Elsewhere
Gabrielle Zevin

Introduction

Welcome to Elsewhere. It is warm, with a breeze, and the beaches are marvelous. It's quiet and peaceful. You can't get sick or any older. Curious to see new paintings by Picasso? Swing by one of Elsewhere's museums. Need to talk to someone about your problems? Stop by Marilyn Monroe's psychiatric practice.

Elsewhere is where fifteen-year-old Liz Hall ends up, after she has died. It is a place so like Earth, yet completely different. Here Liz will age backward from the day of her death until she becomes a baby again and returns to Earth. But Liz wants to turn sixteen, not fourteen again. She wants to get her driver's license. She wants to graduate from high school and go to college. And now that she's dead, Liz is being forced to live a life she doesn't want with a grandmother she has only just met. And it is not going well. How can Liz let go of the only life she has ever known and embrace a new one? Is it possible that a life lived in reverse is no different from a life lived forward? This moving, often funny book about grief, death, and loss will stay with the reader long after the last page is turned.

The first time I quit writing Elsewhere was early in 2002. I had an idea for a novel though I wasn't doing or even thinking of doing any novel writing at the time. My idea was something about a girl who survived an incident in which everyone else in her family had died. I sort of fooled around with this concept for a while, and the only thing that really came of it was one scene: the girl's deceased family (a mother, brother, and father) disembarking a cruise ship. Neither the brother nor the father was speaking to the mother. I had no idea where the family had arrived aside from the haziest sense of an afterlife. In any case, I didn't think too much of it, and I abandoned the project soon after.

A couple of months later, I was having a discussion with my filmmaking partner, Hans, about how there were no good romantic comedy movies anymore. We talked about, for example, how you always knew exactly who the heroine would end up with after the first scene, so the movies were incredibly predictable. Or the love triangles were incredibly imbalanced - somebody always loved somebody else more. So, I brainstormed to Hans, “What about a screenplay with an afterlife love triangle? Guy loves wife. Guy dies. Guy meets someone new and falls in love. Wife dies. Complications.” And I think Hans said, “Hmm, that's interesting.” At which point, we started discussing something else.

But the idea stuck with me. About a week later, I was still thinking about it. “I think I'll try writing a couple of scenes,” I told Hans. I named the main character Owen because one of my favorite books in those days was John Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany. My Owen was a forty-five year-old man and a heart doctor - my notes, I'm embarrassed to say, may have described him as “George Clooney-ish.” I wrote the first screenplay scene to be a ship arriving at a pier as in my earlier novel sketch. When Owen got to the pier, he encountered a banner that read “
About the Book

“WELCOME TO ELSEWHERE” and a second later, he is met by his mother, only he couldn't recognize her because she was younger than he had ever known her in life - I didn't know why this was so at the time. The mother's name was Betty Bloom even in those earliest screenplay scenes. And I asked myself, “Why is she so young?” And then I answered myself without really thinking, “Maybe because she's aging backwards?” Unfortunately, this was a very difficult concept to describe in a screenplay, and I probably wrote about twenty pages before quitting again. The reason I quit this time was because I didn't think anyone in the movie business would ever in a million years buy a script like this. And honestly, because the idea seemed bigger than the ninety to one-hundred ten pages you have to tell a screen story.

But back up... why did I have death on the brain so much? Several reasons, but the two most important ones were probably that I lived in NYC during September 11th and that my pug got a lump. The veterinarians told us not to worry, but they were wrong. It turned out to be Cancer. But don't worry: this isn't one of those stories where the dog dies.

And then, fast forward about ten months. I had stayed up all night finishing the fifth Harry Potter book -- not exactly the shortest book around, that Harry. Hans and I could only afford to buy one copy, and I had the first reading shift. So, I had stayed up all night reading, and it was seven in the morning, and the sun was coming up, and all I wanted to do was go to sleep. And then, all of a sudden, this sentence popped into my head. “Elizabeth Hall woke in a strange bed in a strange room with the strange feeling that her sheets were trying to smother her.” And I thought, that's intriguing, I do hope I remember that in the morning. But you know, you never do remember it in the morning. I made myself get out of bed, and then I wrote the whole first chapter of Elsewhere. I was incredibly sleepy, so I remember very little about the writing of that first chapter. I do remember drowsily thinking, “Of course! It's about the girl, not the man!”

