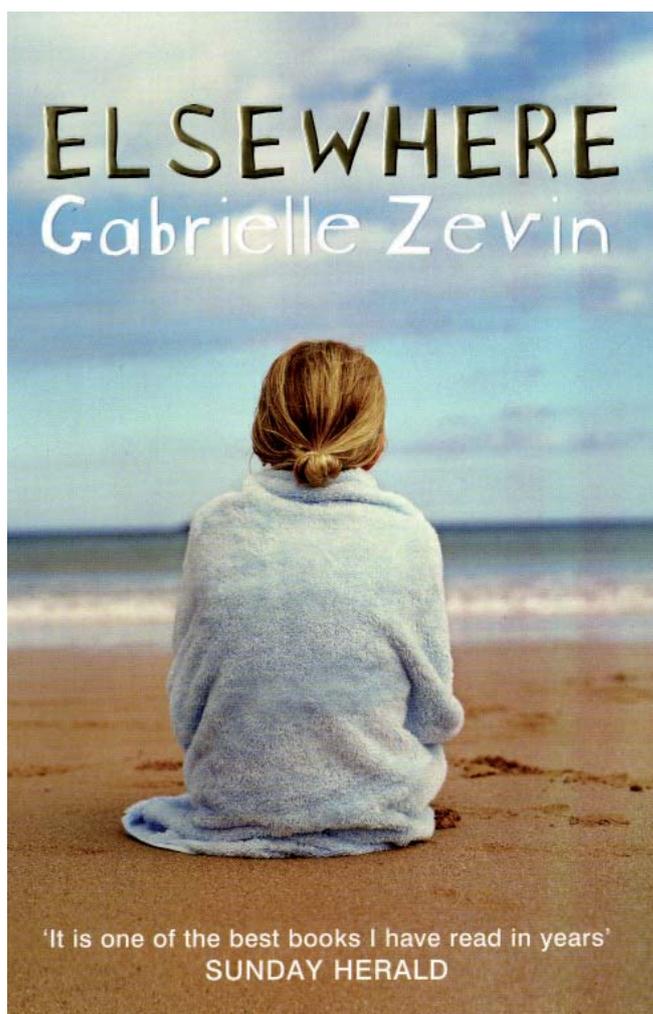


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

In brief

When Liz finds herself in a bunk bed aboard the SS Nile she thinks she must be dreaming. How else to explain the stranger in the top bunk and the appearance of an oddly precocious seven-year-old dressed as the Captain? When she eventually disembarks she's greeted by her grandmother, Betty, who died before Liz was born. Gradually, Liz comes to understand that she's dead, killed in a hit-and-run accident: she's now living in Elsewhere where no one grows older, only younger until they eventually return to Earth to be reborn. But admitting it is one thing, acceptance quite another. Liz refuses to get to know her new world, adamant that she wants her old life back, and watches her old world from the Observation Deck at every opportunity. When she gathers her courage and tries to take the only route back to Earth, she meets Owen and, with the help of her new friend Sadie, the loveable mutt, begins to see that she's made a new beginning after all. Written with a gentle humour, *Elsewhere* is an ingeniously inventive book about the redemptive power of love.

In detail

In other, more clumsy, hands *Elsewhere* could have become a maudlin, rather gloomy tale of a young woman struck dead before she had time to make her mark on the world, but Gabrielle Zevin's deft touch, her wit and her wonderfully creative take on the idea of the afterlife make this a gloriously life-affirming tale. She might well argue with the use of the word 'afterlife' to describe Elsewhere. When asked if she believed in such a thing, she has said that she hoped for one but that 'For me, *Elsewhere* was never really about the afterlife anyway; rather, the next life was a way to discuss the big things about this one.' Explaining that after 9/11 her writing became very dark, she says she began *Elsewhere* 'with an optimism that I did not quite feel at the time. And, in a way, while writing the book, I was learning many of the things that Liz was also learning.' The book is, she says, about 'being fully present in the life that we are given.' Perhaps another clue to the inspiration behind *Elsewhere* lies in one of her favourite quotes from Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: 'We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.' Liz has the chance to live not one but two lives despite the loss of her first so prematurely.

When asked why she chose to make Liz grow younger rather than age or remain fifteen Zevin explained that 'I knew that backward ageing would mean the most to a character who had never really been old, but who was old enough to know very specifically what she was missing.' Zevin had originally planned to make Owen her main character but felt that having a teenage girl age backwards 'would have the possibility of much more drama in it.' explaining that 'part of Liz's growth in *Elsewhere* is learning to separate the "events" of maturity from what it actually means to mature.' For her older characters, Elsewhere offers a second chance. Curtis finds love with Betty rather than losing himself in the misery of drug addiction, while Betty mothers Liz, which helps her to heal her broken relationship with her daughter Olivia.

The inspiration behind the relationships between Lucy, Sadie and Liz clearly comes from Zevin's own life. She has a pug named Mrs DeWinter (or D-Dub) to whom she pays tribute in the book's acknowledgements and who sits beside her on the sofa while she writes. It is to D-Dub that she feels she owes the book's prologue 'probably one of

the parts of which I'm most proud.' She would dearly love to be reunited with D-Dub when she dies.

Zevin believes firmly that anyone who wants to be a writer must be a reader too. She attributes her love of reading to her parents who introduced her to books when she was very young, saying that her mother made visiting the library 'a real adventure.' She began writing plays when she was eight, wrote about music for her local paper as a teenager and began her writing career as a screenwriter. Although she had avoided writing a novel for a long time, telling a friend six months before starting *Elsewhere* that she 'would NEVER write a novel.' she felt that *Elsewhere* 'did not seem to want to be a play or a screenplay. It kept sounding awfully novelish in my head, and though I was a little scared, I just sat in front of my computer and started to type.' How very fortunate for readers of *Elsewhere* that she did.

