

DEAD in a DITCH **JODY SEAY**

★ **Dead in a Ditch** ★

Growing Up In Texas &
Other Near-Death Experiences



This is a memoir, of sorts;
essays to chew on and ponder



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BY JODY SEAY



Koho Pono, LLC

Dead in a Ditch

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"If you have ever known - or been - a mother who feared everything bad would happen to your children - lockjaw, snake bites, the atomic bomb, communism, and finding them 'dead in a ditch', then you must read Jody Seay's hilarious account of her own mother's anxieties.

Read it even if you fear that reading makes you go blind. Here is an Earth Daughter raised by an Earth Mother. The result is a Texas-size funny book about both."

- Liz Carpenter, author of Getting Better All The Time, Ruffles And Flourishes, Unplanned Parenthood, and Start With A Laugh and former press secretary for Lady Bird Johnson

"Jody Seay handed me this book and said, 'I hope you laugh so hard you bust your spleen.' I'm happy to say that my spleen survived intact - but my pancreas is still in a splint. Jody Seay is ONE FUNNY WRITER."

- Jerry Juhl, three-time Emmy Award winner, former head writer for The Muppets and Jim Henson Productions, screenwriter for The Muppet Movie and Muppets Treasure Island, head writer for The Muppet Show

Dead In A Ditch is the hilarious memoir of a tomboy Texan, a little (and then not-so-little) comic hellion who takes every dare. Jody Seay is also a worry-wart. How many ways in Texas can you die if you're not careful? If the snakes don't getcha the atom bomb will, and in the meantime, watch out for lockjaw! A smart, funny tough survivor of a goofy family and her own weird antics, Seay (pronounced See) is one helluva writer and a great observer of the absurdities and poignancy of family life in Texas."

- Robin Cody, Author of Another Way the River Has, Ricochet River and Voyage of a Summer Sun; Pacific Northwest Bookseller Association Book Award Winner and Oregon Book Award Winner

"You can feel, hear, taste and smell your own childhood - with a Texas accent - in Jody Seay's stories. When you stop laughing, you find here and there a shaping truth about your own life that's eluded expression all these years. You want to read this book."

-Jeff Golden, author of Forest Blood, and public radio personality

"Jody Seay is a story-teller extraordinaire. Her wonderfully funny and insightful work has universal appeal. With her page-turning writing, she has that rare gift of being able to touch the hearts and minds of a broad and varied audience."

-Nina McIntosh, MSW, author of The Educated Heart: Professional Guidelines For Massage Therapists, Bodyworkers And Movement Teachers

"There are writers and there are WRITERS. But every now and then a monster writing talent rockets into the literary world from seemingly out of nowhere. Such a writer is Jody Seay. I have known Jody for years, and have never ceased to be simply amazed by every piece of work that flows from this women's pen. Lively, insightful, heartbreaking, and laugh-til-you-barf funny...yes, of course, but Jody brings even more to the table. There is a depth to her work that simply defies description. Jody's stories are to be tasted, then munched, then gobbled up whole and juicy like warm pie. Writing just doesn't get any better than this. Sit down with her book, and get ready for a feast."

- Susan Chernak McElroy, best-selling author of Animals As Teachers And Healers, and Animals As Guides For The Soul

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family - all of them Texan to the bone.

*"Now, you boys know better than to try and
sneak past your Mother. Your Mother could hear
a rat piss on cotton." - 1969, Warren Seay to his
teenage sons, Pat and Mike*

In loving memory of my brother Dean, the hero, and of my brother Pat,
the good guy.

For Stef, as is everything I do.

Acknowledgements

Most writers have many cheerleaders. I am no exception. We need them.

My apologies to so many who kept asking about my next book after The Second Coming of Curly Red was published. I am sorry this has taken me so long; it seems my horse went lame on me there for a while. Now, it feels good to be back in the saddle. My thanks to all of you who have never given up on me even when I did, especially those of you who are now partying over this up in Heaven: Shirley Hudgens, Janie French, Randy Troups, Nina McIntosh, Lou Kimberling, Gay Lustfield, Geneice Gray and CarolAnn Kerman. I miss all of you every day.

