

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Elizabeth Strout was born in Portland, Maine, and grew up in small towns in Maine and New Hampshire. From a young age she was drawn to writing things down, keeping notebooks that recorded the quotidian details of her days. She was also drawn to books, and spent hours of her youth in the local library lingering among the stacks of fiction. During the summer months of her childhood she played outdoors, either with her brother, or, more often, alone, and this is where she developed her deep and abiding love of the physical world: the seaweed covered rocks along the coast of Maine, and the woods of New Hampshire with its hidden wildflowers.

During her adolescent years, Strout continued writing avidly, having conceived of herself as a writer from early on. She read biographies of writers, and was already studying – on her own – the way American writers, in particular, told their stories. Poetry was something she read and memorized; by the age of sixteen was sending out stories to magazines. Her first story was published when she was twenty-six.

Strout attended Bates College, graduating with a degree in English in 1977. Two years later, she went to Syracuse University College of Law, where she received a law degree along with a Certificate in Gerontology. She worked briefly for Legal Services, before moving to New York City, where she became an adjunct in the English Department of Borough of Manhattan Community College. By this time she was publishing more stories in literary magazines and *Redbook* and *Seventeen*. Juggling the needs that came with raising a family and her teaching schedule, she found a few hours each day to work on her writing.

- Author's website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Elizabeth Strout chose to structure *Anything Is Possible* as a novel in the form of linked stories? How would your understanding of the book change if it had been written instead as a novel with a single narrative?

2. How does the town of Amgash feature in the text? How does it shape the lives of its residents? If Amgash had its own personality, how would you characterize it?
3. The past plays a strong role in these stories, and many of the characters find themselves struggling to reconcile with it. What are the various ways in which the past shapes them? How do they attempt to deal with their own pasts, and those of the people around them?
4. Strout deals with many different types of family relationships in the book—between parents and children, between spouses, among siblings. How are these different types of relationships treated? What are the differences and similarities in the ways the characters navigate these relationships? Which ones resonated most with you, and why?
5. An emotion that Strout addresses throughout *Anything Is Possible* is shame. What are the different roles shame plays for the various characters in these stories? How are they motivated, propelled, or hindered by shame? What effects does shame have on these characters' sense of self and their relationships with others?
6. Lucy Barton's legend looms large in Amgash. How do we perceive her through the eyes of the characters in each of these stories? How do these impressions of her differ? When Lucy makes an appearance in "Sister," did your perception of her change as Strout reveals the impact of Lucy's absence on her siblings?
7. Strout portrays wealth and/or poverty through the changing circumstances of several of her characters: Linda Peterson-Cornell; Abel Blaine; Abel's sister, Dottie; Tommy Barton and his sister Vicky. How do these characters react to their economic circumstances? How do these circumstances shape their relationships to those around them, and how they are perceived?
8. Many of the characters in these stories overcome adverse circumstances to experience moments of grace—Abel Blaine, Patty Nicely, and Angelina Mumford, for example. How do these moments of grace present themselves? Why do you think Strout decided to give her characters these opportunities for grace? How did this shape your understanding of these stories and characters?
9. Was there a character or story that affected you more than the others? Which, and why?
10. How did you interpret Strout's choice of *Anything Is Possible* as a title, and how do you think this concept resonated with Abel Blaine in the last chapter of the book?
11. Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it? Is anything left unresolved or ambiguous? How do you picture the characters' lives after the end of the story?
12. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more work by this author?

