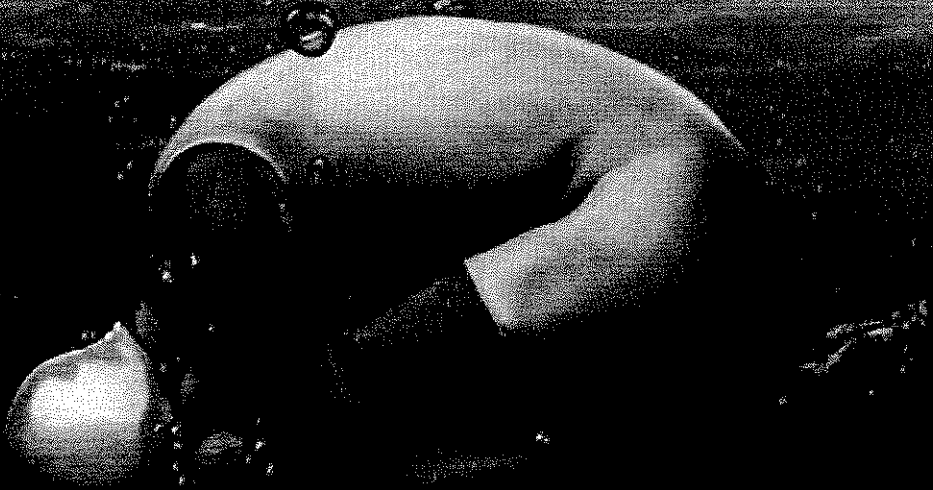


Volume 4 2005 • \$6.00

Center

A Journal of the Literary Arts

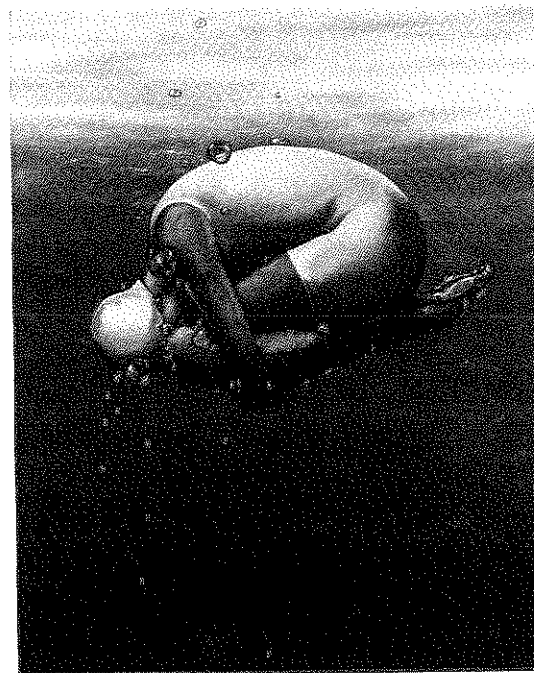


*Featuring interviews with
Linda Gregerson and Elizabeth Strout*

Center

A Journal of the Literary Arts

Volume 4 2005



Eric Zener

Refuge #2
2004
oil on canvas

University of Missouri
Columbia, Missouri

Center: A Journal of the Literary Arts

EDITORIAL BOARD

SENIOR EDITORS:

Nicky Beer (poetry), Andrew Milward (fiction), Alyssa Chen (nonfiction)

ASSOCIATES:

Sarah Barber, John Estes, Elizabeth Hartsig, Michael Kardos, Lania Knight,
Nathan Oates, Amy Wilkinson

INTERN:

Annie Getsinger

MANAGING EDITOR:

Brian Barker



Center: Where margins meet

Center: n. the point equally distant from all other points;
source of influence or action; focus of concern; a facility
providing a service. — *v.i.* to come to a focus; converge;
concentrate; to gather or accumulate in a bunch.

Center Website: web.missouri.edu/~center

Center is published each spring by the University of Missouri-Columbia.

© by The University of Missouri-Columbia

ISSN 1532-3625

Address communications to: *Center: A Journal of the Literary Arts*, Center for the
Literary Arts, 202 Tate Hall, Columbia, MO 65211

We consider unpublished poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, interviews, and literary
essays from July through November. Submissions received between December and
June will be returned unread. All submissions must include a SASE. We cannot be
responsible for lost or damaged submissions.

Sample Copies: \$6 current issue, \$3 back issues



Volume 4 ■ 2005

Contents

Poetry

Pablo Peschiera.....	3
<i>Death Song for Me</i>	
Al Maginnes.....	5
<i>Arranging the Poetry Collection</i>	
Lisa Ampleman.....	6
<i>The Sound Surrounding Us Like Hair</i>	
William Greenway.....	7
<i>Dreambox</i>	
Ricardo Pau-Llosa.....	8
<i>Crab and the Night</i>	
<i>Crab Spying</i>	
Michael Hettich.....	10
<i>Sweet Nothings</i>	
Mary Crow.....	11
<i>In San Miguel de Allende the Lover</i>	
<i>Follows the Trails of Inference as He</i>	
<i>Watches His Beloved in a Garden</i>	
Robert E. Haynes.....	12
<i>It's Not the Prairie, It's the Plains</i>	
Martin Walls.....	14
<i>Mosquito</i>	
<i>Mid-Spring</i>	
K.E. Duffin.....	16
<i>Spolia</i>	

INTERVIEWS



A Conversation with Elizabeth Strout

Bill Grattan & Lania Knight

Elizabeth Strout's short stories have appeared in a number of magazines, including *The New Yorker*. Her novel, *Amy and Isabelle*, won the *L.A. Times* Award for First Fiction, the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Award, and was short listed for the PEN Faulkner Award, as well as the Orange Prize in England. She has taught at Warren Wilson, Bard College, The New School, and Manhattan Community College. Currently, she is on the faculty of the Queens University MFA residency program in Charlotte, North Carolina, and makes her home in New York. She is at work on a novel, to be published in 2005; a collection of short stories will follow.

Lania Knight: How did you get started writing?

Elizabeth Strout: I can't remember not writing. From my very earliest memory I was writing things down in notebooks that my mother bought for me. At a really young age, I was told by my mother to "write down what you did today." I don't have a memory of a time when I wasn't making sentences. I was always, always writing. It was years before people knew it. But I always knew it.

LK: When did you start writing for other people and not just for yourself?

ES: I think in high school I started to finish stories and started to send them out. That's when I got the first of my many rejections. And I continued to write in college, though I didn't send things out as much. But I was writing, and I was still not telling people about it. The more serious it became, the less I talked to people about it.

LK: So you didn't participate in creative writing workshops while you were college?

ES: Actually, I never took a creative writing workshop in college. I just

couldn't bear it. It wasn't really even a big decision in my mind; it was just something instinctive. I didn't want to take workshops because I didn't want to expose my work to so many different people. It was such a private thing. I had one professor who knew that I wrote, and he was very encouraging and I did an independent study with him. He was the only person who saw my stories and he gave me very little feedback, except to say, "Just keep going." He didn't really teach me anything; he would just say "Well, I think this was good," or "This wasn't good." And that was enormously important to me; that was all I needed. I didn't want a larger forum. I learned from reading. I read and read. I was always interested in what people were writing at the time. I very much came of age in the minimalist period, and all that. So for many years I was writing with that sort of echo, because that was what the stories were in *The New Yorker* at that time. Of course it turns out I'm a blabbermouth and not really a minimalist at all.

LK: After college, did you take workshops or join a writer's group?

ES: Eventually, much later when I moved to New York, I took a class at The New School and I studied with Gordon Lish at one point. Otherwise, no, I've never taken any creative writing classes.

Bill Grattan: I think when a lot of people hear Gordon Lish's name, they think of him as the editor of a lot of the Raymond Carver stories. What was he like as a teacher?

ES: His method of teaching was to have somebody read a sentence aloud. You read until he stopped you. His idea was that he would stop you as soon as you read anything false or foolish or whatever. Of course people were stopped very quickly and then he could be quite direct. It was very frightening to sit in an environment like that. But a couple of things happened. One was that I became incredibly aware of sentences. As a result, I took away a respect for what he was doing. He would say that you have to earn every single sentence. And though the class atmosphere was frightening, he pretty much left me alone. There were some people he really went after and there were others he really supported. But he kind of left me alone, which I think was a good thing, because I was able to absorb what I was hearing. And I did learn a lot from him.