On this level, my gratitude goes to those of you who knew I'd finally get off my tail and get it all down in a book some day: Stef Neyhart, Sue Sullivan, Margaret Quinn, Jan Treybig, Sheryl Reese, Sharla Taylor, Nicholas French, Ira Lipson, Melinda Pittman, Stephen Saunders, Judith & Tina, Laura Caraway, Cynthia Griffin, Mike Lindberg, Don Gleason, "Q" & Mary, Millie & Diana, Cheryl & Melody, Jan & Joyce, Rikki LeBaron, Gayl & Osima, Marnie & Joey, Sheri & Linda, McKenzie Kerman, Lisa Yeo & the GNO group, Beth Sawyer, Judy Wood, Lynne Webb, Polk Green, Lynda Jacobs, Catherine Reed, Robin Kendall, OSU Media Services and the Back Page crew, the Porter/McCormick family, the Cobble family, the Dorwart family, the Duke family, and the people I love who lived the stories here, my family.

Big hugs and thanks to all my Roling clients who've been trapped in their underpants listening to these stories over and over all these years. If I've left anyone out, I beg forgiveness. I am beyond grateful to all of you for your love, your support, your encouragement, your confidence and your friendship. It makes my world shine.

Jody Seay

Table of Contents

Introduction	i
Chapter 1 – Snakes	1
Chapter 2 – Bad Guys	11
Chapter 3 – Strangers	23
Chapter 4 – Atom Bombs and/or Communists	31
Chapter 5 – Wheels	39
Chapter 6 – Fire	47
Chapter 7 – Water	53
Chapter 8 – Water Everywhere	61
Chapter 9 – Firewater	67
Chapter 10 – The Nature of Things	79
Chapter 11 – Lockjaw	87
Chapter 12 – Lost and Found	95
Chapter 13 – The Long Arm of the Ma	103
Chapter 14 – Blizzard	111
Chapter 15 – Laramie	119
Chapter 16 – Slick	129
Chapter 17 – Good Luck / Bad Luck	135
Chapter 18 – Food For Thought	141
Chapter 19 – Good Food / Bad Food	145
Chapter 20 – Thanks for the Memories	153
Chapter 21 – Holy Cow	159
Chapter 22 – House Swarming	165
Chapter 23 – Blooey!	171
Chapter 24 – Germs, Rodents, Commies, Drugs	177
Chapter 25 – Looking for Moose	185
Chapter 26 – Heathenism	191
Chapter 27 – Sharing the Lantern	203

Chapter 28 – Salute	211
Chapter 29 – The Hero	217
Chapter 30 – Courage	221

Introduction

I was born with a birthmark and an attitude, only one of which could ever be removed. The lumpy, strawberry malformation on my right forearm was burned away with dry ice in some pediatrician's office leaving a dip and a jagged scar in the skin with which I used to cheat when it was time to tell my right from my left as a child. I knew my scar was on my right arm; the other one, well, what was left was my left, right? As I got older, I made up different stories about it - a knife fight, gunshot, rattlesnake bite - dangerous stories designed to make me appear brave. No smart person ever believed me.

My attitude was a whole different deal. It was as permanent as a cattle brand, glommed onto my DNA like a saddle blanket and as soaked through me as the place of my birth, Texas, where women who aren't born a smarty-pants, as I was, will learn soon enough how to take that one on.

Heaven's way of insuring that I would see the humor in most of life's situations was to launch me into the world under unusual circumstances. My mother's water broke with me at the Spike Jones concert at Fair Park in Dallas on Oct. 25, 1949. I was born dry and breech two days later - tiny, two months early, and with my chest caved in - an impatient, silent and brooding baby - not even sure I wanted to stick around. I was the unanticipated by-product of my divorcing parents having wished each other "luck" at the Hotel Dallas just before their final farewell. On the fifth day of my life, a nurse came into my mother's hospital room and said, "Well, she finally cried today." And I've not hushed since. Ask anybody.

