

the process, as it would be easier for them to heal if they didn't feel left out. Even though much of death is a mystery, we shouldn't be afraid of it.

Towards the end of the three weeks, the younger boy asked if he could speak to me. I took him outside, and he said, "Please don't tell my brother I told you, but he said that when Mommy dies he's going to kill himself." He had tears in his eyes. I asked, "How is he going to do this?" He didn't know. He told me they had not seen their father for a year and a half, and the plan was, within days after their Mommy died, they were going to be shipped off a thousand miles away to go live with him. This would mean they would be missing their Mommy, their home, their school and all their friends, to go live with someone they had been kept apart from for a long while. I promised his secret would be safe with me, although I had other ideas.

I called the boy's teachers and made them aware of what the older boy was going through. Then I asked the grandmother, without telling her what the younger boy had told me, if it would be possible for me to speak to the boys' father. The grandmother replied, "He's not welcome here." I continued in a gentle manner, asking if I could just talk to him, and she gave me permission. When I spoke to him, I didn't tell him what the younger boy had told me, but asked him if it would be possible when he arrived to pick up the boys, could he stay for a week or two so there could be a more gentle transition. To my surprise he was very open to the idea. He said his mother-in-law had never accepted the divorce, and since the boys and his daughter were living with her, he didn't feel he could intrude. He agreed to find an alternative place to stay so that he could make the transition easier for his sons.

He ended up staying three months until the end of the school year, which I thought was very admirable of him as he had had to take a leave of absence from his job to do so. During that time he reopened communications with his ex mother-in-law. He told her his wish was to send the boys to visit her each year, and that it had never been his intention to close her out of their lives, even though he had a new wife and had started a new life. The restoration of respect between their father and maternal grandmother after the death of their mother, made leaving the known for the unknown much easier for the boys. As a result, during the last two months their father was invited to stay in her home with his children.

Once given the opportunity and permission to do so, the boys used to run in excitedly and grab the lavender oil and put the music on. Before, when the boys were locked out and not allowed to participate in their mother's care, one of them couldn't see a future for himself without his mother. But that all turned around. We often forget that children also have fears and we need to respect them and let them be part of the decision making.

***Glenys Carl** has been involved in end-of-life and long-term care for adults and children since 1987. Her book, [Hold My Hand](#), tells her inspirational story of recruiting and training hundreds of volunteers in two countries to help care for her brain-injured son over a four-year period.*

Feature Article

The Facts and Fiction of Writing a Novel About Hospice

By Joe O'Connell, Author

[Evacuation Plan - A Novel From the Hospice](#)

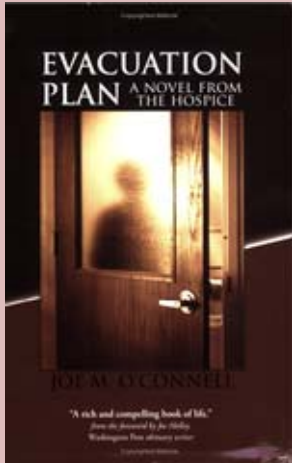
Her great-great-grandmother was squatting in an Irish outhouse, knickers to her knees, when lightning struck and ended it all. My new friend, about to turn 81 if she doesn't die first, twisted the oxygen tube into a coil, hid her chocolate eyes behind the plastic. For her it would be different. She had an evacuation plan.

I was at her bedside in Hospice Austin's Christopher House, a place where the stuff we try not to deal with piles in heaps and waits for takeoff. My own father died before I could say goodbye. A pre-dawn phone call. Speeding down the highway to the hospital. Lots of



Joe O'Connell
Author

Evacuation Plan: a novel from the hospice



Matt, a fledgling screenwriter, volunteers to work with the terminally ill in exchange for a good plot for his next script. He meets the people who work, die, and mourn in this world of last moments.

*In the novel-in-stories style of Tim O'Brien's *July July* and Charles Baxter's *The Feast of Love*, O'Connell's characters in *Evacuation Plan* reveal themselves in poignantly unfolding stories: the gambler who played a risky game involving his wife and his ex-con father; the mortician who was an unwed father-to-be; the daughter whose dying father has no clue about the night her world spun out of control; the nurse who lived among aging neighbors and struggled to hold her own family in place; the drunk who magically encountered himself as a boy. Forgiveness, joy, making the final leap.*

Evacuation Plan is the story of a world in which the clock

waiting on hard cushions as he lingered in a coma. Silence. Maybe that's why I was here.

I was one of nine writers and artists selected to spend time with the terminally ill in the cozy Christopher House, where fresh roses rest on tables next to a library of videotapes and paperback murder mysteries. In the back wing, 15 private rooms with tiny refrigerators, comfy couches and regulation hospital beds house people on their way out of this world.

My mission was to report back to you. Here goes: Patients range from infants to the elderly. If they are afraid of dying, they hide it well. Yet even the most average among them offers heavy lessons to us.

A war vet's best moment was in Vietnam when a doctor helping a pregnant woman barked, "Get over here and help." The soldier scurried to the bedside and did what he was told. "It was coming out so slow, until it was time to pop," he said, his eyes lighting with the memory.

I didn't enter Christopher House planning to write a novel set in a hospice or to save the world. I applied for the project because it sounded like great research for a mystery novel I had in mind. But the experience stuck with me, and I was inspired by the novel-in-stories form of Tim O'Brien's novel *July, July*, which tells of a 30th college reunion but wanders off into stories of what happened to individual classmates in the intervening years. I realized this was a way to tell the hospice story. I wanted the story of this place, the people who live, die and work here. The grieving families. The funeral home worker who picks up the bodies. The children and the scars they carry.

