DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON BLESS THE BIRDS FOR BOOK GROUPS

1. What inspired your award-winning memoir, Bless the Birds: Living With Love in a Time of Dying*?*

Bless the Birds arose from of the life-experiences my late husband, Richard, and I had with his terminal brain cancer, and my passionate belief that our culture needs to learn to embrace the endings of our lives with the same tenderness we do our beginnings. Bless the Birds is a love story, a tale of how we humans can rise to be our best selves when the world goes crazy on us, whether because of a pandemic like COVID-19, deadly racism, or the crisis of our planet burning. It's about finding a way to act with love when the worst happens, and learning to appreciate our imperfect selves, along with the miracle of life on this numinous earth. It's also a journey story chronicling the sometimes scary, sometimes funny times in the 4,000-mile road trip along the Pacific Coast my late husband and I took as our belated honeymoon when we learned Richard's cancer was terminal. That trip was our chance to reaffirm our vow to live with love and kindness no matter what came our way. And we did!

2. And the birds in the title?

The birds in the title are both illusory and real. The illusory birds appeared when my late husband Richard's brain misfired, taking our marriage of nearly 30 years down a terrifying and unimagined path into terminal brain cancer. We were heading for a two-week artist-writer residency at a remote cabin in Colorado's San Juan Mountains, when he suddenly asked, "What's with all the birds?"

I looked around with eyes trained by growing up in a birdwatching family, and saw no birds. As Richard described the thousands of avian forms he could see, tiny birds perched on each blade of grass along the roadside, birds wing-to-wing crowding the barbwire fences and utility wires, giant birds on the rims of distant mesas, my skin crawled. His birds were not real. They were, we learned later, hallucinations produced by a deadly tumor growing in his brain. Those birds sent us to the hospital in time for him to be diagnosed and for us to have more than two years of living before he died. If we had not heeded them, the traumatic brain-swelling that caused the avian hallucinations would have killed him within days. So I bless the birds for giving us time to learn how to live with the end of his life. Richard also watched birds, so the visions were very appropriate to who he was.

3. You have described your book as being both personal and political. How so?

"The personal is political" is a feminist slogan from the 1970s. Meaning that how we live our lives affects the culture and society we are part of. The personal part of *Bless the Birds* is the time of dying it chronicles, both Richard's death from brain cancer and my mother's death from rheumatoid arthritis. I was the primary caregiver for both of them through their deaths in the same year. "Midwifing" two good deaths taught me a lot about how to live through our endings with as much grace and compassion as possible.

The political part is a re-envisioning of how we handle natural death, of learning how to, if not embrace it, at least stop fighting or denying it. We will all die. Death is part of the cycle of life, and learning how to live with it with some modicum of grace will help us learn to live with the other massive changes shaping our world and our lives, from COVID-19 and our tardy reckoning of racism, to the climate crisis that will shape our time on this planet for many generations. If we can rise to be our best selves and live generously in the worst times, the outcome will be better for all of us.

Caretaking is an awesome responsibility. How did you learn the essentials?
I'm female. I've been caregiving my whole life, from carefully digging up and transplanting wildflowers from vacant lots scheduled for development to tending stray dogs to midwifing my loved one's deaths. It's all part of loving this life with a whole heart, the darkness and the light.

4. So much of your book is about "holding gratitude for what you are losing in the same heart space with grief and anger." How difficult is it to stay on that path?
Very. But it gets less difficult with practice. It's a mind-exercise really, and spending time each day finding space to love oneself helps enormously with learning to embrace the contradictions—the yin and yang—that are inherent in life.

5. You chose to end each chapter with a haiku. Can you talk about the place of haiku in your life and in Bless the Birds in particular?
I started writing haiku in my head about 20 years ago as a way to remember bits of beauty or interest I spotted on long road-trips. I could capture the moment in that brief three-line form when I couldn't get Richard, my lead-footed-love, to slow and stop. In time, the haiku became a daily practice of awareness, and my offering to others on social media. As I wrote in *Bless the Birds*, "I turn to poetry the way I suppose some turn to prayer, as a way to express wonder and gratitude, explore what I do not understand, and comfort myself when the vastness of existence becomes overwhelming."