Mother remarried and our stepfather, the man we called "Daddy," adopted my older brother and me. Then Mother gave birth to twin boys and, a few years later, to our baby sister, which completed her dream of being able to sign our Christmas cards "The Seven

Seays." It was a simple thing which brought her much joy, God knows why.

Daddy's family owned a cattle ranch up by Nocona, Texas - yes, where they make those boots - and Mother's family was from Forestburg, Texas, a small ranching and farming town, so we grew up riding horses and playing cowboy, even though we were city kids from Dallas. Round-ups and rodeos were more real than fantasy in our childhood, something we've always been grateful for, and all of us know our way around a horse. Nobody in my family, however, ever looked anything like J.R., Sue Ellen or any of the Dallas crowd that showed up on television years later. Shoot, Dallas didn't even look like Dallas.

In my childhood, Dallas was a city remaking itself over and over again. Begun as a trading post next to a dirty, shallow river, and expanding in all directions each year, it kept defying the odds to survive. It was a city with no real reason for being there. Now it is a massive metropolis full of people willing to put up with the heat of a Texas summer (which I wasn't) to be able to call themselves Texans (which I still do.)

I come from a large family. My Mother's biggest fear was that one or all of us would die on her watch when we were babies and then children. As we grew up, her fear shifted a little - not just that we would die, but that we would be found Dead in a Ditch. It was the ditch part that always made it seem so much worse, something drug or alcohol related, to be sure. Mother's children crumpled up and tossed out the window like an old beer can. "Where have you been?" she would say, "I was worried sick. I thought you were dead in a ditch." This was her mantra.

I am the family historian for our branch of the family tree, primarily because I have a good memory, so when cousins and siblings need to know some obscure tidbit of family info, I'm usually the one who gets the call. I also know that a memoir means that it is being written from memory and, often, everybody's memory of an event can be different. While I thought the family reunion was just swell, I realize somebody else might have been pouting in the car with their feelings

hurt. I have tried my best here to tell the stories as I remember them without swiping anybody else's thunder, anybody else's story, or embellishing them too much beyond what they were. It is all as true as I can get it without an injection of sodium pentothal. So, there you have it.

Mother has been gone for two decades now; my older brother since 2005. My baby brother Pat, one of the world's truly good guys, left us in 2007, surrounded by so much love from family and friends it made my heart crack in two. For those of us still around, as we trundle off toward the second half our time here, my hope is that our lives and our deaths will be easy and sweet - and ditchless.

- Jody Seay

*"I arise each morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."
- Author Unknown*

Chapter 4 – Atom Bombs and/or Communists

Being children in the 1950's and 60's in Dallas, Texas afforded us all the opportunity to spend lots of time practicing for that fateful day when a nuclear holocaust and all-out showdown with Russia could no longer be avoided. Sooner or later we were just going to have to punch them in their collective Communistic nose; we all knew it.

Seeing as how we had, in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, more than enough defense plants, military bases and right-wing hotheads to make us a major target for any Russian ICBM's, there was no doubt that we'd have to hit them before they hit us. And, most certainly, we could have. Between Carswell Air Force Base, Hensley Field, the Naval Air Station, Texas Instruments, Collins Radio, General Dynamics, and LTV, just to name a few, there was more missile and military know-how in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex than you could shake a warhead at. We just hoped we'd live long enough to get to use it.

It was an era of propaganda, spies, escalation and terror on the international level. At home, it was fallout shelters, doomsday theories, and the stockpiling of non-perishable items. Kids at my school wore Army-style dog tags for easier identification of their charred, gooey remains in the event of a nuclear attack. I still remember the sound and feel of my metal tags clinking against my chest as I rounded third base during a softball game. Once, during a heated tetherball match, my tags flew up and took a tiny chip out of my right front tooth. Another time, while I was playing touch football, they clanged me right in the eye. Staying safe was starting to feel dangerous.