The result is my novel *Evacuation Plan* -- the title comes from the actual building evacuation plan I saw posted at the hospice. My book tells of a young screenwriter who enters a residential hospice in search of a plot for his next screenplay. Along the way we detour into the important stories of the people who inhabit the hospice.

Most folks who check into Christopher House will die within the week. My new friend Kay's demise took months. I'm not sure if it infuriated her or gave her a secret sigh of relief.

Our first meeting shocked her. I was here to learn about death? She just wanted the words back, the ones the stroke stole from her still-sharp mind and tongue. Consonants slipped off. "Asters? No. Masters." Entire words oozed into the distance. "Stone, zone . . . something." Her eyes scanned the room for clues. A framed portrait of Jesus smiled from the wall. She was a devout Catholic, and the picture gave her comfort when the words evaded her.

She turned her gaze on me. "Ah! Does that make you angry? It will some day."

Kay isn't in my novel. She's fact, and it is fiction. But the truth of her life is the soul of my book. Instead, my screenwriter bonds with an older architect named Charlie Wright, and they help each other come to some understandings about life and death.

The next Saturday between visits to the Christopher House, my sister handed me a tiny sculpture of an angel which I re-gifted to my friend Kay. She squeezed her eyes shut and tears seeped out. She wore the angel on a chain around her neck through the full countdown. My screenwriter gives the same angel to Charlie Wright in the novel, and again the hazy line between fact and fiction pops up.

Since our first visit, Kay had had an episode. Her fingers had turned blue and sweat coated her body. She knew her heart was failing, so she called her family together and told them the facts: I am going to die. Get ready.

She saw figures in the room, young men dressed in white. Her husband of more than 50 years had the OK to remarry. After all, she'd seen to the repair of his teeth and the installation of new corneas. He was all the rage at the assisted living center and a darn fine writer.

"There's a couple of girls over there, hon." She gripped his fingers through the hospital bed's handrail. "If they've got money, marry them."

ticks off the final moments for all of us and makes of those moments a lifetime..

About the Author



Joe M. O'Connell
Author

Joe M. O'Connell writes columns about the Texas film industry for *The Austin Chronicle* and *Dallas Morning News*. His novel *Evacuation Plan* about life in a residential hospice was released in 2007. In his spare time, he also teaches writing to graduate students at St. Edward's University and to undergrads at Austin Community College. The biggest news in his life was the recent birth of his son Nicholas Drake. *EVACUATION PLAN* was recently a finalist for the **Violet Crown Book Award in Fiction**.

"Here's a book so rich with stories of the living, so filled with people's bountiful problems, as well as incidents of wry forgiveness, one realizes over and over the circling forces of life's completeness. It's not a sad tale nor a needless feel-good account but a balanced, sometimes comic, affirmation of what is here and what we all know is waiting. Evacuation Plan is a book to ponder and to enjoy."

-- Carolyn Osborn, award-winning short story writer

"This is a fictional account of life's last journey. A screenwriter named Matt decides to volunteer at a hospice for inspiration and help with his writing. The hospice is a last haven for the living and it's chalk full of stories for those who listen. Matt takes the

Like my father, she was of the World War II era. It shaped their lives, their loves. She met her soldier husband in the North and relished that night in a New York City bar when their gang took over for an inexperienced bartender. They laughed and sang all night. She followed her husband home to Texas, but never stopped feeling like a Yankee outsider. "I'll Be Seeing You" was on the radio every Sunday.

"People used to sing," she told me. "It was so pretty and soft."

Kay was asleep the next few times I stopped in. Her mouth hung open, her breathing was labored. She slept all day, stayed up all night. Drank a capful of bourbon to ward off pain.

My fictional Charlie Wright works to come to terms with the failings of his relationships with his children. Kay wasn't perfect, but her daughter moved into the hospice with her and was there for her until the end.

I saw Kay one last time. Her face was ashen and impatient. All of the relatives and friends had been called. Peace had been made, memories relived. What was the delay?

"There's a hastiness," she told me. "I want to go, but I don't want to go."

As I got up to leave, she gripped my hand, and her eyes fixed on mine. In them I saw the sexy war bride, the mother, the pains and joys of a life well lived.

She stopped taking visitors. Every day I checked obituaries in the newspaper. Nothing. I knew the delay angered her as much as the too-sudden loss of my father did me.

Charlie Wright waits for death as well. It's not giving away the novel's ending to say he eventually embraces death as a new chapter in his existence.

The night before she finally died, Kay's family had a party. I like to imagine they dragged into her room the brittle Christmas tree her husband had refused to disassemble when she got sick. Her kids brought a cake and sang John Jacob Jingleheimer Smith. They told stories, forced smiles while she nodded in and out. She looked at them and said, "I've got to get ready to go. Time to go."

I think of my father's quick and wordless passing, and hope they realize just how lucky they are.

Joe M. O'Connell has met a mass murderer, prowled a crack house, and spat seeds at a watermelon thump. He's a Texas native whose early career focused on small-town journalism. He earned an MFA in creative writing from Southwest Texas State University where he worked long distance with the late short story master Andre Dubus. O'Connell's stories have appeared in the **G.W. Review**, **Other Voice**, **Confrontation**, **Lullwater Review**, and many other journals. His stories have taken first prize at both the Deep South Writers Conference and the Louzelle Rose Barclay Awards.

His book, **EVACUATION PLAN**, was recently a finalist for the **Violet Crown Book Award in Fiction**. Of late, he teaches writing to graduate students at St. Edward's University and to undergraduates at Austin Community College. Joe lives outside Austin with his wife and newborn son. For more information go to Joe's [Social Media Newsroom for Evacuation Plan](#).