

CULTURE

Author Rebecca McClanahan On Grief, Caregiving, and the Tender Symbolism of Spoons

The North Carolina writer's memoir, "Light Falls on Everything," documents her experience caregiving for her parents, as they age and develop dementia.

by Andrea Richards March 25, 2026



Rebecca McClanahan: *Light Falls on Everything* | UNC Press: March 31

Dementia, for those who have a loved one experiencing it, is a strange, ever-shifting disease. The common refrain is that dementia patients die twice. Watching my mother act as a caregiver, though, for my father, who has dementia, it has become clear to me that the losses are never discrete or sequential—as with the disease, they don't follow linear time. It's simply that some days are good and some are bad, and what constitutes good and bad can change as quickly as springtime weather in North Carolina.

It's a ride, and most of us on it are looking for fellow travelers, like passengers on a plane making eye contact during turbulence. With her new memoir, *Light Falls on Everything*, out this month from the University of North Carolina Press, author [Rebecca McClanahan](#) is that kind stranger who grabs your hand when it feels all is about to be shaken from the sky.

A poet, essayist, and teacher in the MFA program at Queens University in Charlotte, McClanahan has published memoirs before—including a big, multigenerational family history.

Light Falls on Everything works at a smaller scale, with an intimate, contemplative portrait of the last years of her parents' lives—her mother, Juanita, and father, Paul—who, between them suffer from multiple falls, strokes, and dementia. Both Juanita, a former preschool teacher and mother of six, and Paul, an ex-Marine, have led rich lives, full of the complexities of parenting, gender, and aging, and McClanahan conveys their many decades together with a daughter's love and a writer's eye for wry detail.

The book begins with Paul and Juanita on the couch of their townhouse, where they moved five months earlier from their family home in Indiana to live two doors down from McClanahan and her husband. Juanita has her feet in Paul's lap—the couple has been married for almost 70 years, and the serenity of the scene is in stark contrast to the night before, when Juanita called her daughter, panicked about a stranger in her house. That stranger was Paul, whose own fits of night terrors have similarly awoken McClanahan from slumber so often that she sleeps with her "firemen clothes" next to the bed, ready to respond at a moment's notice to whatever confused state she might find her parents in.

Caregiving is brutal work. And while McClanahan never shies away from depicting the stark reality of exhaustion (not to mention the particular type of annihilation and grief one feels when they are no longer remembered by their mother), she also envisions her role as a gift, writing: "The thought of losing my parents feels unbearable; caring for them is a gift to myself. It grows out of my own need—to keep them alive as long as possible so I will not be fatherless, motherless."

Of course, by the end of the memoir, she will be exactly that—fatherless, motherless. But what unfolds between that opening moment of fleeting domestic bliss and the book's inevitable end is a world's worth of lightness and weight, darkness and light. McClanahan's poetic rendering of her role as a caregiver—a sort of psychopomp scout for the rest of us—is beautiful work.

In advance of McClanahan's April 4 reading at McIntyre's Books in Pittsboro, the INDY spoke with her about caregiving, grief, and how art can help us process our experiences. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

INDY: You're already getting some responses from early readers—how does that feel?

Rebecca McClanahan: Well, it's always scary—this is my third memoir and my 12th book. You always say, "I'm not going to do this again," but it always turns out to be rewarding. This one in particular, because so many of us are going through this at this time, where people are living longer—caregiving, it's a pretty universal topic.

I wrote the book for myself as a sort of survival technique—a form of desperate prayer, one might say, which is something to say because I call myself an equal-opportunity pantheist.

I'm a poet, but I'm also a memorizer of poems, and I have hundreds memorized because I've always reached out to works of art as my scouts. You need scouts if you're a caregiver. And I hope this book serves as a form of scout. Not that I have any wisdom; I don't. I really messed up a lot. It was a difficult journey. I made a lot of mistakes. This isn't a guidebook, as I wrote in the prelude; it's maybe a how-not-to book. But the idea that we follow them. I want the book to be a form of scout, so readers can look and go, "Damn, she had good, she was lucky."

I did because my parents were so devoted to each other. They were such decent, wonderful, loving, generous, sane people, and they allowed me to care for them—mostly.

Can you tell me about the title?

