

## A LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE

Elizabeth Case in her own words, interviewed by Georgia Jones in 2003.

Summary: Elizabeth Case born July 24, 1930 ~ died March 23, 2006

Poet and “Mother of the Beat Generation”

First female animator to work for the Walt Disney Studios (“Sleeping Beauty”)

Muralist

When they said Ginsberg died, I didn't care. I know that he and Lennie Bruce both used the magic "F" word for supposed shock effect. I found that dull beyond belief.

Drugs were coming in. People were not viewing Beats as an end to war or a protest against the atomic bomb, but as a drug scene. I found that horrific, so I, finally, fled! Before I took off though, I was booked all over, San Francisco and L.A.

Actually, I had to be talked into performing. I was not ready to read anyway. I had enormous stage fright. I didn't relish any of my readings. I didn't enjoy it at all. I did it because I wanted to see an end to atomic proliferation. The H-Bomb was on the world-stage at that point.

There were a lot of young people involved in "being Beat" and I was talking about and against The Bomb, which was a big issue at the time. I was perceived as taking the role of "Mom watching out for the kids, scolding." In the Los Angeles area, it was called The Beat Generation. In San Francisco, they were called Beatniks. Different terminology. The Los Angeles scene was dark and shadowy and more moody. People wore heavy eye makeup. Even though I was only 28 years old, I was looked at as an "older" woman in this young people's arena. So they gave me the tag: **Mother of the Beat Generation**. Herb Caen called me Big Mama Zwicker. A lot of people tried to call themselves The Father of the Beat Generation, or the Founder of the Beat Generation, but this was the tag they gave me. I didn't proclaim myself this. I thought it was odd, but I wasn't uncomfortable with it. I wore my capes and my sandals and my dark eye makeup and appeared where they told me to appear.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti literally threw me out of his City Lights bookstore. He wasn't going to have any blankety-blank women or women's poetry, drivel. But in 1958 I was the only one in San Francisco doing poetry readings. I was reading at a nightclub, at a time when the nightclubs were folding. Coffee shops were taking over. I don't know where the other poets were. I didn't share a bill with any other poets. *There was Maya Angelou, who wasn't known at that time...* Not as a poet! Not back then. She was a singer, one of the most wonderful performers I've ever seen. She was beautiful, talented and brilliant. She generously offered to sing accompaniment at my very first poetry concert! Trying to encourage me, I read, she sang acapella, and moved around the stage as I stood at the lectern. An amazing memory I have of that!

She taught me that you can't be color blind. I was raised color blind and that was good, but not good enough. She showed me that I had to be more active, take a stand somehow. I really like it that everyone is different, and I want the "differences" to be welcomed embraced!

She was key. This wonderful woman. I don't know why she bothered to talk to me and she probably doesn't remember me. But somebody having such a point of view, and so educated, so well-spoken she was one thought-full human being!

I followed her over the years. Tried to paint a picture of her once: I couldn't do her eyes. Her eyes are fathomless, impenetrable. Full of mysteries, things that I would never see much less understand.

My work was affected by personal events, not by people. When I was a child I saw that very famous picture of an atom bomb explosion on the front page of the "Los Angeles Times" the blast looked like a human face. That affected me! I read Krishnamurti and Ouspensky's "Tertium Organum", I read a lot of Corbusier. I was always a reader. I was always hungry for information. But personal life dictated most everything I did, or thought. My having children, where I lived. I always sought a village. I dislike suburbia. I dislike the 9-5 world. I didn't fit into the PTA.

I chose to be in villages where people tried to maintain simpler lives. I thought it was possible to live a simple life. I experienced a lot of joy in the Quaker community in Pennsylvania. The Quakers are a highly effective minority group. They believe in concord. Everybody has to agree. It can't be majority rule. It's got to be total accord.

It's active non-violence. Stand up. Get counted. Get knocked down. Get back up. Get counted. It's what you have to say that needs to be wrestled with. Their meetings for worship, of course, are silent, but the meetings for discussion where they hash over issues (they used to call them "topics") are quite lively. If nobody agrees the topic is shelved I found that very influential for me and for my children.

