

# Anything is Possible

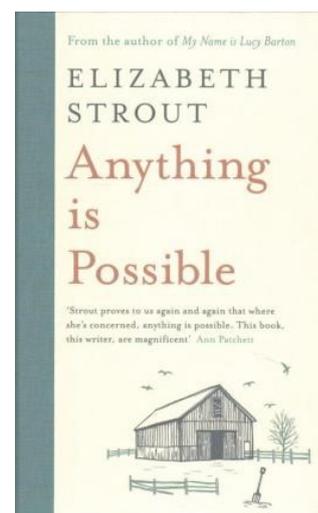
Elizabeth Strout



F Scott Fitzgerald said about the essence of a writer: “There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn’t be. He’s too many people if he’s any good.” For me, this is a way of saying the same thing. That the writer’s self is not one coherent thing, it is many things. And that self is at its best when it is suspended, if not downright disappeared. I use the self and get rid of the self when I write. And in Maine, I walk down the street and then scurry into my little studio above the bookstore, where I am free again.



[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/09/elizabeth-strout-divide-two-places-point-of-view> ]



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## Brief 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.

[<https://www.elizabethstrout.com/about>]

## Letter to readers

Many parts of *Anything is Possible* were written while I was writing *My Name is Lucy Barton*. It was like this: As I wrote about the people that Lucy and her mother were talking about in the hospital, I thought, *Oh – they have their own story!* And then I would – literally – move to a different part of the table I work on, and I would scribble some scenes about the Pretty Nicely Girls, or about Mississippi Mary. Then when I was finished with *My Name is Lucy Barton*, I realized I had another book that could, when I finished it, stand on its own, and that was surprising and fun for me.

I chose a similar format to *Olive Kitteridge* because this is how the book came to me: a group of people from a certain part of the country – in this case the Midwest – have their stories here about themselves and each other. As Patty Nicely realizes: People are mostly and mainly interested in themselves. But this does not disturb her, because she recognizes the human-ness of this quality and also the ability to transcend it.

I hope by reading *Anything is Possible* you are able for a few moments to transcend the life you are living and to understand – and see – people who may live very differently, but who have similar desires for love and safety and the friendship of others, in whatever form that may take.

[<https://www.elizabethstrout.com/books/anything-is-possible/letter-to-readers> ]

## The books that made Elizabeth Strout

### **The book I am currently reading**

*A Long Way from Home* by Peter Carey. It's an astonishing piece of work: so Peter Carey, and yet completely on its own, about a couple in the 1950's who are doing the Redex Trial – a race around the Australian continent – with their navigator. The places the book goes – well, it's just wonderful; it feels necessary.

### **The book that changed my life**

Honestly, all the good books I have read have somehow changed my life. A good book creates a sense of opening – of the soul, of one's life, of other people's lives.

### **The book I wished I'd written**

*The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* by Oscar Hijuelos. The cultural history of Cuban Americans is something I would have had no knowledge about, but boy, did I admire that book!

### **The book that had the greatest influence on my writing**

*The Collected Stories* of William Trevor. I credit him with a great deal of my ability to find my way around a sentence. What a writer he was; he could flip over a sentence so gently, and show the underbelly in a heartbeat. His work is always quietly compassionate. Also the work of Alice Munro has influenced me. Munro and Trevor have been like two bookends in my writing life.

### **The book that changed my mind**

*The Return* by Hisham Matar opened my mind. It brought me into unfamiliar territory, and made it familiar; the sense of loss was something I understood right away, and I was so grateful to have read it.

### **The last book that made me cry**

*Local Souls* by Allan Gurganus. The first novella in this collection of three novellas, called "Fear Not," had me tearing up almost immediately, and I could not understand why at first. By the end of it, I was weeping openly.

### **The last book that made me laugh**

I recently reread *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Dostoevsky, and I had forgotten – or maybe I didn't get it the first time around – how funny he is, how funny the book is in places, the observations thrown out. I laughed out loud a number of times reading it.

### **The book I couldn't finish**

I can't remember. But I am not a person who feels obligated to read a book to the last page if it is not doing something for me.

### **The book I'm most ashamed not to have read**

*Moby-Dick*. I am so embarrassed that I never read that book; I feel as if I should start it right now.

### **The book I most often give as a gift**

I give out Trevor's *Collected Stories* like a preacher with his Bible. And people are always glad to have it, I have noticed that.

### **My earliest reading memory**

*Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* by John Updike. I must have been about six or seven. Obviously I couldn't understand much of what was going on, but I did understand this: that to be a child did not pay. Adult life was where the real stuff was happening.

### **My guilty pleasure**

Seriously? It's *War and Peace*. The first time I read it, I was on vacation with my in-laws and sitting by the pool one of them said: "Liz, that's so pretentious, can't you cover that up?" I almost died. So now I read it furtively in the privacy of my home.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/02/elizabeth-strout-war-peace-books-that-made-me>]

## Elizabeth Strout, masterful chronicler of small-town America

For years, I didn't read Elizabeth Strout. If I'm honest, I was put off by the titles, which seemed to be snatched from the noticeboard of a particularly cultivated old people's home: *Amy and Isabelle* was her first novel, published in 1998, and this was followed by *Abide With Me* in 2006, *Olive Kitteridge* two years later and *The Burgess Boys* in 2013.

I watched the HBO miniseries adaptation of *Olive Kitteridge*, starring Frances McDormand, and I sort of loved it but wasn't sure it was worth four whole hours. All of which is a roundabout way of saying that it took me longer than it should have to discover Strout's writing. It was only with the publication of *My Name Is Lucy Barton* last year that I eventually started reading her.

What a gift it was. *My Name Is Lucy Barton* told the story of a hospitalised novelist coming to terms with her deprived childhood. It was set over five days, within four walls, and came in at 200 pages. Much of the novel consisted of oblique conversations between Lucy and her estranged mother, interspersed with fragments of memory that were eventually stitched together to give a fuller impression of an upbringing punctuated by abuse and impoverishment.

It was a devastating story, quietly told by a writer with a casually

worn mastery of structure. Strout is the opposite of a literary show-off: her writing has no ego and the sentences she creates are to serve the characters, rather than the author. *My Name Is Lucy Barton* was rightly longlisted for the 2016 Man Booker prize.

*Anything Is Possible* is not exactly a sequel, but it does feature Lucy Barton as one of the characters. Set in and around Barton's home town of Amgash, Illinois, this is a shimmering masterpiece of a book. It is a novel told in a series of interconnected stories, each featuring a tale of small-town life that illuminates a more profound truth.

The opening chapter concerns Tommy Guptill, who had once owned a dairy farm that burned to the ground, possibly as a result of arson. Instead of being shattered by the loss of his home and livelihood, Guptill sees the fire as a spiritual omen: "It was not in Tommy's nature to regret things and on the night of the fire – in the midst of his galloping fear – he understood that all that mattered in the world were his wife and children and he thought that people lived their whole lives not knowing this as sharp and constantly as he did."

This is a classic Strout sentence, in that it manages to convey a detail of individual character at the same time as that character's broader understanding of life and it does all this while still

maintaining an easy rhythm and economy of expression.

Writing like this looks easy, but it isn't. Strout's style is all the more powerful for its understatement, and reminded me of both John Steinbeck and Anne Tyler – two other great observers of the interaction between internal and external landscapes, who also appreciate the value of simplicity over self-conscious floridity.

But there are echoes of Tolstoy here, too, most notably the Russian novelist's oft-quoted maxim that "each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". The characters in *Anything Is Possible* are shaped and sometimes haunted by their past, or trapped by the difficulties of present relationships and their inability to say how they feel.

There is, in every chapter, a wrenching, beautiful dissonance between private desires and public obligations: there is Linda, who stays with her rich, distant husband in their soulless, art-filled mansion, despite his creepy predilections; and Charlie, the Vietnam vet tortured by his wartime experiences, who has fallen in love with a prostitute and out of love with his wife; and the father who keeps his sexuality a secret from his family until his death, when the truth emerges.

Strout shows compassion for her characters, but never

sentimentality. Their stories are told with respect, nuance and a pitch-perfect ear for dialogue.

In *Mississippi Mary*, a woman goes to visit her mother, Mary, now living in an Italian village with her younger lover. The daughter tells Mary that other people they pass on the street mistakenly believe that, because of the visible age difference, her romantic partner is actually her son.

