

A conversation with Eleanor Morse, author of *Margreete's Harbor*

Q: *Margreete's Harbor* is set during the late 50s and early 60s. Why did you want to explore this time? What research did you do to capture that era?

A: *Growing up during those years in a household with a politically active mother and a father who decided he no longer wanted to be a Republican, I became aware of a shift in the trustability of my government: a harbinger for the times we are living in now. During the 50s and 60s, language in the public sphere became increasingly distorted: the lying and twisting of facts on the part of Lyndon Baines Johnson and Robert S. McNamara became commonplace, as did the sowing of seeds of fear ("the domino theory") which roped people into continuing an unwinnable and disastrous Vietnam War. This country has never recovered from those years, and I hoped that a reader would be able to feel the backdrop of that time and trace the arc that has brought us to where we are now. My research mostly consisted of searching out memories, trying to recall the language and culture of those times, the more static roles of men and women, a world that came to be dominated by a terrible war, where many people hoped for a better world, yet when you looked at the horizon, it was red with fires burning down a city.*

Q: What drew you to focus on the shared lives of one family?

A: *I wanted to show the fragility and the robustness of a family—the forces that drive families apart and the engines that hum along, keeping them together. For me, the cast of characters is what drives every story, but in the case of *Margreete's Harbor*, I did not anticipate which character would end up in the driver's seat. Margreete was going to be a minor character. "Ha!" she said, as she elbowed her way to the center of the book. I'm grateful that she ended up there. I came to love her, admire her, and learn from her.*

Q: The novel explores how families care for loved ones with dementia. What inspired that part of the story?

A: *My first teacher about dementia was my mother's first cousin's wife, Nina. They married after World War II. Fast forward sixty-five years, her husband had died, along with many in Nina's generation, and I became her closest relative. She was a difficult woman—tender with stray animals and often harsh with human beings. Our meeting ground was music and literature. She often quoted whole Rilke poems to me.*

Nina's mind began to cloud over and the landscape of her heart turned toward suspicion and fear. The character of Margreete is a very different person from Nina—sunnier, more approachable, and with a very different past. But from Nina, I learned how the mind can slowly be overtaken, the present swallowed by the past.

Each character in the book formed in a different way, but Margreete gives you some idea of the random way this can happen, with a character forming out of a tidbit, a fragment, a brief experience, an image, a beloved and difficult person.

