



Book Club Set

The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry

By Gabrielle Zevin

About the Author

Gabrielle Zevin is a *New York Times* best-selling novelist whose books have been translated into thirty-nine languages.

Her tenth novel, *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*, was an instant *New York Times* Best Seller, a *Sunday Times* Best Seller, and a selection of the *Tonight Show*'s Fallon Book Club. *Tomorrow* was Amazon.com's #1 Book of the Year, Time Magazine's #1 Book of the Year, a *New York Times* Notable Book, and the winner of both the Goodreads Choice Award for Fiction and the Book of the Month Club's Book of the Year. Following a twenty-five-bidder auction, the feature film rights to *Tomorrow* were acquired by Temple Hill and Paramount Studios. Zevin is currently writing the screenplay.

The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry also spent many months on the *New York Times* Best Seller List. *A.J. Fikry* was honored with the Southern California Independent Booksellers Award for Fiction, the Japan Booksellers' Prize, and was long listed for the International Dublin Literary Award, among other honors. *A.J. Fikry* is now a feature film with a screenplay by Zevin. She has also written children's books, including the award-winning *Elsewhere*.

She is the screenwriter of *Conversations with Other Women* (Helena Bonham Carter) for which she received an Independent Spirit Award Nomination for Best First Screenplay. She has occasionally written criticism for the *New York Times Book Review* and NPR's *All Things Considered*, and she began her writing career, at age fourteen, as a music critic for the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*. Zevin is a graduate of Harvard University. She lives in Los Angeles.

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About the Book

A.J. Fikry's life is not at all what he expected it to be. His wife has died, his bookstore is experiencing the worst sales in its history, and now his prized possession, a rare collection of Poe poems, has been stolen. Slowly but surely, he is isolating himself from all the people of Alice Island—from Lambiase, the well-intentioned police officer who's always felt kindly toward Fikry; from Ismay, his sister-in-law who is hell-bent on saving him from his dreary self; from Amelia, the lovely and idealistic (if eccentric) Knightley Press sales rep who keeps on taking the ferry over to Alice Island, refusing to be deterred by A.J.'s bad attitude. Even the books in his store have stopped holding pleasure for him. These days, A.J. can only see them as a sign of a world that is changing too rapidly.

And then a mysterious package appears at the bookstore. It's a small package, but large in weight. It's that unexpected arrival that gives A. J. Fikry the opportunity to make his life over, the ability to see everything anew. It doesn't take long for the locals to notice the change overcoming A.J.; or for that determined sales rep, Amelia, to see her curmudgeonly client in a new light; or for the wisdom of all those books to become again the lifeblood of A.J.'s world; or for everything to twist again into a version of his life that he didn't see coming. As surprising as it is moving, *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry* is an unforgettable tale of transformation and second chances, an irresistible affirmation of why we read, and why we love.

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the story, Amelia says she is considering quitting online dating. How would you compare the act of buying books online to the act of dating online? Is it relevant to the story that Amelia meets her eventual husband in a very analog location, a bookstore?
2. Consider the setting. Why do you think the author chooses to set the book on an island? How does the island setting reflect A.J.'s character?
3. Perhaps oddly, vampires are a recurring motif in the story: for example, when A.J.'s wife throws the vampire prom and when A.J. watches *True Blood* to court Amelia. What do you make of the references to vampires?
4. Lambiase moves from an occasional or nonreader, to a reader, to a bookseller. How do you think becoming a reader changes him? Consider the scene where he decides not to confront Ismay about the backpack. Do you think Lambiase's reaction is different than it would have been if he hadn't taken up reading?
5. The author chooses to begin each chapter with a description of a short story. Discuss some of the ways the stories relate to the chapters with which they are paired. Is A.J. creating a canon for Maya? How does the book itself function as a kind of canon? If these are A.J.'s favorites, what do they say about A.J. as a reader and as a man?
6. Did you find Ismay's motivations for stealing Tamerlane to be forgivable? How do you think she should pay for her crime? Why do you think Lambiase lets her off?
7. At one point, Maya speculates that perhaps "your whole life is determined by what store you get left in" (page 85). Is it the people or the place that makes the difference?
8. When did you become aware that Leon Friedman might be an imposter? What did you make of Leonora Ferris's reasons for hiring him?
9. How do you think Daniel Parrish might have changed if he had lived? Do you think some people never change?
10. Were you surprised by the outcome of the short story contest? What do you think of A.J.'s comments to Maya about why certain books and stories win prizes and others don't? Does the knowledge that a book has won a prize attract you to reading it?