But it was a very frightening experience. I think if he had gone after me with any degree of energy, I would have kept writing, but I think it would probably have taken me longer to get on my feet. As it was, I think it was worth it. I definitely learned from it.

LK: Can you describe what it was like when you first got something published?

ES: Well, my first acceptance letter came when I was in law school and it really was the result of this college professor of mine who knew the editor of *New Letters* and had, I think, put in a good word for me. That was my first story and I was terribly excited about it for ten or fifteen minutes and then that was that. I needed to write more and I didn't have another story published for years. It took so long. So gradually the rejection letters got a little bit nicer. You know, tiny little encouraging words like "Thank you," or "Try us again." But it took a long time.

BG: Which writers, both canonical and contemporary, have been important to you?

ES: I absolutely love Tolstoy; I remember when I read *Anna Karenina*, a friend of mine said there is no book to read after that. But there is. There's *War and Peace*. And I loved those two books. And I love Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. Fitzgerald, I think, is terrific, and Hemingway, and George Eliot. I enjoy Trollope. All those people. But certainly Tolstoy has a real place in my heart. And then for more contemporary people: John Cheever was an enormous influence on me. His journals influenced me tremendously because of the attention he gave to weather, the daily conditions. I recognized, for the first time, certain things about the physical world that could be captured in a phrase, and I think those journals liberated something in me, actually. I read them again and again, and I still do. I love the work of Anita Brookner because her sentences are so amazing. I love Alice Munro and William Trevor and John Updike, and Tobias Wolff, I think, is a great writer. Certainly Carver. I like his work very much I probably left out many of my friends.

LK: I can see how Cheever's journals affected you—the descriptions of

the weather, the physical world. That was very much a part of *Amy and Isabelle*. And I really love the way your descriptions reflected turbulence and turmoil and resolution.

ES: Something about his journals made me just stop and realize that all of the moment—the weather, the fabric of the curtain, the way sun is coming in—every single aspect of one moment can be rendered in a way that's so meaningful. It was a way of getting across something that I really wasn't able to do before.

LK: Let's take a little different tack. I'm wondering how your personal life, in terms of commitments to your family, to other people, affected your writing. How have you been able to balance those needs against your needs as an artist?

ES: I think it's just very, very hard. I think there is no way around it. One thing Gordon Lish used to say is that "If you want to be a writer, stay out of debt and don't have kids." And I think for those of us who do have kids, it's hard. Obviously many writers have children, so it's done. But I think it's foolish to think that there isn't some cost to the work. And the costs are fine of course. It's not a matter of judging one against the other. A writer never has enough time. No matter how much you have, it's not enough. And it's a certain kind of time that your mind needs. You cannot be thinking that you have to buy dog food and that your child hasn't had a yellow vegetable for three months. You can't be thinking those things and immersing yourself in a scene the way you need to immerse yourself in that scene. It cannot be done. And so, one is always juggling. I can remember that I used to teach very early morning classes so that I could get home before my daughter was home from school and I could have those few hours. But those few hours can be chopped up in a second. Obviously the telephone is the worst thing. At the same time you get so lonely when you're working that you *want* the telephone to ring. But I just really think domestic details are so horrible. [laughter]. It's felt like a constant battle to take care of other people at the same time that the work is a very demanding thing. And people who don't write don't quite understand. Writing is not a hobby. It's not sort of something you're doing with one hand. It's something you're doing with your entire being, and you simply have to give yourself up to it completely. It's hard.

LK: Now, obviously, you're at a level where you're writing well and publishing. What it's like now when you can't find the time to write?

ES: Yeah, that's a terrible feeling. The sense of frustration is always there. Life interferes. It just does, unless you go off and lock yourself in a cabin in a mountain, which some people can do, but I can't. Now that my daughter is older, I find the struggle is between the aloneness of the occupation and trying to counteract that aloneness with life. For me it's hard. It shouldn't be as hard as it is. But it does seem to be hard for me to get as much work done as I want to be doing. I really don't why.

LK: I'm wondering how you feel about the idea that you should write only what you know. Should writers create stories only out of their own experiences? Is this the nature of authenticity?