I really wanted my kids to find the truth of being, not affectation and false values. Like money, position, society, gentry like being white, race! I didn't want my kids in a community that wasn't integrated and thoughtful.

At that time it was important to have a sense of social responsibility. There were wrongs that had to be righted. In fact I developed a program there, called "A Gift for the World," which embraced differences. Embracing differences certainly takes precedence over being color-blind. Ultimately, I think everybody should be color-blind. In the meantime there's work to be done.

I think the sound of a voice is difficult to preserve. A voice and isn't poetry a voice? has a more fragile life. I don't know if it's something that can be preserved. I think poetry is something that gets sent along. I don't say anything different from what has been said before. A poet can't be judgmental, but can only maintain the words that have to be said

in each time. I don't think you can preserve poetry. I don't think you can preserve a painting, either. It can be changed. It can be moved. It can be brought along, and remembered.

I'm passing it along whether it's in paint, or in pencil or in computers. I'm passing along that which I heard. That which I dreamed. A lot of times I like to think, especially when I'm teaching, that I'm a carrier, or a transmitter, because those images that I talk about and those images that I see in my mind's eye are in being passed along. They're not independent of or limited to one person's life.

Mine was just a little voice. But somebody had to say something!

Nobody in my personal life ever looked at my pictures or read my books or read my poems or asked me any questions about what I was doing. Nobody even said, "What are you doing?" I fulfilled whatever those things are, called chores. And I lived a parallel life.

*Elizabeth Case was both poet and painter. Her life reached heights and notable landmarks in both areas of achievement. In her own words:*

I go down screaming though... I reserve the right to a voice! My grandmothers were bloomer-girls and suffragettes.

I just realized this yesterday. I just realized I lived a parallel life! Nothing interfered with it. Well, yes, there were people who painted over my paintings and got rid of them and hrew them out and broke them. I encountered many disasters. It wasn't personal. It didn't stop me.

I think that it's interesting, don't you, that there was nothing to interfere with what I was doing. There was a lot of interference after it was finished, but not in the course of doing. Nobody said, "What are you doing? I must stop you." Or, "Women don't do that." Or, "You don't do that." There was nobody stopping my flow. I was alone in that room for a lifetime. If I wasn't, I was sent back there. I don't know how to explain it.

I have no idea why I do both. I could never illustrate my poetry or paint anything I was writing about. They're two distinct entities. I always drew; I always wrote. But I was in bed a lot until I was eight.

I didn't go to school for a couple of years ear pain, mastoiditis. I spent a lot of time in my head making images on the wall, and in addition I was isolated, quarantined. Nobody came into my room. My father hung a doll on my door and danced the doll on his way out to the Rainbow Room at the Waldorf when he was announcing. That's when we lived on the East Coast, and had a family life.

In 1956 I had just divorced and had to go to work. I was living in Glendora, California. One Sunday I opened the "Los Angeles Times", to the help wanted. It was divided back

then into men and women. I was reading men's jobs and women's jobs. Nobody ever said I couldn't I never had any boundaries. I did a lot of things that other people didn't because I didn't know better.

I found an ad that said "Fine artist wanted" for Disney studios. I called and made an appointment to show my portfolio. I didn't even know what a portfolio was and had to go buy one. I put in a lot of stuff from art school and also some "cute" drawings. I added what I consider now as very amateur work, as well as some copies of work that was in the college museum.

I took it to Burbank and in the interview they asked me, "Do you have another source of income? We don't pay very much." It was \$32 or \$35 a week, and I assured them that I had child support. Everybody was very honest. They telegraphed me over the weekend that I was hired.

I found out later that it was an experiment. They were looking for fine artists and they still do. They want people who can draw; not people who cartoon. You have to know how to interpret human movement. If you are drawing a teapot, that nose has to twitch. The ears have to go back and forth like flaps.

I did birds in "Sleeping Beauty." I studied how birds fly in the research library. I developed a bird consciousness. Then I did the jester with stripes sleeves the stripes are very difficult. The day the movie was finished, we were all laid off. I was the last one laid off (my last name at that time started with a "Z"). They offered me work in layout. I was crushed. I couldn't imagine life without animation. I didn't want any other work there, even for more money.