11. Compare Maya's "fiction" about the last day of her mother's life to Ismay's version. Which do you consider to be more accurate and why?
12. How do you think the arrival of the e-reader is related to the denouement of the story? Is A.J. a man who cannot exist in a world with e-books? What do you think of e-books? Do you prefer reading in e- or on paper?
13. At one point, A.J. asks Maya, "Is a twist less satisfying if you know it's coming? Is a twist that you can't predict symptomatic of bad construction?" What do you think of this statement in view of the plot of *A. J. Fikry*? Did you guess who Maya's father was? If so, what were the clues?
14. The author chooses to end the novel with a new sales rep coming to an Island Books that is no longer owned by A.J. What do you make of this ending?
15. What do you think the future holds for physical books and bookstores?

Author Interview

Q. What was the inspiration for *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*? You've said in the past that many of your books start with a question you ask yourself...

A. We are at a moment in time when we are grappling with what I would term “value” issues around book culture: print vs. digital, shopping locally vs. online, etc. My original question might have been something like, “What is the value of a bookstore to a community?” But questions do tend to evolve and multiply as I write, so I would add, “How do the stories we read help define our lives?”

Q. You went on sales calls with a Farrar Strauss and Giroux rep when you were touring your third book, *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac*. And, of course, that job is just what one of the loveliest characters in the book, Amelia, does (she's so passionate about books!). What was that like?

A. Illuminating, amusing, frightening! The rep would take out a paper catalogue that represented the publisher's wares for the seasons, and he'd proceed to pitch the books within its pages to the bookseller. He'd be surprisingly candid, considering his job was to sell all of them, and the pace was fast and ruthless. “This one's not for you. This one's heartbreaking, but it's gonna be tough for your clientele – maybe try a box? Wait for paperback for this one. This one's my passion! I promise you'll sell as many as you take. This one's... Well, you've done pretty well with the author's previous work so perhaps start with a box. Between you and me, not his best work.” He'd flip past some pages in the catalog without even a comment. I remember being filled with a strong desire not to be an author with a book on one of the “flip past” pages.

Q. Did that sales rep provide some real-life basis for the story?

A. The first rep I knew was Mark Gates, who was a celebrity among Midwestern book people. He was a big guy, with a big laugh, who knew everything about everyone who worked for his publishing house and everything about books and the book business, too. He had a voice like Harvey Fierstein. Everybody thought Mark was her best friend. I didn't know him very long, but I immediately thought this guy might make a great character. He died of cancer, maybe a year or so after I met him. I felt sadness disproportionate to the amount of time I knew him. In *Fikry*, he is the basis for Harvey Rhodes, the sales rep Amelia replaces. This character doesn't appear very long in the book, but I was recently at a bookselling conference, and many of the Midwestern bookselling contingent recognized the character as Mark Gates.

I should mention that I've known several other sales reps over the years, and I may have borrowed a bit from their lives, too.

Q. Did you do any other research for the book and, if so, what?

A. I sold my first novel about 10 years ago, and so I would say I've been researching *Fikry* for the last 10 years! From that point of view, it's my most thoroughly researched novel. Other than that, I mainly did light research on subjects ranging from adoption practices in Massachusetts to men's a cappella groups at Princeton.

Q. Do you set out with a grocery list of things you'd like to include in each story or book you write? For instance, you've said you're a fan of movies with an element of quirky romance and readers will find that in this book!