ES: I think that people know a lot. And I think that autobiographical facts are really not relevant to what we know. I think that the factual things that we live through are probably the least important part of our knowledge. We know a lot of things intuitively, and we can suspect how somebody else feels with great accuracy. We know what loss feels like. And we know what death feels like. We know an awful lot of things by the time we're three and certainly by the time we're through middle school. So I don't think people need to be writing factually or autobiographically, although some people are very comfortable doing that and do it well. That's how they work and that's obviously fine. I do think that we need to be writing truthfully. We need to be writing what we are able to imagine and that's based on something that we understand as a truth. I don't mean to be spinning this out into something abstract, but, yes, I think we should be writing about what we know, but I think we know a great deal more than perhaps we think we know. We can do an awful lot on the written page.

LK: I read an interview on the internet in which readers got to write questions and you answered back. In response to one, you said that all the characters in *Amy and Isabelle* contained some aspect of you, but that they were all entirely fiction. What I'm wondering is whether you can describe how characters come to you and how they evolve as you work with them.

ES: They come to me in different ways. Different characters arrive in different ways. I'm not exactly sure why. Fat Bev arrived pretty fully formed. She just showed up and it was very easy for me to know what she was going to say. It was very easy for me to work with her, to write about her. Isabelle was very difficult for me to figure out, a very hard nut to crack. I just didn't know who she was, and there reached a point where I had spent so much time trying to figure her out, that I wasn't going to give up on it. I mean, I made enough progress that I cared about getting this figured out, but I could only get it figured out by doing the work. The answer is in the work. It's not in talking about it. Very often I hear people who are writing say to each other, "Well, I'm writing this story and I think this is what's going to happen," and I sort of cringe because I think, "Well, you don't really know what's going to happen, and don't be wasting your energy already exposing that character to the air." Because if you do that, then you won't be interested in trying to find out what she is going to do. So I'm a real believer that writing only gets done by writing and rewriting. It doesn't get done by talking about it. It gets done by working on it and by re-imagining again and again. So, some of the characters come to me so slowly that I could just cry. I want faster access, but I don't seem to have it and I don't seem to know how to speed it up. I have to wait. I have to go through the process, bit by bit, finding out little details here and there that seem right. Then gradually the character will come forward.

LK: I read in the same interview that *Amy and Isabelle* took seven years to write.

ES: That's a close approximation.

LK: You've stated that it started as Amy's story. But then as time went on and you grew older and grew more mature as a woman, then you were able to write Isabelle's story.

ES: I think that as one gets older, one understands that life is more complicated than one originally thought and that my own growing helped me to develop Isabelle. There was no point in writing about a two-dimensional bad mother that cuts her kid's hair off. I wanted to write about people. I didn't want to write a melodrama. I didn't want

to write about a poor victimized adolescent girl. That's not what I was interested in. I was interested in writing about the many layers that we all live on and our different insecurities and fears and hopes and all that sort of thing. We all end up doing things we don't want to do. We do them and we wished we hadn't. We're sorry. So I certainly think that I could not have written that book at a younger age. I mean, somebody else could have, but not me. I think I had to wait to grow up a bit to write that book.

BG: Still on the novel: the plotting and design seem very intricate, and I was impressed by how well you handled the multiple points of view. From your remarks, it sounds like you're not a planner, not the kind of writer who starts with an outline. Can you describe the process you followed with your novel in more detail? And can you tell us about the obstacles you had to overcome during composition. Were there ever dead spots where you felt stymied?

ES: I'm going to answer the last part of that first. I can remember there were days of dead spots. There were days that I felt despair. There are all sorts of terrible things happening in the world right now, so you feel awful using that word to describe your writing. But the fact is that's what I do feel when the work isn't going well. I had many days where I had no idea how I was going to get myself out of a mess that I had created.

