

Orinda literary luncheons offer lively discussions with top authors

By Lou Fancher



Author Gail Honeyman
Photo Philippa Gedge Photography UK

Although the guest of honor didn't – and never could – show up, lunch with Eleanor Oliphant June 14 at Orinda Books was a surefire hit.

Summer salads, wine, lively conversation, approximately 40 people and author Gail Honeyman, arriving all the way from her home in Glasgow, Scotland, combined for a heady mix of laughs and literature. Focused on Honeyman's debut novel, "Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine," the noontime event drew people from all over the Bay Area.

"I have other book clubs I could join and other bookstores closer to my home, but I prefer Maria's shop," said Debra Fong-Kong. "She has variety and a sense of community. Educated women from the whole Bay Area come here. Plus, there's local art on display and the store makes donations of books to local schools."

The Alamo resident has been an ER pediatric trauma nurse at Oakland Children's Hospital for 30 years. Eleanor Oliphant as an adult character with social anxiety and peculiarities in part due to family abuse from her childhood resonated with Fong-Kong immediately. "To understand humans and why they act the way they do is what I do professionally and what is in this book. It's very realistic. Many children and adults have been traumatized. This book gives the picture of hope. It offers kindness, which I think keeps us grounded to what people are, especially in a technology-centered world."

Kindness, Honeyman said in a 40-minute presentation that she described as "foggy jet lagged" but instead sparkled as does her writing style, with humor and authenticity, is a major theme along with loneliness in her first book. Having four years ago read an article in which a young person in her 20s described leaving work on Friday and not interacting with another person until back in the office the following Monday, she

became absorbed in the universality of loneliness. "Back then, it was usually written about in the context of older people," she said. "Here was a woman, about 20, who was so lonely. I was struck by that. The young are usually written about as lively, social, surrounded by people."

The problem Honeyman said is a topic so large in the United Kingdom that a Minister of Loneliness has been appointed by the government in response to recent studies. "They showed loneliness' impact isn't just mental, it's physical. It's like smoking 10 cigarettes a day—the impact on the cardiovascular system."

The kindest character, Raymond, who befriends Eleanor, is gentle, non-judgmental and "exactly what Eleanor needs," Honeyman said. During a book tour stop in the Midwest she was asked if he was based on a real person and if so, could his phone number be shared. Honeyman, laughing along with the audience, said Raymond was not based on a real person but was a crucial character that allowed her to explore a platonic relationship between a man and a woman.

Quick to dispel notions about Eleanor's villainous mother, Honeyman said, "I need to make clear, my mum is lovely. There's no autobiographical mother here. In the first draft, she was even worse. I toned it down. I wanted it to be Eleanor's story. I had to make mummy horrendous, but not so bad Eleanor isn't the star of the show."

The first-time author's experience is rooted in childhood writing that was interrupted for 20 years by undergraduate and graduate study of modern languages and 19th Century French poetry and an office job as a civil servant. But all the while, Honeyman read. Contemporary fiction by Kate Atkinson and Nina Stibbe are current favorites.

After celebrating her 40th birthday, Honeyman decided to try writing again. "You never know, but you won't, until you start," she said, about crafting three early chapters and entering them in a competition for unpublished women writers over age 21. Short-listed but failing to win the top prize, Honeyman had good fortune when one of the judges approached. "She said she loved it and could she represent me. That's why I tell young people and new writers to send out their work. Even if you don't win, you never know who's reading it and what will come of that. I managed to finish the book and thought maybe a small publisher might want it. Then I got an exciting

email from my agent that more than one publisher wanted it. I had to read the email 47 times."

The book she completed during lunch hours over three years while working full time was published in 2017. It has received multiple awards and is available in 38 countries. Film rights have been optioned by actor Reese Witherspoon.

Honeyman appeared still overwhelmed by the attention and was most comfortable when speaking about making Eleanor's voice strong. "She was really fun to write, because she's got no filter. She just says her thoughts." Delighted that revisions allowed her to "tinker" with the final draft, Honeyman said her new life as a full-time writer places her in pajamas at home, writing on a laptop. "I like to write in the mornings because the rest of the day hasn't intruded with boring stuff like paying bills. Also, I think you're accessing the dreaming part of your life, the creativity."

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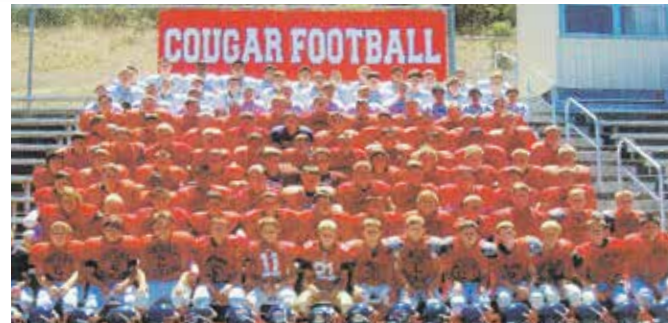
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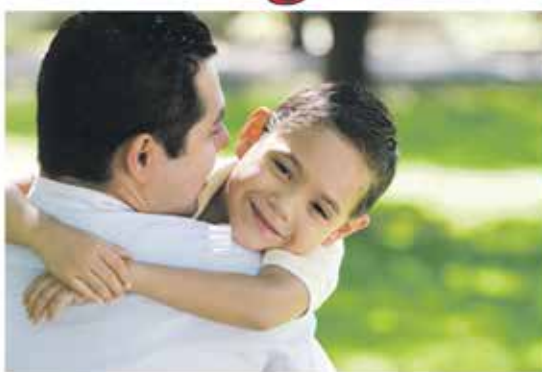
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