



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## Station Eleven

by Emily St. John Mandel



# Table of Contents

# Station Eleven

About the Book .....	3
About the Author .....	4
Discussion Questions.....	5
Credits .....	6

“Survival is insufficient.”

## Preface

*Station Eleven*, Emily St. John Mandel's fourth novel, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, was a finalist for the National Book Award and PEN/Faulkner Award, was an Amazon Best Book of the Month, and was named one of the best books of the year by more than a dozen publications. It's been translated into 27 languages. "Equal parts page-turner and poem" (*Entertainment Weekly*), the novel is set 20 years after a devastating flu pandemic destroys civilization as we know it. A woman moves between the settlements of the altered world with a small troupe of actors and musicians until they encounter a violent prophet who threatens the tiny band's existence. "Possibly the most captivating and thought-provoking post-apocalyptic novel you will ever read" (*The Independent* London). "Think of Cormac McCarthy seesawing with Joan Didion ... Magnetic" (*Kirkus* starred). "It's hard to imagine a novel more perfectly suited, in both form and content, to this literary moment" (*The New Yorker*). "I kept putting the book down, looking around me, and thinking, 'Everything is a miracle'" (National Public Radio).

## What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



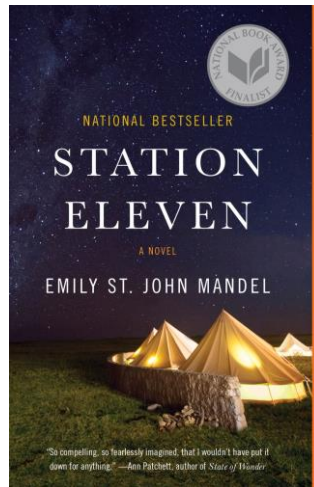
# About the Book

"I wanted to write a love letter to the world we find ourselves in." — Emily St. John Mandel in an interview with *Bustle*

The post-apocalyptic novel has grown popular enough to warrant its own genre, and one could argue that *Station Eleven* fits well within that category. Published by Knopf in 2014, it tells the story of a small band of actors and musicians 20 years after a flu pandemic has wiped out 99% of the Earth's population. Like other books in the genre, it highlights the fragility of our existence, our violent nature, and our capacity to survive despite the inevitable hardships of starvation, loneliness, and chaos. But this is where the similarities taper off, for the story Emily St. John Mandel chooses to tell is not one of horror and mayhem that even she admits would befall the survivors in the immediate aftermath of a complete societal collapse. *Station Eleven* describes a world of hope, of people coping with nostalgia and loss, both in the present and the future, of the power of art and relationships to fulfill us, sustain us, and nurture us back to our best selves.

The novel begins on a snowy night in Toronto during a theater production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where eight-year-old actress Kirsten Raymonde sees the famous Hollywood actor Arthur Leander suddenly struck by a fatal heart attack. This is the same night a super-flu starts to explode like a neutron bomb around the globe, overcrowding hospitals, grounding flights, clogging highways, rendering phone and internet connections useless. Soon there is no electricity, no running water. Within the week, civilization as we know it is wiped out.

From here, the narrative jumps 20 years into the future to a region around the Great Lakes when the worst is over and hints of culture and society are beginning to reemerge amidst a scattering of small settlements of survivors. There are no countries and no borders, and "ferals" still leap out from behind bushes, but there are pockets of tranquility and order. Kirsten is now an adult and part of a nomadic group of classical musicians and actors called the Travelling Symphony that roams the settlements in horse-drawn wagons performing Shakespeare plays, dedicated to keeping art and humanity alive. At each stop, Kirsten scavenges abandoned homes looking through old magazines for mention of Arthur, who—unlike almost everyone and everything else about the old world—is still vivid in her



memory. She carries with her a set of graphic novels called *Station Eleven* that Arthur gave her just before he died.

"I've long been interested in memory as a topic," writes Mandel. "I'm interested in its unreliability ... and in the possibility of memory becoming a burden ... that in a post-apocalyptic scenario, the more you remember, the more you've lost" (*Tethered by Letters*). To help remind us of the world they lost, the narrative offers flashbacks to the interconnected lives of Arthur and his three wives (Miranda, Elizabeth, and Lydia); Arthur's friend, Clark; Elizabeth and Arthur's son, Tyler; and Jeevan, the paparazzo turned entertainment journalist who gets the exclusive that Arthur is leaving his second wife and son to be with his soon-to-be third wife. Jeevan was also in the audience of the play in which Arthur died, the first night of the pandemic. Mandel had to make a map of the book in Excel to keep track of the multiple storylines, both past and present. "I was constantly reordering the book and moving chapters around" ([BookPage](#)).

When the Travelling Symphony returns to a settlement to reunite with a couple and their baby who were once part of the troupe, their lives are threatened by a dangerous prophet and head of a doomsday cult. As the novel moves towards its final climactic scenes, the artists attempt to escape to a settlement in a former major airport, rumored to be a functioning community of 300 people and home to the Museum of Civilization, a collection of old-world artifacts—credit cards, car engines, red stiletto heeled shoes—that survivors had found and preserved.

*Station Eleven* is ultimately and intentionally a hopeful book, says Mandel. And it's a reminder that art—a play, a comic book, a musical interlude, a museum display, even an apocalyptic novel—can be the best means towards cultivating a civilization and preserving our humanity.

