the public library soon, as well as in independent bookstores, but for now it's available on Amazon and directly from the author at [elaineruthklaassen@gmail.com](mailto:elaineruthklaassen@gmail.com). *La Penultima (With A Rose In Its Eye)* is well worth reading and a great Christmas gift for someone you love.

#### (MARK'S BIOGRAPHY

Mark Connor began writing for *Southside Pride* and *Pulse of the Twin Cities* in 1997 when, exhausted from organizing an anti-Margaret Thatcher demonstration with Minnesotans for a United Ireland, he thought, "I'll bet I can work for those guys and make my rent, which is better than being an activist for free." After publishing a story about the Irish Political Prisoners Children's Holiday program in *Southside Pride* and a feature on legislative efforts to compete with American Indian casinos in *Pulse*, he wrote many articles about local, national, and international politics and culture, and a couple of articles about boxing. From January through May, 2001, he was assistant managing editor of *Pulse* and managing editor of *Southside Pride*. He continued providing freelance articles for both publications through 2003, grateful for the experience and the friends he made at the publications.)

My friend J.B. Reynolds, a writer from California, created the following review of my book:

*Memoir* makes for delicious reading

When I was young a favorite pastime was doing "connect the dots" puzzles. They were usually pretty easy, and the final picture's 'solution' was not difficult to guess even just after starting, but every now and then the picture began as just a spray of numbered points, apparently random. It might be anything. And dismayingly, sketching in the line did little to help until suddenly, at some point, an unexpected image would appear! A hidden thing, revealed. It left me with a too-rare feeling of lingering satisfaction. I found myself experiencing that same glow over and again when reading Elaine Klaassen's "*La Penultima*," a life's memoir. Instead of the usual linear crawl this unique memoir is composed of hundreds of tiny vignettes plucked, it might seem, at random throughout the decades of a long and active life, but they are strung along together with care like small freshly discovered jewels on a wire. Art, music, compassion, doubt, beauty, fear, laughter, love, curiosity, despair, joy — they form the Human Condition and she is touched by each. They are the notes in a concerto of a thoroughly lived life. And as it moves along and you step back, so to speak, connections (both direct and in-) are formed jewel to jewel. By the end a complex faceted image results, composed of points and lines and thoughts and swooping contours; a mensch, in other words, a complete person as a complex of jewels, rendered in an engaging pointillist idiom.

I also wonder if another reader's finished puzzle will look just like mine. You might say that Ms Klaassen's jewels are very subtly numbered —we are each someone a little different to everyone we know, after all— so a great many like-but-unlike final pictures will result, each a product of how the reader with the pencil feels they shall proceed, one jewel to the next. As with any personality, there is a format that reveals itself only incidentally over time, even when it deals in familiar themes such as religion, aging, and family. In her case the rigid conformity of a Mennonite upbringing formed a basis upon which a unique individual has taken its central themes of faith, purpose, social justice and love and crafted her own realization.

The engaging cover and chapter headings are composed of many small photographs which echo this same presentation, a fulsome mosaic of ideas. Each picture has a slightly different tale to tell of this human being; all of them are there for a reason. This is an artistically crafted work.

The format makes the book very approachable in doses from a few chapters right down to a few lines. There are vignettes which, by themselves, are remarkably dense and worthy of the sort of contemplation that draws the contented reader's eye for a few moments into the soft expanse of the blank margin while the mind happily reviews its thoughts, before resuming.