I have a sheet—I may put it on Facebook because it's kind of funny—of possible titles. People think that writers are inspired, or things just come to them. I've been a writer for 45 years, and I'm still waiting for that magic muse to appear.

But what happens instead is we [my editor and I] went through probably 15 possible titles in the years in which I was writing this, and nothing was quite right. There were catchy things that would make people open the book, but there weren't things that really touched on my experience. Then, the book's designer, Lindsay [Starr at UNC Press], read the whole book and asked me about the spoons.

I thought, oh my gosh—it's an abiding image, such a small, domestic thing. Spoons, which contain, as you see on the book's cover, spoonfuls of light. This is one of the little heartbreaking things that you'll see dementia patients and people do, and it's something my mother did. Once in a while, I'd find that my mother had wrapped up a bunch of the little spoons and put them in the little compartment of her rollator.

And I'd say, "Mother, what are you doing with these spoons?" And she'd say, "We need those when I go home." She wanted to take these spoons with her to go back to Indiana—she knew they were hers, and she wanted to go back to Indiana, where she was from. But she wanted to go back as a child to see her parents.

These spoons arrive in a couple of scenes in the book, and I'd forgotten about them. Not totally, I knew they were important—they'd broken my heart in a sweet way. It's such a domestic thing—mothers care for their babies, spooning food into their mouth. We spoon. I was a hospice volunteer for years, and spooned food into the patients' mouth as a volunteer.

I was so happy to see the cover art with those spoons, because light falls on everything, even those little spoons. That phrase came as I was rereading Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo.

This was after Mother had died and I had time to read anything—Van Gogh is describing a very dark, gray day to his brother, who had helped him so much in his career, by buying him paints and canvases. Theo really supported him, and while Van Gogh didn't use the word "depressing," that's how I think of the day. He describes how there was not a whole lot to be seen, and painters usually look for the light, right? He writes, "Still, a great deal of light falls on everything."

Light falls on everything because caregiving isn't all darkness—there are moments like that in my book, too, where the ones we're caring for to us. The caregiving goes two ways. That's the part of possibility alluded to in the subtitle, because God knows there's enough grief and darkness over the about 10 years I helped as a caregiver. And I had help; I wasn't alone. There were many moments of darkness, but there were these sparks of light.

The reason I've always gone to works of art, particularly literature, in my case, is that those things remind me that this is a universal path we are on and that if you love those you're caring for, it's going to hurt to lose them. You wish there were an easier way out. My mother was a caregiver for her parents for 12 years, for my grandfather, and he was extremely difficult at the end. I watched her; she was my first scout.

In the book, you read to your mother from what you call *The Book of Juanita*, a collection of stories she wrote about her own life before she developed dementia. It's so interesting that you retell her life to her as a story.

My mother loved to write, but of course, with six kids and a military husband, she never had time. But once we were all gone and she was free, she started taking writing classes along with other classes—and she loved to write. She belonged to a writing club until her dementia got bad. So she had written about her early life, and I gathered all of those and edited them enough just so they were in a certain order and put them together, and I'd read them.

Because she read very haltingly at the end, she wanted me to read them aloud, but of course, they're in first person from her. So if I read "I would walk to the barn with my father," she'd look at me and say, "Did I read 'I would walk to the barn, too?'" So I'd have to switch to third person and say "Juanita would walk with her father."

The basic idea behind it was—these were her memories—it was her life—so I got her to try to read it when she could. On good days, she could follow with her finger and could read them and the children's books, which were part of her life being a preschool teacher. To make a story out of her life because she did remember those early parts very well—it was the most recent 10 to 20 years that were pretty much gone to her.

There's a moment where she exclaims to your dad, "This girl knows my life better than I do!"

This is true. Yes. What's funny, "this girl" is very important because there were certain people she always knew. She always knew who Donald [my husband] was. But see, she hadn't known him as a child or as a teenager. She'd only known him as this grown man. And so he was a constant in her life, and we weren't.

I was always "the other girl." That was one of the heartbreaking things to me, because you want them to know who you are. She almost always knew my sister Claudia, although sometimes she'd call her "the girl from the North." I don't know why. My sister Jennifer was "the girl with the ponytail." Lana was "the tall girl." She would know our names, but she would know our names as the children in photographs. At one point, I was going to call the book "The Other Girl," but I didn't—decided that was putting too much emphasis on me. Also, there's a lot of books called that—murder mysteries and the like.

I don't know if you recall the place in the book where she asked me "How [do] both of you fit in the chair?—You and the girl beside you." At that point, I was so tired, I looked—maybe there is another girl here? But no, it was only me. Still, she saw two of us and said the other girl looked like me but was younger.

Many times I said to Donald, I wish I could be two people so that I could be the good daughter who always does the right thing and stays till the end, and the daughter who can go back to my own life. And I think that's a basic conflict with all caregivers who love their parents or their children or their husbands or whoever they're caring for.

That conflict was within myself—and I believe most caregivers feel it. I've been asked this a lot by people who say oh, here's this caregiving book that is about someone who abused their daughter—that's a conflict. But yours, does it have conflict? Well, you know what Faulkner said: the human heart is in conflict with itself.

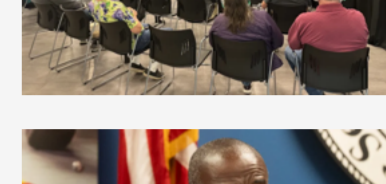
I'm with you. It's interesting just how little we know about dementia, and reading your book, I felt so much better than reading books about dementia because I saw moments I recognized, like 'Oh yeah, my Dad does that.' He doesn't always remember who we are, but he knows we're his, somehow, even if he doesn't know how.

That's a great way to put it. My nephew, at one point, on one of my darkest days, said, "She may not know us, but we know her." I think sometimes you're right—at some level, she knew we were connected. At some point, even though she would say to the hospice people when they asked, "Who is this lady beside you?" and she said, "I have no idea." But she wanted me to touch her. She would let me sing to her, and she would let me do her nails.

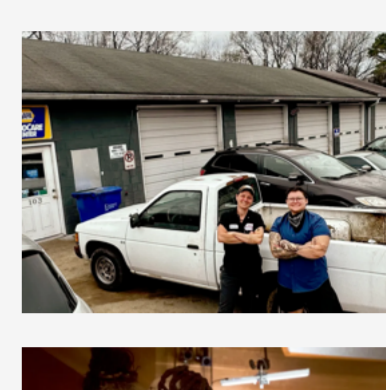
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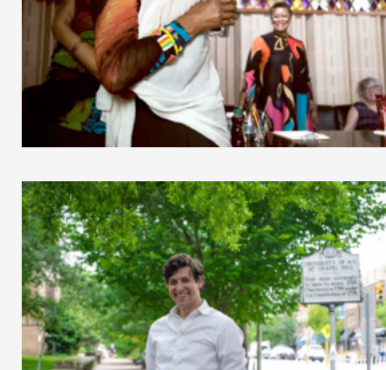
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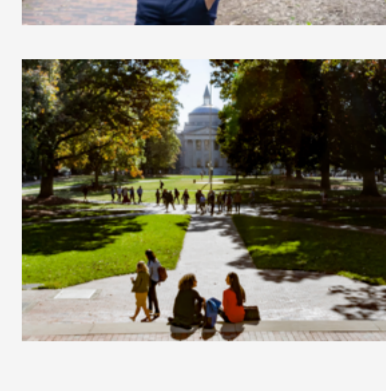
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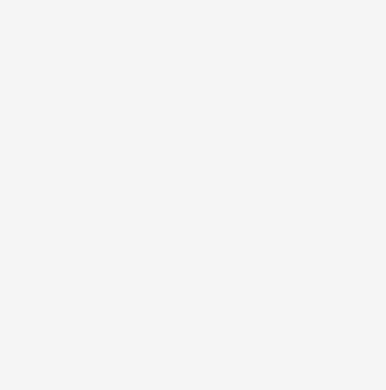
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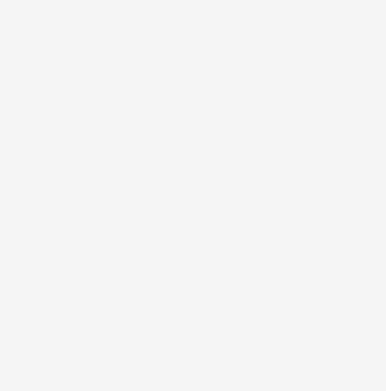
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