

## Gabrielle Zevin

{ IN HER WORDS }

**I** come from a family of readers. Mom's favorite poem is "This Is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams, which she has been known to recite after a few cocktails, and she prefers novels about plucky orphans who go to college, have careers, fall in love—preferably in that order. Dad's favorite authors are Tom Clancy, Stuart Woods, Jeffery Deaver, and Dean Koontz. He dislikes Stephen King on the grounds that he is "too voice-y." When Michael Crichton died, Dad shook his head and said, "We'll not see his like again." It was as if he had known Crichton personally. He'll deny this, but I suspect he was far less sad when my grandmother died earlier that same year. She had had a long illness, and Dad's relationship to Michael Crichton was probably less complex and more consistently entertaining.

Surely, my parents are readers because my grandparents were readers. My dad's mother was a teacher. Grandma was critical, with a taste for literary fiction. Is *snob* too strong a word? When I read *Anne of Green Gables* at eight years old, she told me it was "fine for now, but a bit lowbrow." She favored short stories from the *New Yorker* and used to rip them out and send them to me in fat security envelopes. I'd always hope for a twenty; instead, I'd get Alice Munro with a staple.

My paternal grandfather, an academic, was fond of giving all of us heavy (in subject and in weight) nonfiction tomes. No one in my family ever read Grandfather's offerings, but we all pretended to. From this, I learned the valuable skill of how to discuss a book you haven't read. (The secret is, of course, to let the other person do the talking: *Yes, but what do you think?*) Grandfather considered novels to be fluff. The only novel I ever remember him praising much was *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. When my first novel, *Margarettown*, came out in 2005, he told my dad that he'd struggled through a few chapters before quitting. Though he was certainly not the only person to have such a reaction to my first novel, I was young,

and my feelings were enormously hurt. For the rest of my grandfather's life, he and I barely spoke. Books, I'd been taught, were worth holding grudges over. After all, I am from a family of readers.

When I am asked why I became a writer, I say it's because my parents took me to the library like it was church. On weekends, the ritual was to go to the library followed by Burger King. (This begs the question: have I been conditioned, Pavlov-style, to say I love books, when actually what I love is Burger King?) My dad is Jewish; my mom is Catholic, or at least attended a Catholic school. I'm the product of no religion to speak of except, if this isn't too pretentious to write, the religion of books. The first place I can remember being allowed to go on my own is the bookstore that was next to the supermarket. While my parents would grocery shop, I would be allowed to roam Village Books—I believe that was the store's name—with a five-dollar bill, more than enough for a paperback in the mid-1980s. I was seven years old, and my parents believed that no harm could possibly befall their precious daughter in a bookstore. I have been operating under this principle ever since, and my life has passed in a series of bookstores.

I see myself at ten years old on a class trip to a children's bookstore in a strip mall to meet Donald Sobol, who wrote the Encyclopedia Brown series. Poor Mr. Sobol. I remember him practically begging us to ask questions. No one did! He seemed so much older than Encyclopedia Brown, so much older than we expected. And at sixteen, I remember hanging out at the local Brentano's, getting the cute boy who worked behind the counter to gift wrap the remainderd copy of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* I was buying. The book, of course, was a present for me. I see myself at almost eighteen, kissing an older boy in the entrance of a large bookstore called Liberties. It was just before closing, and I had bright red lips and a copy of *Angels in America: Perestroika* under my arm, and that young man never saw me coming. I see myself buying course books for English 10B at the Grolier in Cambridge, and the man who pressed Stephen Dunn into my hand. "He's just won the Pulitzer," he said. "But he's good anyway." And he was. I remember how delighted I was to discover that Harvard Bookstore's basement sold used books at 50 percent off the original cover price. You could get Virginia Woolf for thirteen cents! *Ulysses* for a dime! I remember the clerk at St. Marks Books in New York who told me that *Infinite Jest* was "gonna blow my mind." And it did. I

remember a nameless bookstore just down the street from St. Marks that was open all night. I was an insomniac in those days and sometimes it seemed of pivotal importance to me to buy *King Queen Knave* at 2 a.m. I remember the big black dog that used to greet you at Ivy's and Murder Ink on the Upper West Side. I can see my black-tighted legs blocking up the Drama aisle at the Barnes and Noble at Lincoln Center, and how no one ever made me move. I remember years later when that Barnes and Noble closed, too. I remember going to the Century 21 clothing store that replaced it and having that feeling people supposedly get when they go back to their old high schools—it seemed so much smaller.

I remember becoming a published author and how that, for better or for worse, changed my relationship to bookstores yet again. I remember when I learned that books didn't end up face out and on tables *by accident*. I can see myself just before my thirtieth birthday on my first book tour. I think of Farrar, Straus and Giroux's Midwestern book rep Mark Gates chain-smoking his way through the Chicago suburbs and telling me that the best reader he ever heard was Alice McDermott. Mark knew everything, so I asked him how I could get to be more Alice McDermott-ish. "Mileage," he said with a throaty laugh. I remember my first book party at the Corner Bookstore on the Upper East Side. I was twenty-seven years old. I had bought a black lace dress at Filene's (now closed), and there was wine and cheese and fruit, and I thought, this is the life. I see myself in the basement at Word Brooklyn and on a ladder at Blue Willow in Houston and on a cushioned divan, like a queen, at the Book Stall in Winnetka. I see myself now. I'm Donald Sobol: won't you please ask a question?

*The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry*, my eighth novel, is about a bookstore and a bookseller and a stolen manuscript and a girl abandoned in a poorly stocked children's section. You must already know how this is going to end—I've already told you I come from a family who believed that no child left in a bookstore ever came to any harm.