6. W*hat made you who you are?*
My childhood. I was born in northern Illinois to a family culture rooted in science and the arts and focused on the study of nature, wild or domestic. My clan is small—both of my parents were only children—so it was just the four of us, my older brother, me, and our parents. Mom and Dad loved the outdoors, and never hesitated to take my brother and me out of school for long trips to explore the wonders of North America and beyond. We traveled in a homemade camper that my granddad, a design engineer, helped Dad customize from a stripped down tradesman's van, and used Army surplus equipment and hand-me-downs. I didn't have a new pair of hiking boots until I bought my own in college.

I was just under two years old when I took my first hike, according to my father's carefully typed trip journal, a five-mile trek along a "mostly level" trail above the Illinois River. Dad added proudly that I went the whole way under my own power, "without once needing to be carried." All I remember from the day is the earthy and spicy fragrance of the deciduous woods, and the musty smell of the wool upholstery of the back seat of the family Chevy coupe where I stretched out and fell fast asleep head-to-head with my brother on the ride home.

I went to school (and got good grades, because that was expected), and was active in church groups and Girl Scouts, but my most vivid childhood memories revolve around our family trips, weekend expeditions to state parks and nature preserves near our suburban Illinois home, along with months-long summer road-trips where we wandered the byways of the West, camping in remote mountain ranges, deserts, canyons and along wild ocean shores. We collected rocks and seashells, and identified wildflowers, lizards and snakes, mammals big and small, and birds. My brother and I might skip school on those trips, but with an educator mom, we didn't skip learning: our classroom was the outdoors, our lessons gained from all we experienced, augmented by interpretive programs at state and national parks.

Those years on the road and studying nature shaped me. I thought I would become an artist like my great-grandmother JV Cannon, a noted California impressionist painter and one of the founders of the Carmel art colony. I studied photography through high school and into college, but ended up in science like my botanist great-granddad, Dr. William Cannon (JV's husband). He studied deserts around the world, moving to Tucson in 1903 to oversee a brand-new desert research facility that still exists and is part of University of Arizona.

Plants are my people, my closest kin after humans, so it made sense for me to go into botany when I decided I wouldn't be able to make a living as an artist. And becoming a field ecologist—a botanist who studies the interrelationships between plants, animals, and landscapes—made sense because I didn't want to end up in a lab. I needed work that would take me outdoors most of the time. And I wanted to live in the West where sagebrush perfumes the air and mountains line at least one horizon. I finagled a seasonal job in Yellowstone National Park when I was still an undergraduate.

My fieldwork years were spent working in Yellowstone and on the Shoshone National Forest, which encompasses the whole eastern side of the Rockies in Wyoming, from the Montana line to South Pass in southern Wyoming. I studied sagebrush communities, mapped grizzly bear habitat, and researched natural fire patterns. And loved the work, until a health crisis and a divorce sent me to graduate school, and I realized that even more than collecting the data, I wanted to write the stories I could hear in that data. Which is when I decided to transition from making my living from science to making my living from writing. (I never gave up science; I just quit doing it full-time. I still do ecological restoration projects as a volunteer.)

7. When did you know you wanted to be a writer? And how did you achieve that goal?
I came to writing when I pivoted from science in grad school. I was in my mid-twenties, and was inspired by writers like Barry Lopez, Ann Zwinger, Sally Carrighar, Rachel Carson, Terry Tempest Williams and others who told the stories of the land. I talked my

way into an internship with *High Country News*, the West's pre-eminent environmental newspaper, took a few courses in writing, and studied the work of writers who inspired me and writers who didn't, analyzing what compelled me and what didn't in different kinds of writing. I am largely a self-taught writer, although my "teachers" were and are prominent writers.