About Gabrielle Zevin

Gabrielle Zevin was born in New York in 1977. She studied English and American Literature at Harvard and graduated in 2000. As well as being a novelist she is also a screenwriter, and her screenplay, *Conversations with Other Women*, has recently been made into a film starring Helena Bonham Carter and Aaron Eckhart. *Elsewhere* is Zevin's first novel for young adults. She lives in New York with her pug, Mrs DeWinter, and her partner Hans Conosa.

Reviews

Tales of the afterlife vary according to the teller, and readers can take their pick. All religions, all writers construct their versions. There's the kingdom of Hades, there are clouds and angels, there are circles of Hell to punish sinners - and in this unusual story, there's an approximation of a small American town. And why not? It's written by an American writer and its audience is young people, so of course there should be shopping malls, dogs, Thanksgiving dinners and so forth.

Zevin's Heaven is a place where you age backwards. If this sounds silly, it shouldn't. The logic that goes with it means that if, as is the case with our heroine, Liz, you are cruelly killed by a hit-and-run driver at the age of 15, at least you meet the grandmother who died before you were born and she's on hand to care for you and love you. If, as a young man, you left a beloved wife behind, when she arrives in Elsewhere, you've grown backwards to 17 and have fallen in love with someone else ... There are dogs in Elsewhere, too, and Liz just happens to be a natural speaker of Canine. (That such people exist here on earth is well known to all dog-lovers.) Other animals appear too.

What happens in Elsewhere is this: you arrive by ship. You get a job suited to your talents. As previously noted, you age backwards. And you can go and observe the world you left behind, by putting an "eternim" (that's the currency there) into a slot and staring through powerful binoculars at the world of the living. You can even try to contact those on Earth. Liz, with some difficulty, manages to get through to her brother. At the end of your time in Elsewhere, you are a tiny baby again. You're closely wrapped in swaddling clothes and sent down the River to become another

baby. You're reborn. It's a more comforting reincarnation scenario than believing you'll be punished for your earthly behaviour by being turned into a cockroach or a rat.

The best thing about this book is the way it's written. It's a third-person narration in the present tense, like many ... novels these days, and this gives it an ordinariness that makes the strangeness even more persuasive. There aren't any grand effects or spectacular events. Rather, life in Elsewhere goes on very much as it does on Earth. You miss your family when you're away from them. You're homesick. You fall in love. The books you found boring on Earth are still boring. "He tries to read *The Brothers Karamazov*, the new translation that he's been trying to read since before he died without ever making it past page sixty-two." It's uplifting and sometimes moving. It's also funny, which stops it being in the least sentimental. It will be popular with young people, and can take its place quite happily in the long list of books about what happens when we leave our earthly lives behind us.

Reviewed by Adele Geras in *The Guardian* (UK)

Some suggested points for discussion

- ☞ 'How long does a dream have to last before it's just life?' (page 21). For a long time Liz is convinced that she is dreaming. When does she realise that she won't wake up, and what makes her realise it? How does she react when she finds out?
- ☞ 'In a way, it feels more like she is still alive and the only guest at the collective funeral for everyone she has ever known.' (page 30) What do you think of this description of Liz's reaction to watching her own funeral?
- ☞ How would you describe Liz's character? How different is she from Thandi?
- ☞ Liz is outraged at the unfairness of growing younger, being reborn and starting out as a baby all over again. Betty explains that 'For most older people, Lizzie, this is a good thing. I imagine it isn't quite so appealing when one is your age.' (page 48) What do you think she means by this? How true do you think it is and why might it be so?
- ☞ How different is Elsewhere from Earth? Are there any improvements? Liz makes a list of the four things she most misses about Earth. What would be on your list if you found yourself in Elsewhere?
- ☞ "'Dead," Aldous says "is little more than a state of mind. Many people on Earth spend their whole lives dead.'" (page 83) What do you think Aldous means by this? What is the effect of Liz's obsession with the Observation Deck on her new life? What finally prompts her to let go of her old life?
- ☞ 'Why do two people fall in love? It's a mystery' is the refrain which runs throughout the chapter entitled 'A Mystery,' beginning on page 165. Why do you think Owen and Liz fall for each other? What happens when Emily joins Owen in Elsewhere?
- ☞ If you had been Liz would you have taken the Sneaker Clause?
- ☞ How does life in Elsewhere change Liz? How does she find a way to forgive Amadou? How different is the

way she felt about Elsewhere at the beginning from the way she feels about it on her final Release?

☞ How does Gabrielle Zevin inject humour into what could be a very sad story?

☞ Why do you think Zevin chose to call her novel *Elsewhere*? How appropriate did you find the title and why? Could the place she describes be called 'heaven,' 'paradise' or something else, and if so what?

☞ Zevin is a screenwriter as well as a novelist. Do you think that *Elsewhere* would make a good film and if so, why? Who would you choose to play Liz in a film version? What about the other characters?

Suggested further reading

How I Live Now by Meg Rosoff

A Gathering Light by Jennifer Donnelly

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold

The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

After You'd Gone by Maggie O'Farrell

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

The Five People You Meet in Heaven by Mitch Albom

The Time Traveller's Wife by Audrey Niffenegger

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon

Other books by Gabrielle Zevin

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