

About *Station Eleven*

(Contains spoilers!)

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.