

**Q&A *Loving Eleanor***  
**Susan Wittig Albert**

**What intrigues you about the American period in which Eleanor and Lorena lived?**

Oh, my goodness. The tumultuous drama packed into the first sixty years of the twentieth century is simply overwhelming. World War I, the Roaring Twenties, Prohibition, women's suffrage, the Crash, the Depression, the Dust Bowl, the New Deal, World War II, the Bomb, the Cold War, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Pill—it's one major earthquake after another, knocking down and reconstructing every aspect of American life. We're still living with the aftermath of these events.

For women, it's the most transformative period in American history. We got the vote, we went to work outside our homes, we began to insist on being heard, we gained control over our reproductive lives. Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok were onstage for act after act of this amazing drama, participating and documenting their participation.

**How did the idea for *Loving Eleanor* originate?**

In 2008, I was reading for another Depression-era project when I discovered Lorena Hickok in the pages of Blanche Wiesen Cook's massive two-volume biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. That's where I learned about the 30-year correspondence—"erotic and romantic," according to Cook—that Hick donated to the FDR Library. My first, surprised thought was, "Why haven't I heard about Hickok before now?" My second thought was, "Duh. Women loving women—of course. It's one of those stories that's always buried in the slush pile."

I immediately went in search of Hick's biography, written by Doris Faber and published in 1980, two years after the letters were released. I was dumbfounded when I read it. "This isn't a biography," I thought. "It's a hatchet job." The book created an image of Hick so unattractive and unpleasant that nobody would believe that the First Lady of the World could love her.

I was briefly tempted to undertake a biography. But I'm a novelist, not a biographer, and the compelling story, the *real* story, wasn't in the facts of Hick's life but in the reality of her long and intimate relationship to Eleanor. What brought them together, I wondered? What *held* them together over thirty tumultuous years? What needs did each satisfy in the other? What were they—together, as a couple—that they weren't, as individuals? That's the story I wanted to tell.

**How important is history to your stories?**

I'm more interested in her stories than I am in histories—stories of women who have set out to do things, discover things, make their way in a man's world, even change that world and the people in it. I am fascinated by women who are their own agents, who live lives that are different, lives that make a difference, in all historical periods. Unfortunately, history—that is, our public memory, the culture's corporate record of events and ideas—is not only written by the winners but written by the *men* who

have won. The stories of women who counted for something are usually hidden in history, behind his stories, because their achievements challenge commonly-accepted beliefs about how women are supposed to behave.

I'm fascinated by women's hidden stories. I spend a lot of time digging around in private, unpublished histories—diaries, letters, autobiographical fragments, pieces of memoir—listening for voices that need to be heard. Silenced voices, misunderstood voices, whispers. Not history. Her stories.

### **How do you undertake your research?**

People who write historical fiction have to love research, because there's such a lot of it. Over the years, I've written about Beatrix Potter, Rose Wilder Lane, Jennie Churchill, Lily Langtry, and many others. All of them have required research to recreate the political, historical, economic, and cultural contexts within which the fictional story unfolds. Biographical fiction, which toes a delicate line between acknowledged fact and imagined truth, creates its own special research demands. And biographical fiction about a well-known, much-admired woman is extraordinarily challenging.

For this project—the story of Lorena Hickok and Eleanor Roosevelt—I started in the usual place: by reading everything there is to read. There isn't much published material about Hick, except for brief introductions to her Depression-era investigative reports to Harry Hopkins and an inadequate biography. But the Roosevelts are the subject of dozens of books, so I ended up with a full bookcase. I always do a great deal of background research in print and online sources, as well as visiting key locations. Then I work on a need-to-know basis, to avoid losing the reader in a morass of facts. That said, when you're writing about the First Lady of the World (as Harry Truman called her), you simply have to get the facts right. The fiction needs to fit within the boundaries of what's real: what people know, or think they know, about Mrs. Roosevelt.

But the real story, the private story of the friendship of Eleanor and Hick challenges what most people think they know. And since I'm interested in women's hidden stories, what I'm chiefly after are unpublished documents. It is our great good fortune that Hick, who clearly wanted the story to be told, donated her collection of letters and other documents to the FDR Presidential Library: the letters tell the story. The experience of reading them is very much like listening to hundreds of hours of private, intimate conversation. I found myself pulled deeply into the worlds that Hick and Eleanor shared. That's when the real questions began to arise. *Who are* these women, behind the personas history has created for them? What do they want, what do they need? What are they afraid of? What is it they have to learn? Where is the *real* story, the hidden story? These are the questions that take us deep into the imaginative heart of fiction, but keep us within the boundaries established by the biographical and historical facts that research can discover.

