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## With Elizabeth and Her Cats

Bobbie Ann Mason

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# With Elizabeth and Her Cats

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- 1 I knew Elizabeth Spencer through the Fellowship of Southern Writers. A founding member of that group, she was always a congenial spirit at the biennial gatherings, and everybody wanted to hang out with her. Steve Yarbrough, one of her fellow Mississippi-born writers, remarked to me last year, a few months before she died, “If anyone asked me who was the finest contemporary writer from Mississippi, I would have to say Elizabeth.” Recently he added, “I also think she’s the most underrated Southern writer of all.”
- 2 She once wrote me an appreciative letter about a story of mine in the *Southern Review*. She was known for doing this—for initiating literary conversation with writers who came to her attention and for encouraging younger writers. Allan Gurganus got one of those letters, too, about his first story, when he was in his twenties. It was the world to him.
- 3 I was privileged to attend Elizabeth’s ninetieth birthday party in 2011 at Allan’s house in North Carolina. I sat next to her for a good while and we had cake. She was awed by the fuss, attended by most of the celebrated North Carolina writers who live around the Golden Triangle. Always self-deprecating, she accepted the toasts with good humor and disbelief that being ninety meant she was wise—or old.
- 4 When I saw her at her home in Chapel Hill later that week, I snapped a picture of her lovely smiling face, wearing my blue beret—for fun.
- 5 We had corresponded about our McCain ancestors. The late Senator John McCain was her second cousin. Both my third- and fourth-great grandfathers were named John McCain. Probably all these McCains belonged to the same passel of pioneers heading west over two centuries ago, but I haven’t traced the precise intersections. In public talks at the FSW in Chattanooga, Elizabeth amused her audience when she spoke of her teasing but respectful exchanges with her renowned cousin, whose politics she didn’t share.
- 6 Elizabeth and I bonded less over literature or our McCain ancestors than we did over cats. We exchanged photos of our cats via e-mail. She was partial to black cats and

always had one or two. My father was partial to white cats. I like both, but the tuxedo cats are special.

- 7 In a country store in Virginia a few years ago, I ran across a wine labeled “Elizabeth Spencer.” Astonished, I shared this discovery with Jill McCorkle, who lives near Elizabeth. We were both bowled over. Jill went to see her and then sent me a photo of Elizabeth holding up a large photo of an Elizabeth Spencer wine bottle. Elizabeth had no connection to the wine, but she knew about it. It turns out that this winery is the dream of a couple whose first names are Elizabeth and Spencer. On their website, they describe their wine as “balanced, elegant, and approachable.” Not a bad description of our own Elizabeth. Some years ago, when the winemakers learned that a prestigious writer had the same name as their wine, they sent her a complimentary case of it.
- 8 Stuff like this amused Elizabeth. She treasured little ironies, and her fiction is breathtakingly nuanced. She long ago freed herself from the Southern belle expectations of the flagging plantation culture she was born in by writing about it. Quietly witty and sharp-tongued, she was a rebel from the start and remained so as she wrote stories and novels that boldly challenged Southern traditions. Eudora Welty described Elizabeth best, I think, praising “the accuracy of her eye and ear, [her] talent, and a certain prankish gaiety of spirit.”
- 9 That a wine had her name or that a movie was made of “The Light in the Piazza,” or that people from around the world honored her so grandly did not spoil her. She wasn’t stuck up or full of herself, as we say in the South, but she was full of curiosity, insightfulness, appreciation, humor, and generosity.
- 10 One fall day in 2018, her caregiver helped Elizabeth out of bed so that she and I could sit a spell. We shared some chocolate and news of our cats. Bello and Bitsy were out on business in the shrubbery. I showed her photos of my new kitten, Maddie. I was afraid I was imposing on Elizabeth and felt bad that I had dragged her out of bed, but she was lively and eager for conversation. Imagine talking casually about the time she went to a fancy dinner in Rome with Faulkner and his pals to celebrate his Nobel. She said she spent her time now reading and watching the news (and raging at Trump). She still enjoyed a glass of wine with dinner and a brandy before bed.
- 11 What I’ve observed about persons of advanced age is that they become more themselves as they have the advantage of time to figure themselves out and to see themselves in a long perspective. They may see how naive and foolish they were in youth, for example, and yet they hold that young person inside—forgiven and accepted. It is ironic. They are still the seventeen-year-old kid but not embarrassed about it now. They are free.
- 12 I heard that when Elizabeth left her house for the last time, in a hearse, Bello tried to follow it down the street. I am glad to know her cats are being cared for now, and I hope they don’t miss her as much as I do.



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## AUTHORS

### **BOBBIE ANN MASON**

Bobbie Ann Mason is the author of several works of fiction, including *Shiloh and Other Stories* and the novels *In Country* and *The Girl in the Blue Beret*. Her memoir, *Clear Springs*, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Her new novel, *Dear Ann*, will appear in 2020.