Nothing was deadlier, though, than the blast from an atomic bomb, which, according to Mother was most likely aimed squarely at my fifth grade class at L.O. Donald Elementary School. Our teachers did their best to make us all feel safe, assuring us almost daily that the Communists were not interested in overtaking our own particular elementary school, only the ones in New York, probably, where there were so many more people.

I didn't buy it. I knew better. My mother's children were at this school. My mother hated Communists and even wrote letters to the editor about it. The Reds probably had a file on her already. Therefore, it would stand to reason that our school would be a prime target - simple deduction. Besides, according to Mother, our government couldn't be trusted to do very many things right, so we had to be ready to take matters into our own hands. This was one of two reasons I saved my birthday money to buy a gas mask at the Army-Navy Store. The second reason, of course, was the fact that I was a budding member of the Future Dykes of America, only I didn't know it then. I thought I just liked uniforms.

My U.S. Army-issue gas mask kept me safe for months as I snorkled around the house, breathing like an iron lung and looking like an anteater. I kept a notepad and pencil with me at all times, so I could stare out the window through the cataract-like lenses of my gas mask, scanning our neighborhood to check for subversive and/or Communist activity. Perhaps a missile silo was being installed down at the end of our double block.

Eventually, my gas mask began to fall apart - one of the lenses popped out and the hose cracked (so much for government-issue sturdiness), but the real reason I finally quit wearing the thing was because it freaked my baby sister out every time she saw me in it and she screamed loud enough to melt a chunk of Velveeta.

I decided my mother had a firm enough handle on the policing of our off-the-rack, average American neighborhood since she was home every day, so I would concentrate on anti-Communist matters at L.O. Donald Elementary School. I'm sure my teachers were thrilled.

One of the things I remember doing at school was watching a film about the effects of an atomic explosion. Houses blasted apart or burst into flames fueled by horrific winds. The charred imprint of a human body was scorched into the side of a brick building. People who'd been standing right there before the atomic blast were reduced to a pile of ashes and maybe some loose change. I was pretty much steeled against the horror of it, reciting over and over in my head only my name, rank and telephone number: Jody Seay, Texan, oldest daughter of Jo Seay, FE 1-4691.

But this atomic blast movie stuff was hard information for some of my classmates to digest. Anna Lou Perry passed out and Janet Grigsby (not their real names) peed in her pants before the film was over. So many kids were crying that they had to stop the whole thing early. Then our teachers and our principal all assured us that we were perfectly safe and not to worry about anything we'd seen in the film actually happening to us. Just to be sure, though, we were going to begin practicing a new drill.

To ensure our survival from an atomic blast, the U.S. Government instructed the school systems of America to teach a "duck and cover" drill, whereby, America's school children would crouch under their desks, face down and knees up under them, their heads covered with their arms and hands. That is how most of America did this drill. Not at my elementary school. We did it differently.

We filed out into the hallways, making two complete rows of children for each class - one with their heads up against the locker doors, and the second row of kids with their heads up against the feet and butts of the first row of children. Of course, as our science teacher, Mr. Allen, laughingly pointed out, the concussion from an atomic bomb dropped anywhere near Dallas would be so great that the first row of children would have their little skulls firmly implanted into the lockers and those of us unfortunate enough to be on row two would have the unprecedented opportunity to kiss the asses of our classmates a swift good-bye. That's not how he phrased it, but that's what he meant.

I determined that Mr. Allen was probably a Communist sympathizer due to his cavalier attitude about where our heads would wind up in a nuclear explosion. I mean, we had to do something. It wasn't as if our school had access to a fallout shelter. We didn't even have a basement. Mother wanted a fallout shelter at home, though; she lobbied hard for one. We got aluminum siding on our house instead, and I was always rather glad about that. Even though I believed her when she preached about impending doom, atomic blasts and radioactive fallout, I also knew I'd just as soon not be one of the only ones to survive a nuclear holocaust. We'd have to start a brand new country all over again with only my family and maybe a few others scratching around in tainted, luminescent dirt, trying to grow plutonium-flavored onions or something.