# About the Author

## Emily St. John Mandel (b. 1969)

"I've always been interested in writing about memory, and in what it means to live honorably in a damaged world." — Emily St. John Mandel in an interview with the National Book Foundation



Emily St. John Mandel  
(photo: Dese'Rae L Stage)

Emily St. John Mandel (her middle name, St. John, was her grandmother's surname) was born on Vancouver Island and raised mostly on Denman Island, a small, bucolic island off the coast of British Columbia, Canada. Known for its natural beauty, laid-back feel, and thriving arts community, the island is home to just over 1,000 inhabitants. Mandel's father emigrated from the U.S. and worked on the island as a plumber; her Canadian mother works for an organization that assists victims of domestic violence and is active in the labor movement. Both loved to read and for no reason other than to provide the best education they could, they homeschooled Mandel, encouraging her to write every day. "Although I grew up in a very working-class household, there was a tremendous emphasis on books," she told the *Columbia Daily Tribune*. "We had a lot of books in the house and went to the library all the time.... I read voraciously."

Like many teenagers, she also watched television. The island only had two channels, so options were limited, which meant she watched a fair amount of *Star Trek: Voyager*. It's where she first heard Seven of Nine say "survival is insufficient" in an episode in 1999 — a phrase she wholeheartedly believes and that readers can find on the side of the traveling group's caravan in *Station Eleven*.

At the age of 18, she left home to study dance at The School of Toronto Dance Theatre, and worked with a number of independent choreographers after graduation. "There was a slow process of going from thinking of myself as a dancer who sometimes wrote, to a writer who sometimes danced, to just thinking of myself as a writer," she told *The Rumpus*. While that process was occurring, Mandel moved from Toronto to New York to Montreal and back to New York in less than a year. "There have been times in my life when I've had to decide to pay the rent or buy groceries," she told

*Publishers Weekly*. "I had a job in Montreal where I had to unload a truck at 7 a.m. in the winter."

Mandel settled in New York and wrote, working part-time as an administrative assistant at a cancer research lab at a university to pay the bills. Her agent found the manuscript for her first novel, *Last Night in Montreal* (2009), in a slush pile and shopped it around to editors for almost three years before Unbridled Books picked it up. Like many small presses that nurture talented writers overlooked by commercial houses and help them get discovered, Unbridled Books went on to publish two more of her critically acclaimed novels in the genre of literary noir: *The Singer's Gun* (2010), about a young man trying to remake himself after growing up in a family of criminals, and *The Lola Quartet* (2012), a jazz-infused mystery about a man searching for an old girlfriend and a daughter who might be his.

In 2014, Mandel published *Station Eleven*, her fourth novel, with Knopf and her writing career took off at rocket speed. The novel won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, was a finalist for the National Book Award and PEN/Faulkner Award, was an Amazon Best Book of the Month, was named one of the best books of the year by more than a dozen publications, and has been translated into 27 languages. In less than two years, she has participated in more than 125 book tour events in seven countries. "I was thinking of the way the tour had begun to mirror the book; we traveled endlessly, my fictional characters and I, afraid of violence and sustained by our art, exhausted and exhilarated in equal measure, and the costs were not insignificant but we'd chosen this life," she wrote in an essay for *Humanities Magazine* about touring during a year when news reports were filled with relentless gun violence. "But every day of the tour ... I met people who cared about life, about civilization, about books, and by the end of the tour this seemed to me to be a reasonable antidote to despair." As is, she will tell you, heading back home to her husband and daughter and office where she writes.

# Discussion Questions

1. The novel opens with a passage by Czeslaw Milosz. What does it mean? Why did Mandel choose it to introduce *Station Eleven*?
2. Does the novel have a main character? Who would you consider it to be?
3. How do Shakespearean motifs coincide with those of *Station Eleven*, both the novel and the comic?
4. Arthur's death happens to coincide with the arrival of the Georgia Flu. If Jeevan had been able to save him, it wouldn't have prevented the apocalypse. But how might the trajectory of the novel been different?
5. What is the metaphor of the *Station Eleven* comic books? How does the Undersea connect to the events of the novel?
6. "Survival is insufficient," a line from *Star Trek: Voyager*, is the Traveling Symphony's motto. What does it mean to them? Does it hold true for you? What role does art play in society?
7. The prophet discusses death: "I'm not speaking of the tedious variations on physical death. There's the death of the body, and there's the death of the soul. I saw my mother die twice." Knowing who his mother was, what do you think he meant by that?
8. Certain items turn up again and again, for instance the comic books and the paperweight—things Arthur gave away before he died, because he didn't want any more possessions. And Clark's Museum of Civilization turns what we think of as mundane belongings into totems worthy of study. What point is Mandel making? What items do you think you'd strive to preserve?
9. On a related note, some characters—like Clark—believe in preserving and teaching about the time before the flu. But in Kirsten's interview with François Diallo, we learn that there are entire towns that prefer not to: "We went to a place once where the children didn't know the world had ever been different . . ." What are the benefits of remembering, and of not remembering?
10. What do you think happened during the year Kirsten can't remember?
11. In a letter to his childhood friend, Arthur writes that he's been thinking about a quote from Yeats, "Love is like the lion's tooth." What does this mean, and why is he thinking about it? How does the impending publication of those letters affect Arthur?
12. Arthur remembers Miranda saying "I regret nothing," and uses that to deepen his understanding of Lear, "a man who regrets everything," as well as his own life. How do his regrets fit into the larger scope of the novel? Other than Miranda, are there other characters who refuse to regret?
13. Throughout the novel, those who were alive during the time before the flu remember specific things about those days: the ease of electricity, the taste of an orange. In their place, what do you think you'd remember most?
14. What do you imagine the Traveling Symphony will find when they reach the brightly lit town to the south?
15. The novel ends with Clark, remembering the dinner party and imagining that somewhere in the world, ships are sailing. Why did Mandel choose to end the novel with him?

# Credits

Discussion Questions for *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel provided courtesy of Vintage Books.

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The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



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