

***The Laws of Eleanor* by Trecia R. Greene**

Review by Cate Gable for The Chinook Observer/Long Beach, WA

The Laws of Eleanor begins, perhaps as things do in the real world, by keeping us off balance and diverting our attention from the main act. Greene's book starts with Toby, the woman Eleanor lives with.

Toby seems one of those characters who is bigger than life: swaggering, confident, and dominant. She is a tow-truck driver who is known for her ability to haul vehicles out of ravines and places where other tow drivers have thrown up their hands. Toby is a woman who holds her own in a man's world and who feels more secure with lots of big vehicles in the front yard, just in case.

In the summer, a couple of horses looked out over a range of no less than ten vehicles with varying numbers of wheels and doors and crooked antennae listing crazily toward the tree tops...Toby's version of circling the wagons. The working vehicles faced the driveway, prepared to be gunned into action at the slightest suggestion of a command from Toby. There was only one vehicle on the property that you could open the door and just get into.

(Then) Greene settles us into chapters about the quieter and more subtly woven Eleanor herself. Eleanor's story begins with a parable.

Behold there was come from Kansas a woman whose name was Eleanor. And this is the record. When the busybodies sent the gossips to ask Eleanor, Who are you anyway? Eleanor owned up, saying, I'm just an unemployed single mother looking for work.

She seems to have appeared out of the ether and wandered into Toby's life one day. But Eleanor's mythos begins to evaporate as we...are reeled, inch-by-inch, into Greene's biography.

Eleanor is a girl from Kansas City, Kansas...who has had some hurt in her life and who makes do with what life gives her. She seems crusty at first, hidden behind a cloud of cigarette smoke or the glaze of one too many gin and tonics. But gently, persistently, Greene wrestles Eleanor out of the fog of her life and unearths what she calls 'The Laws of Eleanor,' after the earlier Eleanor of Aquitaine. By the end of the book, some of these laws cause even Greene to re-examine her life choices.

Greene does an excellent job of re-creating the pace and color of Eleanor's speech until one feels as if one is sitting with the two of them at their accustomed posts at the big wooden table in Toby and Eleanor's house on 'The Mountain.' You can

almost hear the clink of ice in Eleanor's gin and tonic as she rants crazily one afternoon waiting for an overdue Toby.

You're a good girl, Maddie. [One of Toby's many dogs.] Now get outta the way. Damn dogs. Damn women who own dogs. Dogs and guns. Dogs to protect themselves, they say. Then the damn dogs hear a noise and bark, and the damn women jump up and grab a gun and blow a hole through somebody. And who's gonna protect the rest of us from damn women who own the damn dogs and the damn guns? You're a good girl, Maddie.

The Mountain too is, more or less, a character in the book as it provides the backdrop for the story, the two women's livelihoods, and cycles of weather that often set the tone for events. The Mountain becomes a Mecca for Greene, where she has purchased her own rustic retreat.

After Greene's initial proposal to interview Eleanor, the text picks up speed and the reader develops the same impatience Greene must have felt each week as she waited through her weekday tasks in town in order to return to The Mountain to continue the taped dialogue with Eleanor.

As Eleanor becomes more comfortable with the process of relating her life – after an initial ‘ah-shucks-there-certainly-isn't-anything-special-about-me-Toby-is-the-one-with-the-stories reluctance – we fall easily into Eleanor's tale. Greene relates the narrative to us much the way it has been delivered to her, sometimes jumping ahead, sometimes looping back to a story told earlier that Eleanor now feels able to tell us more about. The story has a ‘real time’ feel.

Almost like the fine cigarette smoke one imagines is perpetually circling Eleanor's head, the story weaves its spell and begins to permeate the things around it. We see that despite Toby's big and public presence, the heart of their life together is Eleanor. She holds the center.

My favorite chapter and a turning point in the book is entitled “Dancing With Patsy Cline.” With a little prodding from Greene, Eleanor reveals a passion for the music of Patsy Cline and in the midst of the clutter – Toby is a packrat for anything that might come in handy some day – Greene and Eleanor claim a space for themselves to revel in the joy of music and movement. This provokes more feeling than Eleanor has been willing to allow herself, perhaps ever.

This scene leaves the reader with the sense of Eleanor's untapped depths and the strength of her bond with Greene. The more Eleanor talks, the more she reveals to Greene and to us, and, more importantly, the more she opens to herself.

This chapter illustrates the literary version of Einstein's principle that examining the behavior of an atom, changes the behavior. As we have been guessing chapter by chapter, as Greene listens more intently to Eleanor's story, the effect of this listening changes both of them.

Eleanor begins to reflect on her life. She looks back and sees patterns; she, timidly, then more courageously, enters dark corners she has left abandoned for decades – her favorite brother struck down by lightning, the 'more beautiful' older sister and her three illegitimate children, and her own role in her family as the unappreciated 'Plain Jane.' Eleanor begins to see that she *has* had a life worth noting, that she has loved and been loved; and, near the end, she even attempts to take up the pen herself in that age-old, though futile, fight against mortality.

Although Toby steps in again in one of the last chapters to fill in some of the details of Eleanor's life, there is no sense now that she is an interloper usurping the heroine's role. By this time, the woman at the center of this tale is indisputably Eleanor. It's Eleanor we want to hear from and about. Toby, with all her bravado, has taken her rightful place in the story as a supporting character, a foil.

Greene is a witty and humorous narrator and brings into the story her own life, the mythology of Edith Hamilton, a touch of Virginia Woolf, Georgia O' Keefe, Mary Cassatt, Edna St. Vincent Millay and whatever else she thinks is needed for the right mix.

Greene's ultimate magic is that we ourselves miss Eleanor when she is gone. We want to say, "No, come tell us more. You were just warming up!" But by then, it's too late. The self-proclaimed "mean little bitch from Kansas" has returned to the ether. What we have left is this simple tale of a seemingly unremarkable woman who has grabbed our attention with her rough wisdom and reminded us again that each life is a miracle.