Taking on the look of Scarlet O'Hara in front of Tara, my mother's nostrils would flare, and then she would get misty-eyed. I swear violins would be playing America, the Beautiful in the background. No wait...harps! I bet that's what they were - harps played by angels! Flags would wave around behind Mother's head. "If we were the only ones left - just this family - we could rebuild this nation," she would declare, solemnly, as if the Seay family could not only survive a nuclear explosion and subsequent radioactive crop dusting that snuffed everybody else, but we could also manage to find the only ox left on the planet to help us grind up this uranium-tainted dirt and grow ourselves a garden. Why, we could just hook that beast up to the plow we always happened to have handy in the back of our recently cauterized station wagon! No need to worry about the shelf life of our food when we now had half-life on our side! Food would last forever and ever!

Was she kidding? I scoffed to myself, *This family? We can't take a car trip to the Gulf of Mexico without getting pissy enough to shoot each other.* Too much togetherness got on our nerves. Rebuilding a nation was a little beyond what I knew my family to be capable of. But the thought of it kept Mother content, or as close to serene as she ever came in her life. She was, after all, a Republican, and all the Republicans I knew were born to fret.

There was a time when, politically speaking, no greater conservative group of people could be found than your basic Texas Democrats. They were a sturdy group who loved Texas, God and America, in that order. They did not trust businesses or banks or politicians afraid to get dirt on their shoes, or unions, for that matter, who seemed to only want to stir up trouble and shut down plants that were willing to give these hard-working Texans a decent job and a chance at a better life. Then, somewhere toward the end of the 1950's, as the cold war got well into full-swing, a group sprang up in the state of Texas which was so far to the right of everybody else, it made your basic Texas Democrat seem like a Commie Pinko. My mother was part of that group.

Mother never joined the John Birch Society, but she understood why some people did. She thought muckraking Senator Joe McCarthy was a swell guy and that, rather than dying from alcoholism as he did, the liberal media had driven the poor guy over the edge. It never occurred to Mother that people lost jobs and careers and lives after falling under the scrutiny and grinding zeal of Senator McCarthy. No, Mother was certain Hollywood was just crawling with Communists, and that America was skidding fast down a slippery slope, taking all its children toward a godless hell if any liberal stayed in elected political office for too long.

Rather than changing the channel when somebody she couldn't stand was on Meet the Press, and this was usually everybody, she would stare at the television screen, bug-eyed and fierce and with her jaw clenched, muttering under her breath the worst word she ever used, "Bastards."

Mother's politics wrecked her health. I watched her chain-smoke her way to emphysema while writing her daily letters to the editor, most of them urging everyone to IMPEACH EARL WARREN! Of course, in Dallas, in the early '60's, that was like preaching to the choir. The conservative movement was alive, mean and nasty. And it was backed by big business with lots of big money; in fact, not much different than today.

It's shameful that money in large amounts can be used to buy the feelings of and to fool people who want their country to be righteous. I feel the shame of it now even as I write this so many years later. I still remember how closely the hatred in my home town brushed up against me. I did not understand how a city I saw as filled with - mostly - loving people could allow political emotions to ride so close to the surface and allow hatred and anger to boil over. Of course, not all Dallasites felt that way. Not all acted on that anger, but enough did to make the situation ripe, raw and volatile - more than enough.

I campaigned for Nixon in 1960 because my mother was a Republican. But I cheered for Kennedy because somewhere between elections I began to develop a mind of my own. I never told my mother that. There was always something about Richard Nixon that just flat-out gave me the creeps. I never told my mother that, either, but I knew exactly what it was.