As far as planning the novel, this was what I knew: I knew that I was going to write about this mother and daughter and that the mother was eventually going to cut the girl's hair off and it was going to be for a sexual sin. That much I knew. That's a lot to know. It took me years to figure out that that was how much I knew, but when I had that figured out, I could begin to make a little progress, and I realized I had to get to that point. I had to build up to the point where that scene occurred. And every so often I would think to myself, "Oh, my God. What am I going to do when I get to that scene?" I had no idea what I was going to do then. So then, I thought, "Just don't think about it," and that enabled me to move forward. This may sound simplistic, but every day I wrote a few pages that seemed right and in doing so, the characters became more and more real to me. When I got to the hair-cutting scene, it kind of took care of itself. And as I continued, there were more

surprises. For example, in that scene where her co-workers come over to spend the night at Isabelle's, I had no idea that that sleep-over scene was going to happen. And I had no idea that Dottie Brown would spit at someone in the bathroom. So for me, the plot just kind of happens. It's an exciting discovery process. When I was writing the novel, it wasn't the plot that worried me. It was the authenticity of the writing. I wanted to be inside every scene, and I wanted the scene to be right. Otherwise it sounds like a writer writing; it doesn't sound like a world that you're experiencing.

BG: The timing of a lot of the details seems to be so perfect. There's a place fairly early in the novel where Isabelle is asked by a stranger whether she's a "Mrs." It's in italics and there's a little bit of doubt in the reader's mind—*was she married?* So that mystery sticks in our mind. Later when Stacy, Amy's friend, has the baby, Isabelle, much to Amy's surprise, encourages her to break the rules about hospital visits to support her friend and we wonder even more about Isabelle's past. It just seems like those and other details—e.g., the timing of the obscene phone calls—were so well spaced. There were a lot of emotional jolts in the novel.

ES: It's interesting to think about that now, because those were intuitive decisions rather than moves that resulted from a lot of pre-planning. While I wrote the novel, I did think a great deal about pacing. And this is what I mean when one submerges herself in the work and why it's so difficult to worry about buying dog food and having a teacher's conference or an argument with a spouse, because in every way you're trying to live inside the universe of the novel. I was very concerned about pacing. I had never written a novel before, but I knew that pacing was important. It seemed to me that everything in my life began to take on pacing. For me it became a process comparable to running long distances—where do I use my energy and where do I save it?

BG: As I was reading *Amy and Isabelle*, I was caught up in the writing; every sentence seems so perfect. The other thing that struck me was that it almost seemed Jamesian or like Wharton in how there are terrific psychological insights and character details, and I'm saying, "Yes, that's exactly how it is." There are moments that are really striking, such as when

Isabelle becomes embarrassed that she didn't know how to say Yeats's name in front of her high school-age daughter. It was just so poignant, such a minor thing, but so poignant. There was a great universality to the characters and the setting, I thought. So to me—and I guess this may sound like an indirect criticism, though I don't mean it that way—it seems like you could move this story to a small mill town in Wisconsin or North Carolina or Pennsylvania and it reads pretty similarly. I'm wondering what you thought about sense of place? How important was it to you in this novel?

ES: That's interesting, what you say about small mill towns in other places; I've had other people say to me, "Oh, I grew up in Kansas, and this could have been my small town." I understand that. I was in a small Mississippi town once briefly and as I walked down the main street, I thought, "Oh this is so great. This is like Shirley Falls." Of course, I recognize that all around America there are towns similar to Shirley Falls, mill towns with divisions between the mill owners and mill workers, the bosses and secretaries, the Congregationalists and Catholics. There's a flavor that's common to all of them, not just the ones in New England.

But I think that sense of place is hugely important for me. I think it took me a long time to realize the phrase "literature is place" and I finally realized that, yes, it is. I mean, it is for me. I haven't for years written a story that takes place in New York City, because even though I live there, I'm not from New York; it's not my place, though someday I will write a story set there. But I finally realized that a small town in New England, that's my place. That's what I know. I've been a secretary with those people at different points in my life. I've worked in mills and I've worked in bars. I know those people. And I know those back roads. I know those stories of people getting abducted. I know what flowers come out at what time of year. So it was liberating for me to finally realize that's what I want to be writing about. You know, it's almost like being in New York allowed me to be homesick for a landscape that was finally quite far away but very much inside me. So in the novel, the setting is New England in the sense that it's *my* New England. I'm writing from the area that's very familiar to me. And it was place I was embracing in the novel.

