DESIGNATED DAUGHTERS: Book Club Discussion Guide

Irrelevant factoid: In 2003, a preening pintail duck decoy carved by Elmer Crowell (1862-1952) sold at auction for $801,500.

Margaret Maron on the writing of Designated Daughters: This book was inspired by a friend whose mother was dying. She had been comatose for several days and death was expected at any time. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and began talking. Not to anyone in the room but to people in her past. More specifically, to her long-dead husband. "It was as if she'd been carried back in time to when they were courting," said my friend. "I got to watch my mother fall in love with my father all over again."

Her story seized my imagination and being a mystery writer, my "What if—?" curiosity kicked in. What if she had witnessed a crime in the past? What if she knew long-buried secrets? What if someone at her bedside was afraid she might reveal those secrets? So I set the scene with Deborah Knott's dying Aunt Rachel, filled the hospice room with Rachel's friends and relatives, and then let someone put a pillow over Rachel's face. Now the question becomes "Who kills a dying woman? And why?"

I thought I knew, but the more I learned about the secrets Rachel knew, the more things started changing. I thought the killer was someone completely different and the real killer's identity surprised me almost as much as it did Deborah.

DISCUSSION POINTS:

1. A "designated daughter" is one who by choice or by default winds up being someone's caregiver. That someone is usually an elderly relative, a mother or father, and the burden often lands on a woman. But not always. Many men have stepped up to the plate. And, of course, it's not always someone elderly. Special needs children can need that same level of care, but for the purposes of this book, the focus is on the elderly. Have you been a caregiver for someone?

2. The chapter captions in this book are all quotations from Cicero. Why do you suppose he was chosen instead of another source? Are the quotes pertinent?

3. Among the issues in this book are scams perpetrated on the elderly, appraisers who cheat, and domestic violence. Keeping in mind that when the deacons of Kitty Byrd's church took matters into their own hands, this was something that had happened fifty years ago. How would today's deacons handle it?

4. One of Deborah's court cases is a civil suit. A brother sues his sister for a larger share of their mother's estate. Deborah quotes that old adage "Never say you really know someone till you've divided an inheritance with him." Is this true? Have you had to settle a parent's estate? What would you do differently if you had it to do over?

5. Often, children think they know all there is to know about their parents until cleaning out the house. This is when they often realize that there are things they never asked. Have you ever wished you could speak to one of your deceased relatives and ask the questions no one else alive can now answer?

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