



# Interview: Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author Elizabeth Strout



By [Olivia Snaije](#)  
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Elizabeth Strout photo Leonardo Cendamo

When Elizabeth Strout was younger, she thought she was born in the wrong place. She doesn't think so anymore, but because everyone around her was so taciturn and she was a "chatterbox", she was a source of embarrassment for her family.

"My father was a lovely man," she said; during an interview in Paris for the French launch of her book [\*My Name Is Lucy Barton\*](#). "But I remember him saying to me 'less talk, less talk'."

Although she calls herself "a blabber mouth" and says that the minimalist style that was in vogue when she began writing in the 1970s wasn't her thing, much of the intensity in Strout's work is in what she *doesn't* say, and in the pauses. In real life she is the same: funny, charming, warm, but certainly not loquacious. Her answers are brief, as if she wants the ball to stay in the interviewer's, or the reader's, court.

*My Name is Lucy Barton* tells the story of Lucy, a writer from a desperately poor rural background in Illinois, who now lives in New York. Lucy describes attending a panel with a writer she has met who tells the audience "It's not my job to make readers know what's a narrative voice and not the private view of the author." Strout is similar in public. *She* has done her work, *she* has lovingly described her characters with their flaws and innermost secrets, *she* has reported on the human condition and given it to us in a book, and now it's ours, to do what we like with it.

Elizabeth Strout is perhaps best known for her third novel, [\*Olive Kitteridge\*](#), which, among other prizes, won a Pulitzer, and was adapted into an HBO [\*miniseries\*](#) by Frances McDormand. The book is actually thirteen short stories that revolve around the formidable Olive Kitteridge, a retired schoolteacher living in Maine. One of the richest characters in contemporary literature today, she is also one of Strout's favorites—"she was such a part of my life for so long," she commented, adding that Olive is "not my mother. I couldn't write about my mother if I wanted to. She's so fundamentally unknowable."

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The mother-daughter relationship comes up frequently in Strout's work, such as in [\*Amy and Isabelle\*](#) about a mother and her teenage daughter. In *My Name is Lucy*

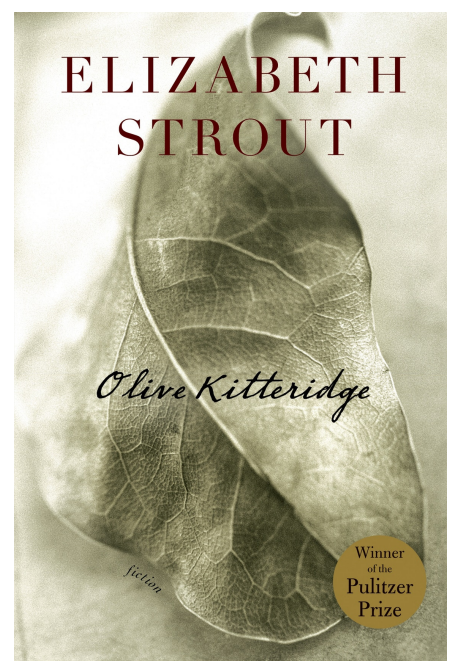
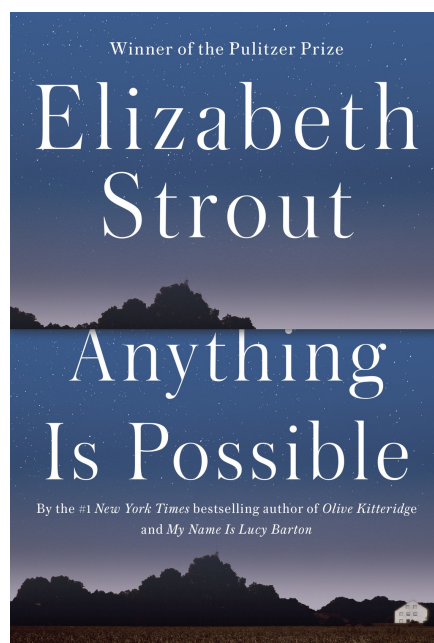
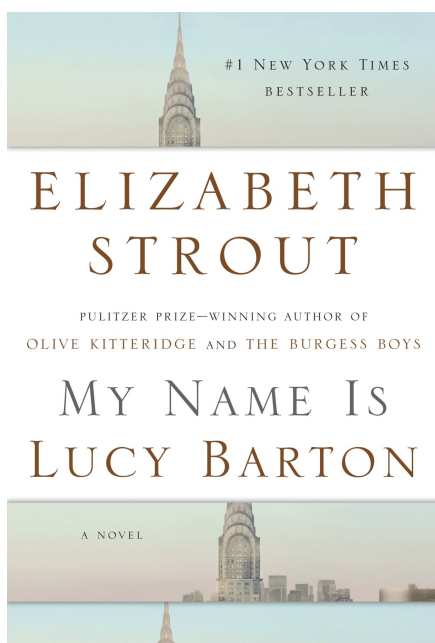
*Barton*, the book begins with Lucy being hospitalized, and her mother coming to visit her. But in *Lucy Barton*, Lucy’s mother is more of a device than the focus of the novel. “She gave me access to Lucy,” said Strout. Lucy’s mother, who takes a plane for the first time to visit her daughter in New York, also gave Strout a starting point to talk about the rural poverty that Lucy Barton comes from. Strout did not grow up poor, like Lucy Barton, but poverty was “a part of our lives.” She distinctly remembers a boy in her class being told by the teacher that he had dirt behind his ears and that being poor was no excuse not to wash.