During a 1960 campaign stop at Love Field, Richard Nixon shook my hand, sort of. It was a cold night. Maybe his handshake had such a wimpy grip because I was a kid - a girl kid, at that. I don't know; perhaps he was just tired at the end of his fierce campaign. Maybe Richard Nixon would have had a firmer grip if I'd been an Ambassador or Congressman or somebody more important than an eleven-year-old girl with a Texas accent. Nonetheless, I gripped as hard as I could, just like Mother taught me, and there the Vice-President's pasty, sweaty hand lay across my palm like a dead perch.

"Good luck, Mr. Nixon," I said, and he looked at me for just a moment before his eyes darted back and forth. I thought he was trying to figure out which way to run. His face had the same look as our dog whenever she got caught rooting around in the trash. Then he turned away from me and the smile came back on. His arms and hands flew up in the air, and his fingers sprang into the usual V for victory. The crowd cheered wildly, hoping he was the one, hoping he would bring America back to them.

Richard Nixon stood there in the chilly night, hunched, his back bowing out like a question mark, grinning at the crowd like he'd

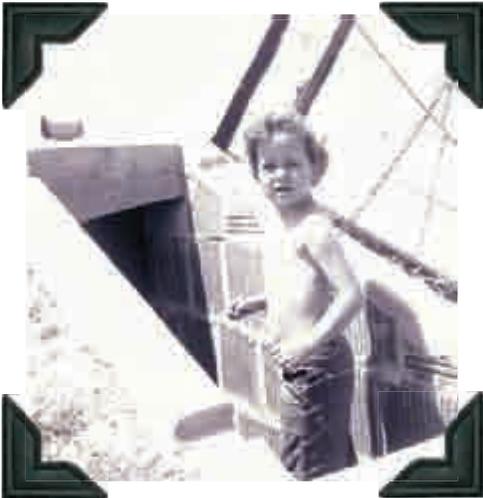
just hit an oil gusher, and all I could think of were my mother's words: "Stand up straight, look people in the eye, and give 'em a firm handshake. And don't ever trust anyone who doesn't do the same."

When President Kennedy was assassinated, Mother was horrified. She hated him, certainly. She didn't want him to be president, but she didn't want him dead, either.

"What has become of us?" Mother said to no one in particular as she sat, hollow-eyed, watching the funeral procession on television. As the rider-less horse, Black Jack, pranced by in the cold autumn wind, jerking the arm of the young soldier who held him, I saw the tears in my mother's eyes begin a slow roll down her cheeks.

My politics and Mother's never really matched after that; although I sometimes pretended they did just to keep her quiet. My politics slogged around for years, undergoing many incarnations as we slogged our way through the mire of Vietnam and the mess of Watergate. I finally emerged as my family's unapologetic screaming liberal, a position shared by only a few in this rowdy, conservative Texas family. And, yes, in answer to those who think a liberal is a conservative who hasn't been mugged yet, I have been mugged. And I'm still a liberal.

For over thirty years of my life, my mother was certain her children would be slaughtered by atomic bombs and/or Communists, and she did her best to protect us from that. She did not live long enough to see the Soviet Union finally fall over on its side, overspent, worn out and broke. She did not live long enough to see any part of the 1980's "trickle down economics" trickle her way. I made my mother's politics my own as a child because I wanted my mother to love me. I thought I had to agree with her for that to happen. Age has given me the wisdom to know this now as the truth: my mother couldn't have loved me any greater. She just wanted me to vote. And so I do.



I come from a large family. My Mother's biggest fear was that one or all of us would die on her watch when we were babies and then children. As we grew up, her fear shifted a little - not just that we would die, but that we would be found Dead In A Ditch. It was the ditch part that always made it seem so much worse, something drug or alcohol related, to be sure. Mother's children crumpled up and tossed out the window like an old beer can. "Where have you been?" she would say, "I was worried sick. I thought you were dead in a ditch." This was Mother's mantra.



Photorapgh of Author Jody Seay by Sarah Neyhart

