television and books. Even though much of this material is explicitly antiwar.

So I can't quarrel with the intent of a lot of it, but I'm starting to think if we want to have an actual impact in the world that is an antiwar impact, then maybe the war narrative can't be massaged into that. Maybe we just have to put that whole narrative aside and try to find other things and other ways in which we can be thrilled and inspired by heroism, danger, and sacrifice. Like I said, there are a lot of books and movies about war that I really love and that I really admire, but I'm still tired of them. The whole Star Wars enterprise is troubling me now that I have small grandchildren. I see how quickly that's the narrative that appeals to them. The good guys, the bad guys, the fight to the death.

E.M.: It's been on my mind every day, the false "fake news" accusations against journalists who are reporting what's happening.

K.J.F.: I just feel it's creating difficulties for fiction writers and nonfiction writers alike, not to mention all our other fellow citizens. I think one of the political problems we're facing right now is that nobody knows how to counter that fake-news accusation. If all your opponent has to say is "I never said that" or "you're the one who's lying" even with clear evidence to the contrary, nobody yet has found the right, the effective comeback, because the rest of us can't get used to the fact that facts don't matter.

I think this is something that writers need to be thinking about and working on. I think it's up to us to figure out how that can be countered, because it's culturally devastating. But we're the people who deal with words and we're the people who deal with narratives and we're the people who think about truth in that sort of mutable way. I don't see our media responding effectively to this postfact world, hard as I think they are trying. (Of course, they share some responsibility for creating this problem with their "both sides are to blame" narratives.) But I see that something has broken in our shared world and that it won't be easily mended. Not on the Internet, for sure. Not by all the king's horses and all the king's men.

Elizabeth McKenzie's novel *The Portable Veblen* was longlisted for the 2016 National Book Award for fiction and received the 2016 California Book Award silver medal in fiction. She is the managing editor of *Catamaran*.

KAREN JOY FOWLER

Sugar Your Cookies

Wisdom from Family Reunions

In my family, my Grandma Fossum is the maternal prototype. My Aunt Mikki once got in trouble with her psychiatrist husband for saying at a dinner party that she had no complaints about the way she was mothered. Her husband thought she'd made him look bad—the wife of a psychiatrist and yet so unaware of all the ways she'd been screwed up!

Grandma had four children, three of whom were girls. Those three had eleven children, five of us girls. When I say that my family is a matriarchy, I don't mean that the women make all the important decisions, although it's possible that we do; it all depends on how you define *important*. What I mean is that, much as we love our men—and they are the very best sort of men—they're not exactly central. If you want to know what's going on in the family, you must ask the women; the men won't have a clue. (They appear to prefer it this way.)

My grandmother, my mother and her sisters—they are all similar in temperament and personality, remarkably cheerful, even-tempered, and unflappable. Neither my cousins nor I can even remember an occasion on which our mothers lost their tempers. Sadly, our own children cannot say the same. The apple falls a little farther from the tree with each passing generation.

When I was little, I was absolutely comfortable in my aunts' homes. I knew I would be served food that I liked, a major concern of mine back then. I knew what the rules would be and what would be expected of me. I knew that if I opened the refrigerator I would find a bottle of pimiento-stuffed green olives—the food of the gods—and that I was allowed to help myself to that or anything else. My mother and her sisters were all very close. My uncle we seldom saw.

And then we grew up. In 1996, my cousin Trudy had the idea that we Fossum women should go away together on a retreat. She chose a central location—Pismo Beach—for a three-day weekend. Grandma was long dead, and our own young daughters otherwise occupied, so it was just our mothers and ourselves getting together to reminisce, to gossip, and to share the classic family stories on the remote chance that anyone there hadn't already heard them.

Among these is the mysterious marital arrangement of our mothers' cousin Evelyn, who was married to Julian of the Merchant Marines. One night Julie (the name the family used for Julian) was at a bar and met a man so despairing

that he was considering suicide. Julie persuaded him to come home for dinner. He lived with Julie and Evelyn for the next forty years.

Since Julie was off at sea much of this time, Evelyn's parents were always at some pains to point out the separate bedrooms. As if we couldn't tell a raven from a writing desk! Evelyn wore two wedding rings, one from each man, one on her right hand and one on her left.

Then there was the opulent Hollywood wedding of another remote cousin. This happened in the 1930s when my mother was about sixteen years old. She wore an Alice-blue gown and danced with Lew Ayres. The bride and groom left in a hail of rice and roses. Later that night, a phone call: The honeymoon had revealed the groom to be a woman. Love did not conquer this difficulty; the marriage was over before it began. My mother still remembered this evening as one of the most glamorous events she'd ever attended.

There were stories of earthquakes and accidents. Grandma Hazel's everyday china had been acquired from the Santa Fe Railroad Company when the train on which she'd been traveling west had terrifyingly derailed, and, never one to miss a chance, she collected her set—the California poppy design—from the wreckage. There were stories of illness and hardship. My mother had contracted polio at the age of three; it's what brought the family to California, the hope of better medical care.

There were many, many stories about my grandmother. The time she went to Japan, mistaking it for Hong Kong. The time she and Grandpa took a cruise and she got hives and was confined to her cabin for several days, emerging finally to hear at infuriating length from the other women on the boat how lucky she was to be married to Grandpa who'd apparently been charming the socks off everyone in her absence. A picture of health up until the day of her death, my grandmother put sugar on everything, including celery. When she ate cookies, she buttered the tops and sprinkled them with more sugar.

It was Trudy's idea that we put together a small book for our daughters and entitle it *Sugar Your Cookies.* Each of us contributed five pieces of life advice. Our different personalities come through pretty clearly in this collection. From my practical cousin Gayle: Never leave the house without a sweater. From my inspirational cousin Trudy: Choose a career that nourishes your heart instead of your pocketbook (advice she has rethought over the years as one daughter became a yoga instructor and the other an artist). There I am, an animal lover to the core, telling everyone not to kill spiders.

Three years prior to this trip, my mother had been diagnosed with leukemia. She'd been nearly symptomless for the first two years and then managing well on regular transfusions. She seemed to be keeping up with everyone. My mother lived in La Jolla; she swam often in the ocean. But on this weekend, in the hotel pool, she went under and didn't resurface. I watched it happen.

It's a terrible thing to know about yourself, that you are no good in a crisis. I'm not the person you want when quick action is required—I will be staring down at you, frozen in horror. The person you want is my cousin Sally. It was Sally who dove in and pulled my mother back up into the air.

Her own weakness had shocked my mother and it shocked me. Our trip was not over, but I was unable to recover the festive, familial mood. This was the moment when I finally understood that my mother was dying and I think it was that moment for her as well.

My aunts and my cousins have talked many times of repeating our reunion, and including our daughters this time. We think it's their turn to put out a new edition of *Sugar your Cookies*—advice for a new generation from a new generation. I think it will happen some day, but it hasn't happened yet. Twenty years later, my mother's absence is still too great a matter.

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. Fowler and her husband, who have two grown children and seven grandchildren, live in Santa Cruz, California.

PHYLLIS HERFIELD

Saint in Gold Dress, 2004
Oil on wood panel, 10 x 8 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST