

About the Author, Emily St. John Mandel



Join us for a Conversation
with Emily St. John Mandel
on Sunday, February 24
at the CelticMKE Center.

Reserve your spot at our [Events page](#).

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.

Updated July 2017

Listen to and watch interviews with Emily St. John Mandel at:

<https://www.arts.gov/national-initiatives/nea-big-read/station-eleven>

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL PLEASE VISIT:

www.prhspeakers.com

www.emilymandel.com

Author Quotes

"I was surprised to discover that if you write literary fiction that's set partly in the future, you're apparently a sci-fi writer."

Emily St. John Mandel, from *The Washington Post*

"I wanted to write a love letter to the world we find ourselves in."

Emily St. John Mandel in an interview with *Bustle*

"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

An Interview with the author (from the NEA website)

How did you approach writing *Station Eleven*?

I started with the idea of an actor dying of a heart attack during the mad scene in *King Lear*, in more or less the present day. At the same time, I realized early on that I wanted to write about a traveling company of musicians and actors moving over a post-apocalyptic landscape. So from the beginning, I had the idea of writing a novel with two narrative strands, one set in the present and one in a post-apocalyptic future, and constructing a book where the action would move back and forth between them. After that, as with any book, it's just a question of relentless hard work. I wrote and revised the novel over a period of two and a half years or so.

Why a post-apocalyptic novel?

I wanted to write about the modern world, about this extraordinary time in which we find ourselves and all of these spectacular things that we take for granted - the supercomputers in our pockets that send signals to the satellites, the airplanes, the way hot water comes out of faucets, and rooms light up when you flick a switch on the wall.

There are obviously a great many things about our world that are completely awful, but we are surrounded by a level of technology and infrastructure that at any other point in human history would have seemed miraculous. One way to write about something, of course, is to write about its absence, so I thought that an interesting way to write about the modern world would be to write about a time when the modern world has fallen away. This novel is often marketed and described as being post-apocalyptic, and that's not inaccurate, but about half of it is set in the present day, and I think of the book as a love letter to the modern world.

What is the story's most compelling lesson for today?

I didn't write the book with the intention of conveying any specific message or lesson to readers. My goal was just to write the best novel that I possibly could. The writer and critic Edmund Wilson once wrote that no two people read the same book, and I think he was right about that. Different people can often come away from the same book with very different impressions. I think it's not the author's place to try to impose a single meaning or lesson on readers.