I was painting murals while I was there and before I went there. I always saw things on the bare walls. When I had a high fever I was much too weak to hold a book, or a doll. So I would follow the stucco patterns on the wall, literally tracing them with my finger on the sheet. I called them "islands." As I traced them they would move back and forth it was negative space. I would see something I had read about, like a foreign country and would wonder if it was shaped like that. I exercised my fingers while envisioning things and I think this manual activity was that which made me draw, and imagine things. Because when you're doing poetry you're imagining scenes. My poetry, in particular, is imagining what it would be like if we didn't have X, Y, and Z.

In the first house I lived in as a married woman, I painted murals on every wall. Daisies in the kitchen, a big religious scene in the living room, circus trains in the baby's bedroom. And the first thing my husband did when we moved out was paint over the walls so the house would sell better.

After that, I was asked to paint a mural for the Church of the Good Shepherd," so I painted a good shepherd. It took me about a year.

I was working on an 11-foot ladder. You don't want to just put the mural on the surface where it could chip off. You want it to pervade at least an eighth of an inch. So I scratched the wall thoroughly and then used a warm wax medium to penetrate the wall.

I came back a few years later and somebody said "Where is your mural at the church?" And I said "It was in perpetuity; what do you mean where is my mural?" We went up there. One whole section was boarded up and painted and there were electrical fixtures on it. I'm not usually proud of a piece of a painting but I felt so good about that particular mural.

They have a wonderful minister now. She asked me to tell the story of the mural; they are thinking about restoring it. What happened was a section of the roof had leaked, and there was so much damage to the mural they were going to hire another artist to repair it. They said they couldn't find me. They couldn't find me? At that time I was five miles away. That would be a welcome project.

I did a mural on a long wall in a banquet room in the Palisadeum restaurant. They wanted it sort of semi-abstract so I used their plants, their silverware, their glasses, and I wove it of yellows and gold, but mostly blues. It was one of the strongest decorative pieces I've ever done. Later somebody said "Where's the one at the Palisadeum?" I said, "What do you mean?" They said, "It's gone." They had covered it with wallpaper.

Then I did a 16-foot mural on the history of typography in New York City for a corporation. I made sure that it was on Masonite panels that had been installed on boards. A few years later they called me. They were bankrupt and asked if I wanted it back. "If you can find a buyer in the next week it's yours." Somebody told me that a nearby technical school had a science wing. I called the director and he said they'd have to see it and I said "It's only going to be up one more day." A friend of mine who was handy with a power saw and I were going up and saw it apart and take the four panels and load them in her van. I said "You have one last chance to see it." I didn't expect any response from them, but the principal and the director of the school came up in suits and they got off the elevator and here's the mural. And they said "Oh! " But they weren't funded to buy it. I said "What about trading me an education in computers?" So we did a little bartering and the painting is now permanently installed in the Bergen County Technical School's Academy for Science and Technology wing in Hackensack, New Jersey.

I was an official Navy combat artist. In the mid-70s. As a GS-15, I was on invitational orders from the Secretary of the Navy to "Observe and Be Prepared to Paint" at the New London Submarine Base. It is a public information program, using fine art to demonstrate Navy events and operations. It does seem at odds, an anti-nuclear poet painting a torpedo painting, a painting which has in the past hung in the Pentagon.

People ask, "How could you reconcile that with your peaceful point of view?" Well, that comes from some Quaker influence. You have to have your ear to the railroad. You have to know what the fight is. You have to guard that which is good. I believe in preparation. I can't condone destruction, but I approve of protection.

How do you reconcile that? If you don't know what's going on, you're worse off than a person with or without a bomb. You could be on the short end of a bomb and not know until it blows off your shoes. As remote as I am here, I still know when there's something happening in the world that spells war or danger and it's time for me to pay attention not that I can do anything.