<https://www.elizabethstrout.com/books/anything-is-possible/questions-for-discussion#:~:text=How%20would%20your%20understanding%20of,how%20would%20you%20characterize%20it%3F>

BOOK REVIEWS

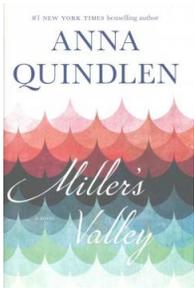
Booklist

In this collection of short stories centered in and near the fictional town of Amgash, Illinois, last visited in *My Name Is Lucy Barton* (2016), Strout once again shows her talent for adroitly uncovering what makes ordinary people tick. Here, for the most part, it's sex. Nearly every story has sex at its core--not erotic or salacious sex, but the sex that beats in our hearts, the mundane stuff that brought every last one of us into being. It's almost misleading to classify these as short stories; while they read fine as stand-alones, they work best as chapters that make up a novel of Amgash. Each story feeds off a previous one, whether via shared characters or mention of a prior incident. For example, Lucy's former classmate Patty not only gets her own story, she's also featured prominently in several stories and is mentioned in passing in others. Most of the stories feature Lucy herself--on the periphery, at least--whether it's a character reading Lucy's latest book or seeing her on a TV spot or stopping on a memory of the dirt-poor Barton clan. Clearly, this is a must-read for fans of Lucy Barton, but it's also an excellent introduction to Strout's marvelously smart character studies.--Rebecca Vnuk

Kirkus Reviews

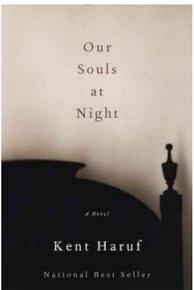
A radiant collection of stories linked to Strout's previous novel, *My Name Is Lucy Barton* (2016, etc.), but moving beyond its first-person narration to limn small-town life from multiple perspectives. Lucy is long gone from Amgash, Illinois, but her absence looms large; now that she's a well-known author, the fact that her desperately poor family was despised and outcast has become an uncomfortable memory for the locals, including her damaged brother, Pete, and resentful sister, Vicky. Strout stakes out the collection's moral terrain in its first story, "The Sign." Tommy Guptill, who was kind to Lucy when she was a girl, still drops by the ramshackle Barton house to check on Pete even though it's quite likely that Pete's father was responsible for the fire that destroyed Tommy's dairy farm and reduced him to taking a job as a school janitor. Tommy is an extraordinarily good man who took the calamitous fire as a spiritual lesson in what was truly important and has lived by it ever since. Patty Nicely, protagonist of "Windmills," is another genuinely decent person who returns kindness for cruelty from Vicky's angry daughter, Lila, who, in addition to viciously insulting Patty, states the jaundiced town wisdom about Lucy: "She thinks she's better than any of us." That isn't so, we see in the story in which Lucy finally visits home ("Sister"), but there are plenty of mean-spirited people in Amgash who like to think so; it excuses their own various forms of uncaring. Class prejudice remains one of Strout's enduring themes, along with the complex, fraught bonds of family across the generations, and she investigates both with tender yet tough-minded compassion for even the most repulsive characters (Patty's nasty sister, Linda, and her predatory husband, Jay, in the collection's creepiest story, "Cracked"). The epic scope within seemingly modest confines recalls Strout's Pulitzer Prize winner, *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), and her ability to discern vulnerabilities buried beneath bad behavior is as acute as ever. Another powerful examination of painfully human ambiguities and ambivalences--this gifted writer just keeps getting better.

READALIKES



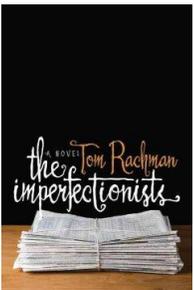
***Miller's Valley* by Anna Quindlen**

Coming of age in a dwindling 1960s farming community in eastern Pennsylvania, Mimi struggles with profound family secrets and the pain of falling in love with the wrong person against a backdrop of dynamic historical periods.



***Our Souls at Night* by Kent Haruf**

Addie Moore and Louis Waters, a widow and widower each living alone, forge a loving bond over their shared loneliness, provoking local gossip and the disapproval of their grown children in ways that are further complicated by an extended visit by a sad young grandchild.



***The Imperfectionists* by Tom Rachman**

Preoccupied by personal challenges while running a struggling newspaper in Rome, an obituary writer confronts mortality, an eccentric publisher obsesses over his dog, and other staff members uncover the paper's founding by an impulsive millionaire.