A. I start with characters, and I don't care too, too much that they end up in a particular kind of story. However, I do believe life is better with a little romance, and books usually are, too. But now I'm about to contradict myself! I definitely have goals when I write. I structure quite a lot before I start, but the structure is a fluid thing that is allowed to shift a bit as I dig deeper and get to know the characters better. In this case, I knew that A.J. was isolated geographically (he lives on an island), intellectually (he is a snob), and emotionally (his wife is dead). The book was about A.J. moving outside of himself into the larger world, and showing that transformation was my goal.

Q. Is there one essential theme you find yourself trying to convey over and over, perhaps unconsciously even? For instance, I've spoken with one writer who says no matter how she tries to escape it, her books are always about loss.

A. Oh dear! I have a terribly depressing answer to this question. This isn't a theme per se, but some time ago, it was pointed out to me that I had never written a book that didn't involve brain trauma! And I'm afraid this might be true. I think it's probably because my grandmother had Alzheimer's disease, and when she had it, I often found myself thinking about issues like, what constitutes a person? How much of a person is memory and experiences and the books we've read and the music we love?

Q. Why did you decide to write from a male perspective?

A. Because I couldn't imagine it any other way! A.J. Fikry always ran Island Books, and he was a male! In truth, I like writing the male point-of-view. Perhaps it's a vacation from myself. Perhaps, I thought I could get away with more (A.J. is opinionated after all), if there was no chance anyone thought I was writing myself. Although the book is mainly

in A.J.'s point-of-view, I feel I should mention we do spend time in Amelia, Maya and Ismay's perspectives, too.

Q. I love when writers write about books and create worlds involving books. You're a writer, but what was surprising about doing that for you?

A. I'm always hoping to learn something when I'm writing a book, and sometimes I'm surprised by what I learn. Something that occurred to me when I was writing *Fikry* was the way people use novels and stories to mark time. You can place yourself in time based on what you were reading. A certain novel might mean a summer vacation with your parents. A different novel might mean an apartment where you broke up with your boyfriend. And then if you read the same book twice, time bends and it's actually rather like time travel. The you who read the book the first time now coexists with the current you. It's a wonderful side benefit to having a reading life.

Q. A.J.'s bookstore is a wonderful, magical place, not only in terms of the worlds it contains in its books and how inviting it is for Maya as a place to grow up, but in the way it brings the people who live on the island together. Why was it essential that A.J. run a bookstore for that to happen? Or was it?

A. Yes, it was absolutely essential. While there are other places that have the ability to bring people together, this is a book about book people and readers. A grocery store might also bring people together, but not in perhaps the same way. A book, for most people, is not a necessity, like food, water, or shelter. A person who enters a bookstore does so because she wishes to somehow expand her intellectual/emotional life or the intellectual/emotional life of someone she knows. Choosing to walk through the doors of a bookstore says something about a person. And I think it says something positive about Maya's mother that she chose a bookstore as the place to leave her daughter.

Q. It seems one of the things you like to explore is the way people change, and this book is also about how people struggle with the opportunities they get to do just that. Some, like A.J., manage (albeit with difficulty), others, like Daniel, don't. Would you agree?

A. When someone says to me, "People never change," I usually think, You haven't been paying much attention. People do change – how could they not? Things happen. We either adapt to these circumstances, or we die. I think it is sometimes difficult for people to recognize change in others, though. So, yes, I suppose I am always writing people changing, because in most circumstances, I believe they are!

When we meet A.J. at the beginning of the book, he is not quite himself. He is a grief-stricken, poisonous version of himself. All his best qualities (taste, wit, intellect) have turned against him and become weapons that he can use to isolate himself from the world. Once Maya arrives, change for A.J. is abrupt.

Poor Daniel! I loved writing him. If I were to analyze his character, I would say that he desperately wants to change. He isn't a stupid man. He knows all the things that he should be doing, but he can't. And I think the reason he can't change is because he feels like a failure. He feels like if he could just write one more hit novel, then he could settle down. But of course, he's probably wrong. If he did write one more hit novel, he'd probably get lost in all the accompanying fanfare. If there's a lesson there, perhaps it's that we can't wait to change.