No one is “too poor to buy a bar of soap,” a teacher tells Lucy Barton’s sister.

The social isolation brought on by poverty that Strout recounts in *Lucy Barton*— and in her latest book, *Anything Is Possible*, in which we find characters from Lucy Barton’s hometown—was based on “everything I observed when I was a child...Later, I realized that these were *people*.”

The rural environment Strout describes is also a place where many people might have voted for Donald Trump. Besides her own books, in which she was prescient, are there others that might allow people to understand Trump’s America?

“I think [Andre Dubus III](#) writes about class. [Richard Russo](#) writes about class in some way, and [Tobias Wolff](#). [Alice Munro](#), although Canadian, would write about the country girl, she would go straight in there. But I am a little struck by the dearth of class discussion in contemporary fiction. In my mind it’s strikingly vacant.”



This rural America that Strout describes so beautifully, is “in many ways, most familiar to me in a fundamental sense.”

Strout speaks of her childhood as being depopulated; she talks about playing alone in the woods, in a beautiful setting. She didn't begin to fill her imagination or notebook pages with characters until she was 16 or 17. Before that, being alone was what built her inner resources, “which are a very important part of me being a writer.”

Yet what stands out in Strout's novels is her deep love for her characters, with their flaws and failures. Part of what inspires her about people from Maine, for example, is that they are so reserved, and she can delve into what is unsaid. “Nobody says what they mean anyway,” notes Strout.

“I finally began to understand that if I'm working with a character I have to have a certain feeling for them, and that feeling is love. If I don't feel that then they get shoved off the table. Once I have that feeling I can enter into them and they can misbehave, they can do anything, and they do!” Strout often punctuates her sentences with a little laugh of delight and perhaps discovery in what she has just said.

“I don't judge them, which is wonderful and very freeing. We're all just people. It's just so interesting, that every single person is so different.”

Some writers walk around with their characters in their heads, they live with them, sometimes for years, until they have matured, and are ready to be put down on paper. Strout says: “I have to write a lot. My characters develop as I write and then they're in my head. Until they're done, they're always there.”

One also has the sense that all of Strout's characters, who become so palpable for the reader, are somehow interconnected, and that it might get very busy inside her imagination.

“It's so funny, they *are* in some way interconnected. It's like a huge family and it gets bigger and bigger. I don't think much about Amy and Isabelle anymore but they're still in me forever. They're part of the same bolt of material. I've had the image of a bolt of cloth, and unfolding that bolt and recognizing characters in the square in front of me. I think of them as a constellation. They are stars twinkling and understanding their connections.”

Strout's writing is so beautifully crafted that she gives the impression that it is effortless. She said this about her process:

“When I have a bad day of writing, and it happens, I get very depressed and I get very, very upset with myself. I think, ‘why can’t I get this down’. Those are terrible days and then you sort of forget about them. I just keep writing. I’m just so determined that instead of forgetting the piece I’ll pick it up and say ‘let’s try it again.’ Sentences come to me easily. My form of writer’s block is to write badly.”

And what is it that preoccupies Strout most in the world today?

“Truthfully, trying to figure out what’s the story here, although it’s not for us to figure out. If you turn on the news you see mudslides, and genocides, and then you also see during the day many lovely things, many small things. I’m preoccupied with what’s behind all this. I was reading a biography of Einstein and was very interested to hear what he said about his vision of the universe at one point. He said, imagine we’re children and we’ve wandered into a library and everything is organized and categorized on shelves and [because we are children] we don’t understand it. Even though I understand that I will never understand it, it still preoccupies me.”



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