BG: In some ways the time seems universal to me in this novel. I noticed there are references to Howard Johnson's and Life Savers and

there is very little else. You pick up a Bobbie Anne Mason novel and the characters are always going to McDonald's and then they're watching the Donahue show. There's talk about Johnny Carson's monologue and President Reagan. Where does all that fit into your work? Was that "purer" setting particular to *Amy and Isabelle* or does it characterize your writing in general?

ES: Well, that's a good question. I know that for the novel it was deliberate choice, to stay away from as many brand names that I could, and still make it a real thing. I was deliberately vague. I mean, I didn't want to fool or confuse anybody. I mention the Moon Walk and the women still smoke cigarettes in the office and talk about consciousness raising groups. In certain general kinds of ways, I wanted to position the reader in a time that was late 60s, early 70s. In that particular book, I wanted the focus to be on the inner turmoil and the sense of claustrophobia that these women, particularly Amy and Isabelle, were experiencing. They were so claustrophobic, they were so encased in that house and in that factory, that I didn't want the outside world to be that loud, because in fact it wasn't for them. Isabelle is doing everything she can do to hang on. She doesn't have the luxury of caring about political things going on in the world. I mean, she's holding on for dear life. She's about to lose her daughter. So I deliberately didn't make the time specific in that kind of way. I don't think that's a choice I make in every piece of writing. But it seemed to me something I wanted to be doing in *Amy and Isabelle*.

BG: It seems to me a constant struggle for a writer because you want to have those kinds of markers to establish authenticity.

ES: Absolutely.

BG: Then again, I have a TV and when I drive around town I see billboards. When I read, I see it as an escape from popular culture and all that. It's sort of like, what's in good fiction is what's important. The other stuff is noise. I was just wondering if you had a philosophical view on that.

ES: Well, I guess my interest just lies in character, and how place and

character come up against each other in time. Time and place and character combine and produce a life. So that's part of why I write the way I do. That's what interests me as a writer.

BG: Do you draft and then go back and rewrite, or do rewrite as you go along? Could you go into that?

ES: I do both. I'm a compulsive rewriter, absolutely insane about rewriting. I do both, I rewrite as I go along, and I rewrite after. I just constantly rewrite. I just never look at a page without a pencil in my hand.

LK: One of the things that rang true for me was the way the women's relationships evolved. There was a sense of isolation in the beginning, and of high school or younger behavior—the way they undercut each other—and then finally, with the telling of the truth, the women became each other's strength. It was a huge pendulum swing. Was that a conscious thing for you?

ES: None of it was conscious. I wish I could say it was. I think that what I was doing was trying to stay true to what I perceived the story to be according to who they were as they lived out that story. What seemed to me to be true was that they were living under tremendous oppression, Isabelle in particular, by having a secret—that when a person lives dishonestly a person can't be generous to their daughter, to themselves, to the people that they work with. Along the same lines, Dotty was living a lie—she made up the story about the UFO because she was embarrassed about her marital situation, and even her best friend was beyond her reach. I was really only following those stories and being interested, in the sense of unburdening oneself from a lie, combined with the sense that we are saved by kindness. That's exactly what saves us. When Isabelle tells her story, and she realizes that these women have wept, her whole life is changed because it had never occurred to her that someone could care that much. But they do. That's what saves us—someone's ability to be compassionate.

LK: I noticed that Jake Cunningham's eyes were described as kind, which complicated things. I couldn't be angry at him—it tied him to this kindness that you're describing, of the women weeping with each other.

ES: I know that there are readers who don't care for the male characters, and I believe the book belongs to the readers. Personally, I love the male characters as much as the women. Their actions may seem questionable, but I'm interested in human beings and what we do. We all do things that can be criticized in a heartbeat, but we do them for very complicated reasons. I felt Jake Cunningham's eyes were a part of him.

LK: I noticed something else you did with a male character—Mr. Robertson—that was complicated. I was trying to explain what happened in the book to a friend—someone who is very uncomfortable with rape and has actually told me she's stopped reading certain books because she could tell what was about to happen. I realized as I was trying to describe the scene in the car . . . not that I felt like it was rape, but that I felt like it was Amy's sexual awakening. This exquisitely beautiful thing is happening, but it's also a complicated, painful moment.

