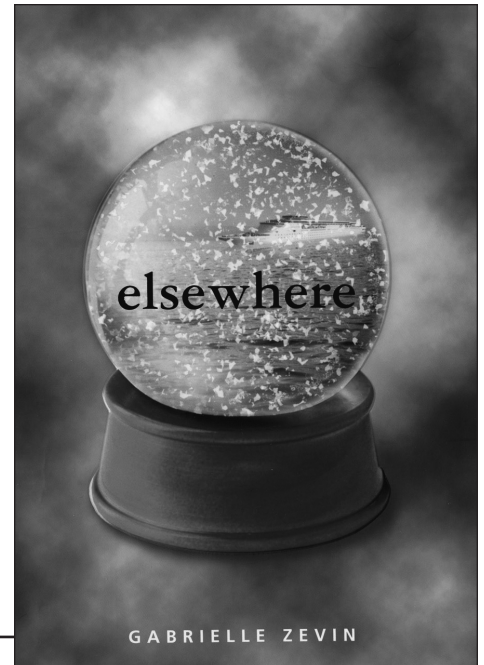

Teachers' Guide

Elsewhere

by Gabrielle Zevin



Introduction

Liz awakens in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. Why is she on a ship in the middle of the ocean? Where is the ship heading? And who is this other girl named Thandi who is sharing her room? Liz finally comes to understand that she has been killed by a hit-and-run driver and is bound for a place called Elsewhere.

Liz arrives in Elsewhere and is greeted by her grandmother Betty, a woman who died even before Liz was born. On the drive to her home, Betty explains how Elsewhere operates. Liz will live in Elsewhere and age in reverse. She is expected to decide on some sort of avocation (a job she loves) and to go on with her life until she becomes a baby. At that point, Liz will be “released” to return to Earth and given an entirely new life.

Liz resists the customs of Elsewhere. She is angered that instead of growing older and obtaining her driver’s license and falling in love, she will get younger. She refuses to do more than

sit each day at the Observation Deck and watch her family and friends back on Earth through the binoculars. Eventually, bored with doing nothing but viewing the events on Earth, Liz begins to accept her new life. She elects to help domestic pets become acclimated to life in Elsewhere and ends up adopting a dog named Sadie on the first day of her job. Later, Liz meets Owen Wells and falls in love.

Life, though, is no easier in Elsewhere than it was on Earth, and Liz has to learn how to deal with loss and change. In Owen’s previous life on Earth, he was married. When his wife arrives in Elsewhere, Liz is displaced. She decides to take advantage of a special clause, known as the Sneaker Clause, and return to Earth now rather than wait for her inevitable infancy. At the last minute, Liz changes her mind. Owen rescues Liz from the water so she can return to life on Elsewhere. Liz continues to grow younger until, as the novel ends, she is released into the River to be born anew on Earth. *Elsewhere* explores how we all must cope with life and whatever is to come after our lives end.

Classroom Connections

Reading and English Language Arts classes address skills that often overlap. Therefore, a critical reading of this novel can be used in any classroom setting that focuses on the reading, comprehension, and discussion of text. Since this novel relies on powerful imagery, subtle symbolism, and other advanced components of literature, a study of this story can extend beyond basic skills in reading to include more sophisticated skills such as identifying symbolism and understanding figurative language.

Moreover, since reading and writing are skills that share many of the same characteristics, students can be encouraged to write in response to their reading. This novel can also be tied to other topics such as careers, grief and loss, and relationships. School counselors can be involved in the planning and delivery of instruction about this novel.

Language Arts/English/Reading Standards:

(www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm)

These standards, set by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), can be developed through a study of this novel:

- Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Pre-reading Activity

Much of Liz's initial anger at finding herself in Elsewhere is that her future plans are all canceled. Since everyone in Elsewhere ages in reverse, Liz will never have the chance to get her driver's license, go to the prom, or graduate from high school. Compile a list of three goals you hope to accomplish in the next year. Why is each goal important? How must you go about accomplishing these goals?

Discussion Questions

■ Water is a powerful image and symbol that runs throughout the book. Liz's story opens on the ocean; the Well is in the water; the Observation Decks face the water; Liz can communicate through a water source with her brother, Alvy. What other aspects of the importance of water are evident in the novel? Why does the author elect to use water as such an essential symbol? Comment on some of the other symbols, such as Liz's stitches, the watch her father gave her, and the snow globe.

■ This novel is divided into three separate parts and also employs a prologue and an epilogue. Understanding the structure of the novel is important to understanding the story itself. Why

is the scene with Liz's dog, Lucy, the first glimpse the author provides of the story? How does this scene foreshadow what will come later in the novel? How does the epilogue bring the novel not to a close but to a resolution? What purpose do the three parts serve? What important events occur in each of the three parts?

■ There are many characters who are part of the story of *Elsewhere*, all of them critical to it. The author, Gabrielle Zevin, introduces the characters early in the story. Liz meets Thandi and Curtis on the ship, Grandma Betty upon her arrival, Aldous Ghent at the acclimation session, and Owen at the Well. No characters, not even the canine ones, are minor to the story. Explore how the characters move the novel forward. For instance, what important role does Esther, the supervisor at the Observation Deck, play? Why is Thandi critical to the story? Could the novel be complete without Sadie or Lucy or Alvy? 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?

■ 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 E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* as she grows younger. Finally, Owen reads Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* to Liz when she is no longer able to read on her own. Every one of these titles deals with some aspect of life as it relates to Elsewhere as well as Earth. How does each address some facet of Liz's life and experiences?

■ How does the author use humor in the novel? What examples of wordplay are evident? For instance, Liz is aboard a ship called the *Nile* and Thandi tells her she is in denial (de-nile). Another example of this gentle humor is when Liz meets Sadie and informs the dog that she is drinking from a toilet. Locate other instances of humor and discuss how it is used in the novel. Is the humor intended to defuse the emotion of a serious situation or scene? Is it more of a way to show how Liz is becoming acclimated to life on Elsewhere?

■ Be sure to visit the Web site for the book at: www.fsgkidsbooks.com/elsewhere/index.htm. How

does the structure of the site reflect the structure and content of the novel?

■ 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?

About the Author

Elsewhere is the first young-adult novel by author Gabrielle Zevin, but it is not her first piece of writing. Gabrielle is the author of one book for adults, *Margarettown*, and several screenplays, including *Conversations with Other Women*, which was made into a film starring Helena Bonham Carter and Aaron Eckhart. She is a graduate of Harvard University with a degree in English and American Literature and lives in New York City with her pug dog, Mrs. DeWinter, and her partner of ten years, director Hans Canosa.



Gabrielle says, "When I was around eight, I learned how to touch-type at school, and I received a computer as a present. I started writing plays, and for many years I thought I would be a playwright. Over the years, I had studiously managed to write everything but novels — I had been a copious pen pal, a first-class transcriptionist, a professional screenwriter (still am, actually), a teen music reviewer, a mediocre research-paper writer, and, of course, a writer of plays. So, although I was not writing novels, I was always writing something. Actually, I hadn't ever felt any particular calling to be a novelist, and I clearly remember telling a friend of mine about six months before I started work on *Elsewhere* that I would NEVER write a novel.

And then I thought of the idea for *Elsewhere*, which 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. So it was fortunate that I liked typing, because I would be typing Liz's story for many a moon.

"Although I still write screenplays, I've written two other novels since writing *Elsewhere*. And I'm happy to report that I still like the sound of the keys."

For more on Gabrielle Zevin:

Web sites:

www.fsgkidsbooks.com

Contains more information about the author and her book

www.fsgkidsbooks.com/elsewhere

Contains everything about *Elsewhere* and includes a biographical sketch of and an interview with the author

www.teenreads.com/authors/au-zevin-gabrielle.asp

Features biographical information and an interview with the author

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An ALA Notable Book

A *Booklist* Editors' Choice

Fanfare, *The Horn Book's* Honor List

A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Children's Book of the Year

A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

- ★ "A work of powerful beauty." — Starred, *Booklist*
- ★ "With an intriguing and well-developed premise, thoughtful characterization, and refreshing style, Zevin's poignant novel rewards readers with a view of death that celebrates the rich complexities of being alive." — Starred, *The Horn Book*
- ★ "This intriguing novel . . . provides much to think about and discuss." — Starred, *School Library Journal*

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