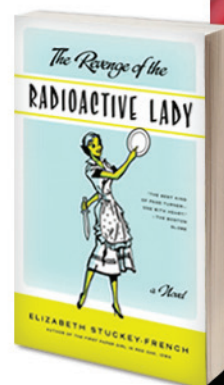


## Random House Author Q&A

### *The Revenge of the Radioactive Lady*, a novel by Elizabeth Stuckey-French



**RH: You mention in the acknowledgments that your title character's ordeal with the radiation she unwittingly swallowed many years earlier is based on actual government-funded experiments that took place during the Cold War. What inspired you to craft a novel around these events?**

ESF: Looking for something to read in my public library, I'd stumbled upon the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Plutonium Files* by Eileen Welsome. It turned out to be a gripping read; it's just so horrifying that all of these experiments were done on unsuspecting people, including pregnant women. I kept wondering how these doctors and scientists could possibly justify their actions. How did they live with themselves?

I was initially interested in the doctor's point of view, but then started writing from the perspective of the victim, for personal reasons. I had thyroid cancer in my twenties, and was told it might have been caused by the old dental X-ray machines they used. I started thinking, "How do you forgive someone who has done something like this to you?" On top of that, I'm really interested in mass delusion. The Cold War era really fascinates me.

**RH: What inspired the character of Marylou, aka The Radioactive Lady?**

ESF: She's based on a woman I read about in *The Plutonium Files*, but she's also a combination of my mom and my aunt, who are both kind of kooky. They have great senses of humor, and even though they're really strong Christians, they have no problem doing some morally questionable things [laughs]. I'm always interested in characters like that—complicated and acting on various impulses. Good, but also with darker things going on. And, of course, funny.

**RH: You write about the devastating situations your characters face in darkly comic ways. What determined that choice?**

ESF: I have a daughter with Asperger's syndrome who's been in a lot of support groups over the years, and sometimes you just have to laugh at stuff you wouldn't ordinarily laugh at. The things that the people in the novel are actually suffering from, like sexual abuse or autism, aren't funny at all, but I'm interested in how you cope with things by laughing or seeing the funny side, the darkly comic side. That's just how I see the world—with a funny edge.

**RH: The characters have such varied lives and interests—tracking hurricane patterns, dealing with autism, working on secret experiments and more. Which was the most difficult to write?**

ESF: I was afraid to write from the perspective of the kids who had Asperger's because I had never done that before, and I wasn't sure if I could or should. But my daughter reminded me that not everyone with Asperger's is the same, so each of my characters would just be one version. Once I gave myself permission to try their points of view, it was very liberating. I really tried to find something in each of the characters to connect with, and each was fun to write for different reasons. Of course, originally I was writing the novel only from the father's point of view.

**RH: So you started with one character's point of view and ended up writing from the perspective of every character—and there are seven in all! Was that difficult?**

ESF: It was daunting to write that way, but I realized that it wasn't one person's story; the story was in the way they affected one another. It wasn't just a story about Marylou; it was also about how she came to the family at exactly the time they needed her. They were self-involved and didn't notice what was going on around them, and they needed someone like Marylou to shake them up.

**RH: Several of the characters have something of a hidden identity.**

ESF: I wanted the story to be at an explosive moment for the family, and I wanted them to have secrets that were fairly serious to make for some drama. Plus, I've always loved mysteries—Nancy Drew books were my favorites growing up—and I loved the idea of someone taking on another identity, the way Marylou does when she moves to Tallahassee and assumes the name Nancy Armstrong. I also worked as a social worker for years and did a lot of family counseling. I was always amazed by the things family members kept from each other and weren't noticing or communicating. But I like writing about it much better than being a counselor—I found it frustrating that I could help certain people and not others. I much prefer exploring these things at a distance, as a writer and a reader.

**RH: What writers influence your work? Do you feel a particular affinity with any?**

ESF: I always loved Flannery O'Connor. I love Alice Munro—she's a genius—and Tobias Wolff. I like southern female writers, like Jill McCorkle and Lee Smith. They all write kind of dark comedies, but they're always sympathetic toward their characters. I don't like comedy that just makes fun of everyone. I like having sympathy for my characters even when they're not behaving in the best ways. They still seem human and vulnerable to me.

**RH: Can you tell us about the next book you're working on?**

ESF: Well, I swore I was only going to write from one person's point of view, but it seems I've wound up doing multiple points of view again. I don't know why! It's going to be a novel set in the 1920s and '30s. I'm fascinated with the 1930s, especially. A tornado wipes out a little town in the Midwest and it exposes this predatory, convict-type guy who the townspeople didn't know had been living in their midst. He's really creepy—I've been trying to make him sympathetic, but it hasn't been easy. I've only done a rough draft, so we'll see!