EM: That's what I felt about that scene, too. It's not what everybody feels, and that's okay. People are entitled to respond to in many ways, but that's what I was hoping would come across in that scene.

BG: Did you have any involvement with the making of the movie? What was your reaction to the final product?

ES: They were very lovely people to work with. I had to think long and hard about whether to sell the rights because I really just wasn't sure.

BG: This is the film company that Oprah owns?

ES: Right, and I just wasn't sure that I wanted *Amy and Isabelle* to be a movie. Once I decided that I did, then in my mind, I just gave up all rights to it. They were tremendously kind—they asked my opinion every five minutes, and they really involved me in ways they didn't have to. They were just lovely to work with, which is not the story you hear a lot from other people with their own movie situations—not with Harpo, but with different movie situations—and I thought they did a nice job. They tried to stay very true to the book. At that point it felt very separate from me. It was theirs.

BG: Would you elaborate on what your initial apprehensions were?

ES: I had spent so much time writing—I really wanted it to be read as a book. I was worried that it would be known as a movie instead of as a book—that people would see the movie and not read the book, and maybe the movie wouldn't be true to the book. I was told that Harpo was very book conscious, that they try to be true to the book, and they really were.

BG: In a lot of cases, that increases sales. Did you find that to be true?

ES: Yes, it was definitely true.

LK: A shift in gears: I'm wondering how working on short fiction is different for you than working on long fiction. Are they completely separate—can you only work on one project at a time? Or are you able to layer things that are in different stages?

ES: I like writing short stories. Right now I have a novel that's due, so I really need to be just working on that alone. It's way past the point of my being able to divert myself to play with a short story for a day. Though I think in the past few months, one sharp scene from a short story has come to me, and I've jotted it down. Now it's a matter of hunkering down and going with this novel. With short stories, I work on more than one at a time. I really enjoy that. There will reach a time when one story will suddenly, or gradually, move itself forward, and require full attention until it's done.

LK: How does a story require your full attention?

ES: It's like an itch. I want to be with it, like having a new crush on somebody. You have to go sit in that part of the library because you just like to be near them. There's also a higher level of anxiety that comes with a sense of "Okay now, can I pull this off? I've got to get this together." There's a point when enough of the story is there that it becomes this character's turn. There's always one I'm working on more than others, but I generally have my hand on different things.

LK: You described earlier that you were very private about your writing. I've heard writers describe having a person that they write for, or that they have three people who are close that read the first draft. Do you let anyone see your early drafts, or are you still very private?

ES: It's private, not as private as it should be because I succumb to showing it to people when I shouldn't. With *Amy and Isabelle* I only had one reader—she was fabulous and I'd known her for years. Now it's more difficult. I have a greater sense of exposure, of my writing not being private. It's a different position. I feel like someone's put a flashlight into that dark hole and I'm trying to get back in the dark, and it's hard.

LK: So are you saying you feel too exposed? That your preference is to be more private?

ES: My preference is definitely to be more private. Because now everyone knows I'm a writer.

LK: And they have expectations?

ES: Yes. Exactly.

BG: Would you say that you feel pressure to make the next book as successful as *Amy and Isabelle*?

ES: I feel tremendous pressure. I don't feel pressure in quite the way I think people mean when they ask, in terms of success. I know that means money and sales, but the pressure that I'm experiencing is the pressure to write a good book—one that I believe I can write. I think I have it in me, and I want to do it so badly. That's the pressure—I just want the book to be good.

BG: You mentioned that you're working on some stories, but is the book that's closest to being done the novel?

ES: Yes.

BG: Is there any relationship with the previous novel? Do you feel comfortable talking about it?

ES: I won't talk about it a lot, but it is set in New England, and it takes place very specifically in 1959—very time and place oriented. It's about a small town minister.

BG: Do you hate when people say, "What's it about?"

ES: Yeah . . . [laughter] It's about a poor guy [laughter] who's had some problems, some hard knocks.

BG: You mentioned "Olive" stories. Are you working toward a collection?

ES: Yes. I've written a number of stories that have this character, Olive Kittrich, in them. It won't be a novel—well, I don't know what they'll call it—but she connects all of the stories. She's the main character in most of them. It's also about different townspeople, but she always makes a cameo appearance.