“Mary considered this. ‘Except why would they think I was his mother? I’m American, he’s Italian. They probably didn’t think that.’

“‘You’re my mother!’ Angelina burst out, and this caused Mary to almost weep again, because she had a searing glimpse of all the damage she must have done.”

That’s just one example of Strout’s ear for conversational subtlety – she writes people talking as they actually talk and yet not one line of dialogue is wasted. It all does something: advancing the story in some way or elucidating an inner feeling, in this case, a daughter’s sense of rejection and possession and the impetuosity she knows she should have outgrown. All this in a couple of sentences.

But Strout’s insight into human vulnerability is not mushy or hand-wringing. She has an acute eye for bitter, unhappy women who hide behind their social standing. She’s acerbic when it comes to class: the people who think they’re better than others just because

they’ve moved away or made more money or because they have two Picassos hanging on the living-room wall.

When Lucy Barton herself finally makes an appearance in “Sister” (an astonishingly written chapter, which is worth the cover price alone), she is shown struggling with her own unbelonging. In spite of her difficult childhood, Lucy has become a published author and her success is referred to by other characters throughout the book with a mixture of pride and resentment. But when she returns to Amgash, Lucy is caught between two worlds – simultaneously comforted by the familiarity of her one-time home and panicked by the memories it contains. She, like us, is now a visitor to this town.

Strout is a brilliant chronicler of the ambiguity and delicacy of the human condition. *Anything Is Possible* is a wise, stunning novel. If there is a theme that unites these stories, it is the longing to be understood – arguably the most human desire of all.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/23/anything-is-possible-elizabeth-strout-review>]

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## “I have never written anything from beginning to end”

I have always been able to write anywhere: I have written scenes on the subway, or a city bus, or in a crowded coffee shop. But my favourite place to write is at home, and this has always been true. These days I write first thing in the morning after having breakfast with my husband; my writing day starts as soon as he leaves the apartment, which is usually right after breakfast. Then I clear the table and sit down to work. I write mostly by hand, transcribing it on a computer when I can no longer read my writing, when I have made too many marks on the paper to be able to see the scene I am trying to write.

Almost always I will start by writing a scene or a piece of a scene. I have learned over the years to take anything that is most pressing to me – it may be as mundane as a concern about upcoming dental work, or as serious as worrying about the safety of my child – and to transpose that emotion into a character. This will give the scene life, as opposed to having it wooden. I am a very messy worker – I push these scenes around our table. It is a big table, and over time I realise which scenes are connected. I have never written anything from beginning to end, not a story or a novel. I just collect different scenes, and the ones that aren't any good to me, get slipped on to the floor and eventually into the wastebasket. (There are many of those.)

Sometimes I will move to the couch, which looks out at New York's East River, and write from there. Then I will walk around the apartment talking to myself, and it is always about the work. So I move about, rather happily, until I begin to see enough scenes that will make a book or a story. This period may last for a year or more, and then I have to get down to writing the book.

The actual writing of it – deciding what the reader needs and when the reader needs it – is not as fun as writing the scenes; I feel less free, but there is a pleasure in drawing myself – and the reader – together this way. I always imagine an ideal reader: someone who is patient, but not too patient; someone who needs the book and wants to read it, but may not read it if I do not write it honestly. For me, it is a dance with the reader.

Except for my cereal for breakfast, and my coffee, I don't tend to eat or drink as I work. I will work until lunch time, which I try and put off as long as I can, because there is something about having lunch that makes the energy level drop. I have learned this over time.

When we are in Maine, I have my studio above a bookstore. That is a splendid place to work; I have my own thermostat and I turn the heat way up in the winter. I have a couch there as well, and also a big table, and there I find I can read after lunch

and perhaps get back to my work a tiny bit more in the afternoon. This is always dangerous, the return to the work on the same day that I did it: if I feel it is good work, I am happy for the rest of the day, but if I feel it is not good work, I become fretful. So I have to be careful with that.

I don't listen to any music, as I have heard other writers do. But I don't need complete silence around me. I just need the sense of being alone in my head. This is harder to achieve than it sounds, and is why the anonymity of a subway has sometimes worked for me. And it is why I like being home alone the best.

**Elizabeth Strout**

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/elizabeth-strout-my-writing-day>]