The association I've had with the nuclear concept has meant that, like any conscious person, I've had to wrestle with fear, intelligence, the human condition, mortality, my belief structure. I'm not alone, and it doesn't run my life, it's just another thread and another avenue to personal development that a lot of people are denied or will deny themselves. I'm lucky that my life has included such things because a lot of people have never been on an atomic submarine. I'm like a boy. I get to go in the place in the books that the boys read. Down to the sea in ships. Actually under the sea.

*One of the exciting things that happened to Elizabeth Case in 2003 was the rededication of one of her most beautiful murals, "The Wrong Elf" in the Old Bridge (New Jersey) Library.*

That story is fun. Actually, we didn't sign the contract until the day the mural was dedicated, which is very amusing. Contracts are antithetical to art! They are different kinds of thinking.

I definitely was not going to do such a mural without its being "in perpetuity." To do this, we all agreed to give the copyright to the children of Old Bridge. As long as there was a child in the town of Old Bridge, that child would own the copyright to the mural.

It's the history of children's literature. The composition is based on the infinity sign and that is the yellow brick road. All of the characterizations and action of the mural take place around the yellow brick road. I made the paint for that wall. I ground the pigment, and made the egg emulsion for an egg tempera painting. Busloads of children came to watch me paint on the ladder.

One day I was up on the ladder and a woman came in with her fretful child and said, "Stay here. I'm going to go and get a book." The kid said, "NO!" And the woman repeated, "Stay! Watch the nice lady paint the wall!" "NO!" Again she said, "Watch the lady paint the wall. It's all your friends." So the little kid stood there. I was painting, and he looks at the wall and then up at me. He was looking at the Shoemaker's Elf. (Because of copyrights, I had to work with derivative art in public domain. I had permission from Maurice Sendak, and other contemporary artists. The Shoemaker's Elf was adapted from a series of block prints that I had in my books as a child, when I was sick in bed, reading. So for me to paint these images was thrilling.)

This little kid is looking back and forth between me and The Shoemaker's Elf and he says, "It's the wrong elf!" Aaah! He was absolutely right, because in his day and age, the elves are from Disney and they don't look like that. He knew it was an elf, but he knew it

wasn't his elf. He was furious. Not just at his mother, leaving him to watch the lady paint the wall, but it was the wrong elf. So that is what I named the mural, The Wrong Elf.

Ten years later they built a new library that covers an entire acre, and did not make arrangements to relocate the mural in the new library. It was abandoned. I couldn't go and have a fit, because ego works against itself. But it was supposed to be a "forever" painting. It hadn't been that long. The only thing I could do was let it be known that I cared, and that to leave it behind was in breach of contract. To have said so would have sounded like a threat, and I didn't want to do that. But I was crushed,

As it turned out, the children of the township started putting their dimes in a box called Save the Mural Box. There were people who were in favor of this mural. Yet, one woman said, "Well, she's not Picasso!"

That remark was quoted in the newspaper. I was amazed at some of the remarks as to why it shouldn't be brought along. One was the fact that it was impossible to resituate it without a wall to hold it. You couldn't nail it into air. This huge acre building with soaring buttresses fantastic ceilings...unreachable. Not only that, but the architect said it was in an "earthquake zone," and had to be secured. I said in earthquake zones it has to be flexible. You could hang it with wire to the ceiling and just anchor it.

When they finally decided it could be moved they did not remove the panels from the studding. They riveted out the steel studding and took the whole wall. They did not know at the last cut whether the mural would crash to the ground or come down with the studding onto the dollies that they had prepared for it. After they removed it from the wall in this desolated area that it had been left in, everybody cheered and shouted.

There were seven or eight big husky men and they're putting it on these dollies to sail it up the hill to the new building! This 17-foot wall looked like a sail on a roller skate. These men are saying, "It's Humpty Dumpty! It's...oh, I know, Little Toot!" They're all making these wonderful noises about the painting. They had to take the doors off to get it into the children's area. We were a little troop of people going to move the painting. As we rounded the corner, little children sitting at tables in the Children's Reading Room looked up and said, "Oh! Here comes Humpty!"