BG: Kind of like a *Winesburg, Ohio*.

ES: Actually, I'd like to think of it that way—coastal Maine *Winesburg, Ohio*.

BG: I wanted to ask you about teaching—do you have an overall philosophy about teaching fiction writing? What do you try to emphasize in your workshops?

ES: I try to emphasize not showing off—just writing something truthful. It may take a lot of working and re-working. It's like teaching someone to pray. You can say, "This is how other people have done it," or "This is how you might do it," but it's such an inward, inside activity. One comes to it alone.

BG: How do you feel about creative writing programs? They've exploded in terms of numbers. What has it been like teaching in a low residency program?

ES: I find teaching very hard. My favorite experience was when I taught at Manhattan Community College—Basic English 101. I had students

who came up through the public school system in New York City and they didn't know that reading could be fun. It was very difficult for them to just read. It was wonderful to teach those classes, and to get them to find a story that they liked, or a writer that spoke to them, or a poem. I loved that—it's like bringing religion to people. I bumped into somebody years later at the subway. She was on the platform and she said, "Oh, Professor Liz. Look at what I just bought!" She had this Raymond Carver book and she said, "I never would have bought it if . . ." and I thought, "Isn't that wonderful?" I get a little nervous about teaching creative writing, I guess, because I didn't really want to be taught myself. I could never sit through the workshops that MFA or PhD students do—I feel awed being on the other side. For me, it's such a private thing.

BG: Instead of an MFA, you were out there cleaning professors' houses, you worked at a shoe factory, you were a lawyer, you were an artists' model, played the piano, took a stand-up comedy class, began running. Is there any common thread there? Anything that you feel in particular helped or nourished your writing?

ES: Here is the truth: writing to me was so important that I couldn't bear to fail at it. Of course, I *would* fail at it because everybody does. I couldn't bear it. It was lonely, because nobody wants to hear that you're a writer when you don't have anything published. I couldn't bear that. I thought to myself, "I'm gonna be a fifty-five year-old cocktail waitress in Lewiston, Maine—writing stories during the day and cocktail waitressing at night," and that actually seemed to me embarrassing. I couldn't talk about this to anybody because it was too important. But I had thought for years that I'd be a waitress, earn my living at night. As I got older I thought, "I'll be a fifty-five year old failed cocktail waitress/failed writer," and that seemed unbearable to me. So, I went to law school to try to be a normal person. Deep down, you always want to be a normal person. It was so excruciating for me to be in law school and to not be trying to write. I had a realization one day when I came home from work from that horrible law office: "I should be so lucky to be a failed cocktail waitress and a failed writer when I'm fifty-five. That would be so superior to what I'm doing now." That's what happened—I finally realized that I didn't want to die thinking to myself, "I didn't even dare try, so I was

a bad lawyer instead." And I realized there's nothing shameful about being a cocktail waitress at the age of fifty-five. I was right.

BG: A lot of us in school become professors or teachers, and we say we are committed to our writing . . . I am, and I hate to admit this, but there is something shameful about just being a bookstore clerk.

ES: And society will make you feel that way.

BG: Fortunately, you've found success and you can dedicate yourself to your writing.

ES: Someone told me the other day that they went to a financial planner to plan their retirement, and I just thought, "Oh my gosh." You know, "I'm back out there on a twig," but, whatever. I'd rather try and write this book as well as I can. It's always a battle is what I'm saying.

LK: I have a question that you can take either personally or professionally: what do you feel is your responsibility to do or to impart through your writing, as a teacher, or just as a person?

ES: As a writer, I would like to write something that allows the reader to see the world in a way that's a little bigger, a little different, and yet completely familiar in a comforting way. That combination of recognizing "Oh right, I know that feeling," accompanied by a larger vision of what it means to be human. We're here to record this amazing business that we all do—we just get up and live everyday. I'm interested in recording that in a way that makes people feel not quite so alone. I don't mean that in a smushy, marshmallowy kind of way, but the way that you feel when something speaks to you . . . when you think, "Oh right, I'm not the only person who's thought this, not the only person who's felt this." That would be nice if I could do that.