### **What is one of the greatest misconceptions about Eleanor and Lorena?**

There are so many, it's hard to narrow it down to just one. The most unfortunate misconception was fostered by Doris Faber through her misrepresentations of both Hick and Eleanor in *The Life of Lorena Hickok, E.R.'s Friend*. Hick is mischaracterized as a clownish, needy, emotionally unstable woman whom

the kindly, deeply sympathetic Eleanor took under her wing and supported financially, long after the initial affection (never expressed in any physical way) had run its course. Hick's substantial early achievements as a woman in the man's world of journalism and her later accomplishments as an author (seven books, written in a ten-year period of declining health) are overlooked. She is described as "bereft" after being forced to "give up" her Associated Press work and her life as "totally destroyed" by her love for Eleanor. Not so! Hick was a sophisticated professional woman who chose which direction her life would take. Yes, she was changed by her friendship with the First Lady, but she was enriched by it, too, and she understood—and valued—the difference.

### **How do you strike a balance between depicting the reality of the times with the needs of fiction?**

When I began to work on this project, I decided that I would stay as close as I could to the reality of the women's relationship and other "facts" about their lives and times. I would fill the gaps between what is known and verifiable with my own imagined story, created (as Norman Mailer says at the end of *Armies of the Night*) by the "enhancement of the real, the unverified, and the wholly fictional."

For instance, Hick's several encounters with FDR's "left hook" are fictional. But they are built on documented occasions of Roosevelt's duplicitous dealings with both friends and enemies, such as his little known stage-management of the marriage of ER's bodyguard Earl Miller to a 17-year-old girl in order to deflect the press interest in ER's relationship with Miller. As Hick understands it, the deal was sweetened by a new job in the New York prison system and the gift of a piece of land near Val-Kill. She isn't surprised, then, when FDR and his adviser, Louis Howe, connive to separate her and Eleanor by offering her high-paying a job on the road, as Harry Hopkins' chief investigative reporter. And she understands better than anyone else why ER's young soldier-friend, Joe Lash, has been sent to the Pacific after a weekend with the First Lady in a Chicago hotel room bugged by Army Intelligence. A novelist enjoys the freedom to paint a portrait of people, their fears and motivations and secret hopes, that can be more subtly detailed and true-to-life than one created by the biographer or social historian.

### **What do you hope readers take away from your work?**

I hope they will see how a passionate relationship between two extraordinary women—one with a deeply-felt need for personal privacy, the other with a deepening awareness of her transformative opportunities for public service—can evolve into a lifelong commitment. I would like them to know something of the historical events within which Hick and Eleanor shaped their lives, together and separately, and understand why Hick felt that their story should be told. It's a wonderful story of two women who followed their hearts, a complex, multi-layered story of love, longing, intrigue, and compassion.

### **Hick made quite a name for herself as an AP journalist, and later as an investigative reporter for Harry Hopkins at the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Tell us something about that.**

Hick was a woman who went through life with her elbows out. She began working as a journalist at the *Battle Creek Journal* in 1913, just 19. Two years later, she moved to the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, briefly to the *New York Tribune*, then (in 1918), to the *Minneapolis Tribune*, where she quickly earned her stripes

as a reporter, feature writer, and Sunday editor. In an unusual move, her editor assigned her to the sports desk. Her breezy, conversational style was new to sports journalism, and as a female sportswriter, her work was groundbreaking.

In 1927, Hick went back to New York, first to the tabloid *Mirror* and then to the Associated Press, the first woman to be hired in the flagship New York bureau. Fearless and energetic, she quickly earned a by-line. In her first year at the AP, she covered the sinking of the steamship *Vestris*, becoming the first woman to have a bylined front page story in the *New York Times*. An investigative reporter, she covered politics (FDR's election as New York governor in 1928); political corruption (the downfall of New York mayor Jimmy Walker and the hugely complicated trial of banker Charles E. Mitchell); and sensational crime (the Lindbergh baby kidnapping). I've found her bylined stories in hundreds of newspapers across the country, and almost every story is a standout.

In 1933, Hick left the AP to work for Harry Hopkins, the director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. For the next two years, she traveled across the country, looking at government-sponsored relief programs and reporting on Depression-era conditions in 32 states. Her nearly 80 confidential FERA reports, written in bleak hotel rooms late at night, provide us with vivid, no-holds-barred descriptions of the appalling—and yet heroic—plight of millions of destitute Americans. She felt their anguish. Even now, reading her reports, we can feel it, too.