My heart was so full that the mural was welcomed back to its place. They left it leaning against the wall until the architect designed an ingenious method of lacing it. You couldn't use a hammer and nails or a riveting gun on the studs, because of the fragile nature of the gesso and the egg tempera. The mural had been painted under artificial light, and had never seen daylight. When it was flooded with sunlight in the room the architect had designed, it was absolutely like sparkling jewels. The color was so incredibly alive. It was just bathed in light though the windows have UV protection (works for the pigment).

The architect laced it to the wall and put some kind of a frame around it. It's on the floor instead of elevated, and a small child can have the feeling that he's going to walk into it. It is an entirely different picture from the one I painted. It has been saved. It should last.

I started art school at the Art Student's League with William Zorach, the sculptor, because my major gift is sculpturing. All that movement with my hands those years when I was sick, studying those images. I have a certain dexterity. I have, on the other side, an appreciation for the monumental. I say now, "Well, the only thing I want to do is paint murals." But we're talking about what happened after sculpture, which was my gift. I could do it. But. Every single thing I ever sculptured turned out...cute. It ruined me because what I love is the monumental. What I did was good form, movement but, cute. Sad.

I was once at an art show, talking to Joan Altabe, an outstanding painter, master of the monumental in her art. I told her I just can't deal with the fact that what I do and what I love are so diametrically opposed. She said, "The day you realize that it's not a weakness, but your strength as a storyteller, is the day you'll be free from that feeling."

After that conversation, I finished up that particular piece and had it bronzed. So I allowed the storyteller to take over. I did the mural on the History of Children's Literature. I allow myself to be a storyteller now. Maybe that's why I'm not dropping the thread of poetry through my life. It's very strange the paintings and the sculpture and the poetry are all beginning to tell the same story.

*In 2003 her college invited her back for a special 50 year retrospective showing of her work.*

Packing more than 51 paintings in the Cruiser was a hoot...unpacking resembled a car of clowns at a circus...I had students in a water bucket line carrying them into the gallery. It was professionally hung by a young man with a background in hanging for Steubens in Corning and other prestigious places. I like the idea he hung them high—gives a more imposing stance, rather than eye level. I couldn't put in anything larger than 48" so some of my bigger pieces still have never been seen.

Elmira was the first women's college to give a degree equivalent to that of a man's, it is an appropriate gift — the presentation will be on the 6th. They are coed now, but the 50th anniversary was a girlie gala. There will be a closing ceremony where I give them a couple pieces for their permanent collection, mainly the triptych mural design "History of Women Voting"—about 89" wide, to quarter-inch scale, the center panel to be 40 feet with a 20 foot panel on either side. Plus two full-scale charcoal sketches.

The theme of the 50th reunion was "hats off to Elmira" so I put in everything I had of hats, with two extra watercolors, hat paintings that didn't fit in the show, displayed for the reception on the entry table and punch table. The 'star' of the show was my self-portrait in a hat—each exhibition has one dominant painting and that was it...very funny...because they had many reunion classes admiring it who had never known me.



The fifty years of paintings demonstrate the many places I have lived and reflected in my work, the many styles I have tried on, the few I have kept. Eclectic is always the word used to describe any retrospective of mine, but I think of it as a life interrupted, and during each hiatus I store up things ramaging to get out when their turn comes and I paint again. The oil paintings are intense and I use a chiarascuro...try to pull light out of the dark so to speak. Many people remark that they are 'dark.' On the other hand, my watercolors are always full of light, and rarely reflect the intensity of the oils, and tempera and oils.

You know, watercolor is 'for the moment,' and rarely involves heavy attention to detail—whereas oil is where you try to bring out meaning as well as those interpretations of people as well as a sense of place. I am in the American Genre in the oils...you can see my influences: Reginald Marsh as well as Homer.

The wall of pencils, pen and inks have as much variety as you might imagine, Disney outtakes...a prince, jester, Aurora, birds...submarine scenes, horses, Christmas tree, Downtown NY at the turn of the century—whatever comes to mind, rendered to a fair-thee-well.

*For the "Mother of the Beat Generation" the beat does still go on in the extraordinary road she set for herself laying alone in a bed looking at blank walls.*