Making the transition from science to writing wasn't easy—scientists are taught to be dispassionate and objective, and to write in a spare, just-the-facts, jargon-laden style that may work well for points within the academy, but is not particularly readable to the general public. And I wanted to be readable! So I studied good writing and chased freelance assignments by pitching to editors and going to conferences. I met a lot of my best contacts through connections with other writers and scientists, usually women—there is an old girls network, and I needed it, because the world of freelance writing is still very male-centric. It took me a long time to realize, for instance, that when a man was offered an assignment he always asked for more money. I always just took the assignment without negotiating, and I made less because of it. But I was raised to be a good girl. Boys were raised to ask for what they wanted.

8. What was your biggest lesson in your writing career?
The biggest thing I learned along the way was that readers loved my stories about nature even more when I wrote them in a personal voice and related them to the human world somehow. That came through really clearly when I turned in the manuscript for my third book, Barren, Wild, and Worthless: Living in the Chihuahuan Desert, a look at nature and people in the Chihuahuan Desert of southern New Mexico, west Texas, and northern Mexico. I already had a busy freelance magazine and newspaper career going, and I knew I wrote well, so I was shocked when my editor gave me back the manuscript with a single comment in red ink, all caps, scrawled across the first page: PERSONALIZE!!!! (I forget how many exclamation points he used, but it was more than three.) So I wrote myself into the story, and Barren became my first "memoir-ish" book, long before memoir was a thing. I still receive fan letters about that book, twenty-some years after it was published, and that is such a delight.

9. *What inspires your work?*
Terraphilia, a word Richard and I invented to describe what motivated his sculpting and my writing and land restoration. It means our intrinsic affection for and connection to the earth and its community of lives. As I wrote, "Without this bond, we are lonely, lacking, no longer whole." I'm a botanist who writes about humans' place in the living world as a way to reconnect us with our relatives large and small—the community of species whose interactions sustain Earth as our vibrant home.

Terraphilia permeates *Bless the Birds*: it framed our approach to Richard's brain cancer and to our whole lives. Acknowledging and drawing on our affiliation for the rest of the living world kept us grounded in the hardest moments and inspired us in the best. Making time to get regular doses of "vitamin N"—time spent outside in the wildest settings possible—brought us the physical and emotional benefits that helped us be our best selves through the worst of the journey.

I've written memoir, narrative nonfiction about nature and science, gardening, travel, and kids books. All are hymns of love to this numinous green planet.

10. *What is the best writing advice you've ever received?*
Nancy Fay, former poetry editor for a press in New Mexico, read an early draft of Walking Nature Home, my first memoir, and said succinctly, "Let the bloody story off the leash!" (Only she used a different adjective instead of bloody!) What she meant was, follow the story instead of trying lead and control it. Don't be afraid to probe the painful places, to walk with it into the dark nights and the crises. Let it sing to you and stop caring what others will think. So I did, and the story grew immensely more deep and wide and universal. That advice was invaluable through the years I worked on *Bless the Birds.*

11. *Are you working on a new book?*
Of course! In between freelance assignments, I'm working on a memoir of my life with plants called Sitting with Sagebrush. It's about what plants have to teach us, beginning with, "In dark times, grow toward the light." Which is very timely advice for us all.

12. What advice would you give to other writers?
Honor your stories, your experience, and your inner knowledge. Be fearless. If writing about something scares you, explore it (carefully). The things we are ashamed of, that frighten us, and that we avoid are often the stories that have the most power. Be yourself—don't try to be perfect. No one cares about the person who knows it all already; readers want to know the real, fallible, imperfect, unique you. Listen carefully to your inner voice. Take it slowly if you need to, a word at a time, a paragraph at a time, a page at a time. But never give up!

Last! How can readers learn more about you and your work?
Visit my website: susanjtweit.com. Follow me on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. And thank you for reading my words!

(Many thanks to writers Joan Schweighardt and Pat Bean for the interview questions.)