The next morning, I decided I would allow myself a month to write the whole book. Ha! Cut to four months later, and I was more or less finished and very, very tired.

In retrospect, the road to publication was remarkably easy. I had a manager for screenwriting at the time, and he gave it to another manager at that firm, Brian Steinberg. Brian gave the book to a William Morris literary agent, Jonathan Pecarsky, who was someone Brian knew from summer camp, and Jonathan agreed to represent the book. The offer from my publisher Farrar Straus & Giroux came about a day after Elsewhere had gone out, which was exciting and crazy. (My editor at FSG is named Janine O'Malley, and she looks quite a bit like Liz is described in the book.) And I even ended up sharing a British publisher with old Harry Potter, which seemed a very nice bookend to the whole story.

So, is there a moral? No good ones, I'm afraid. But here's a short list anyway:

1) Quit often. But write a lot, so you can quit a lot.
2) It takes longer than one month to write a novel.
3) If you can swing it, make your main character look like the editor. (Risky strategy...)
4) Write it down. You WON'T remember in the morning.
And that's about it. Aside from spending a large portion of my income on books, I knew nothing about publishing. I did not know the marketplace. I did not attend writing conferences or get an MFA. No one in my family knew anyone remotely useful for publishing a book. And the reason I tell you all this is not because I think an MFA is a waste of time or because I think it's preferable to be as ignorant and unconnected as I was. I tell you this because I want you future writers out there to know that you don't need these things either. Writing is not résumé building. The only things you absolutely need are a story to tell and a good pen. The rest will come.

Gabrielle Zevin 2007

Discussion Questions

1. Much of Liz's initial anger at finding herself in Elsewhere is that her future plans are canceled and she will age in reverse. What future events are you most looking forward to? How would you feel about aging in reverse?

2. Water is a powerful image and symbol that runs throughout the book. Why does the author elect to use water as such an essential symbol? Discuss some of the other symbols, such as Liz's stitches, the watch her father gave her, and the snow globe.

3. There are many characters who are part of the story of Elsewhere, all of them are critical to it. No characters, not even the canine ones, are minor to the story. Explore how the characters move the novel forward. How does each of them help Liz adjust to life on Elsewhere and come to understand that life on Elsewhere is something to be cherished?

4. If you were in Liz's shoes, would you spend all you time on the Observation Deck or do you think you'd acclimate? Would you mourn the loss of your life on Earth? Would you view being on Elsewhere as a liberating change and fresh start?

5. Notice the allusions made to classic and contemporary literature throughout the novel. Liz recalls a line about antique lands. Aldous Ghent prompts Liz to read Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. Liz reads Charlotte's Web as she grows younger. Finally, Owen reads Tuck Everlasting to Liz when she is no longer able to read on her own. How does each address some facet of Liz's life (on Earth and Elsewhere) and experiences?

6. How does the author use humor in the novel? What examples of wordplay are evident? Is the humor intended to defuse the emotion of a serious situation or scene? Is it a way to show how Liz is becoming acclimated to life on Elsewhere?

7. Liz and all the other arrivals in Elsewhere are encouraged to find an avocation to pursue during their time there. Ghent explains to Liz that an avocation is something that makes one's soul complete (page 74). Some of the residents of Elsewhere work in avocations similar to the jobs they did on Earth; others have new ones. Marilyn Monroe becomes a psychiatrist. Curtis Jest decides to be a fisherman and comments that John Lennon is a gardener. How do the
avocations of Monroe, Lennon, Owen, Betty, Curtis, and other characters reflect what they really want out of their new lives? What would you chose as an avocation?

8. This novel is divided into three separate parts and also employs a prologue and an epilogue. What purpose do the three parts serve? What important events occur in each of the three parts? Why did the author chose Liz's dog, Lucy, to narrate the prologue? How does the epilogue bring the novel not to a close but to a resolution?

About the Author

Gabrielle Zevin is the author Margarettown and Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac. Of her writing, The New York Times Book Review said, “Zevin’s touch is marvelously light even as she considers profundities.” She was born in New York and lives there still with one pug dog, Mrs. DeWinter.