Now, you didn't ask me about Daniel's wife, Ismay, but I think she probably changes more than anyone in the novel. And my favorite transformation in the book is actually Lambiase, the cop. I like that he goes from non-reader to reader, from law enforcement officer to.... Well, I won't spoil it.

Q. I love the chapter intros in which A.J. recommends to Maya different books or stories she'd enjoy. Did you know from the beginning you'd include those?

A. Thank you! It wasn't the absolute beginning, but it was fairly early in the process. I liked the idea that a father could create a sort of canon for his daughter, and I liked the idea that a person, who was not a writer, could have a "collected works." In a way, it's what all of us who are lifelong readers do.

As an aside, I thought of the "intros" as "shelftalkers." I don't know if you have them in Canada, but American booksellers write these little cards that they put in front of books they are recommending at their stores. It made sense to me that a bookseller would leave his daughter a pile of shelftalkers.

Q. What is the most difficult aspect of writing? And the easiest? With this novel, in particular?

A. All novels are different. Over the years, I've learned that the amount I struggle with a particular piece of writing has little bearing in terms of how much readers will enjoy it. This novel was an awfully good baby. Sure, we had a few rough days, where I did what any harried mother would do and locked the screaming baby in the office and went out for dinner. Of course, I jest! You can't lock a baby in the office. You can, however, lock a bad novel in the office, so that's why they must learn to be very good.

The most difficult aspect of writing for me is probably committing to an idea. But that's become easier as I've written more. I spend a longer time thinking about an idea and assembling information before I begin than when I first started writing. The easiest part? Wait! There's an easy part? Other than making PDFs, you mean? Or selecting a font? Let me see... The easiest part of writing *Fikry* might have been writing the end. I always had a strong sense of what that should feel like emotionally for the reader.

Q. You're also a screenwriter. Do you prefer one form to the other? Why?

A. Screenwriting is a good palate cleanser every now and again. I like that screenplays have rules, that the result is always 90-110 pages, and that all of a character's story must take place through external action. The thing about a screenplay is that it is not meant to be an end. It is not meant to be a beautiful thing that stands alone. It's meant to be a blueprint that shows other people how to build a movie. Novels are an end, and they can truly be anything. They are more terrifying to undertake, and they hurt more. That is why I love them best.

For reasons that may be obvious, *Silas Marner*. I'm not sure how much people still read this novel, but simply put, it is the story of a weaver whose life is transformed by the appearance of a child. During my most recent reading of this novel, I began to be taken with a pet theory about this book: Silas Marner's weaving may be understood as a metaphor for George Eliot's writing and the potential for loneliness in any intellectual pursuit. I was also interested in the way the book was plotted, as I had similar plotting concerns.

Q. What are your favourite books/authors and why?

A. I wish I had a good answer to this question, but they change from year to year. A book I always love is *Old School* by Tobias Wolff, because it is many books in one. An author I always love is John Irving, because his books are modern and old-fashioned at the same time. Fikry would like me to tell you that my favourite short story collection from this past year was *Bobcat* by Rebecca Lee. My favourite novel from this past year was either Jami Attenberg's *The Middlesteins* or Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*? A novel that I'm always trying to convince people to read is *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth. It's about music and love – what could be better? When I was a girl, I loved the character Anne Shirley above all others. I must admit I always grew disturbed around book 6 when it became clear to me that Anne was never going to write a novel.

Q. What are you working on next in terms of writing? Can you tell us something about it?

A. I've written eight novels in about 10 years. I feel like I want a little break! But there are a few ideas calling to me right now. I just haven't decided which call I'm going to return.

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Other Links and Resources

Movie Trailer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dDTHl67SLk>

Kirkus TV Interview with Bestselling Author Gabrielle Zevin:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OEW5Jy0REI>

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As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!	It was OK...		Loved it!	

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: