

Indie bookstore owner inhabits Gabrielle Zevin's '*Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*'

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Do you haunt bookstores? Find yourself looking for one of those quirky independents even on vacation? Do you fantasize about owning such a place, preferably a jumble of rooms encouraging browsers to meander all afternoon, ideally located in a quaint New England town?

Gabrielle Zevin has written this novel for you.

"The *Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*" is about a middle-aged man who owns a failing independent bookstore on Alice Island off the coast of Massachusetts. Depressed for the past two years following the death of his wife, Fikry is lonesome, angry and a bit of a literary snob. He doesn't just stock any old book in Island Books, where "No Man Is an Island; Every Book Is a World." Only those titles that satisfy his old-fashioned tastes are allowed in:

"I do not like postmodernism, postapocalyptic [sic] settings, postmortem narrators, or magic realism. I rarely respond to supposedly clever formal devices, multiple fonts, pictures where they shouldn't be — basically gimmicks of any kind. . . . I do not like genre mash-ups à la the literary detective novel or the literary fantasy. Literary should be literary, and genre should be genre, and crossbreeding rarely results in anything satisfying. I do not like children's books, especially ones with orphans, and I prefer not to clutter my shelves with young adult. I do not like anything over four hundred pages or under one hundred fifty pages. I am repulsed by ghostwritten novels by reality television stars, celebrity picture books, sports memoirs, movie tie-in editions, novelty items, and — I imagine this goes without saying — vampires."

Not surprisingly, he doesn't get a lot of customers and has few friends, and in the space of the first few chapters, his most valuable possession, a first edition of Edgar Allan Poe's "Tamerlane," is stolen. Into the slough of despond he tumbles, until something — or *someone* — unexpected shows up in the sparsely stocked children's section. A little bundle of joy and redemption changes his life forever. He quickly figures out that books and reading can bind lives as surely as any shared love.

Zevin has published seven books, including five for young adults, and it shows. "*The Storied Life*" zips by, paced by a few unexpected turns and complications, and any potholes in the plot are quickly smoothed over. Here and there, one's suspension of

disbelief is tested. There's a prize-winning story within the novel written by a well-read high-school freshman in a style that feels just a shade off.

Everything is explained, and all the loose ends are tied up with a bow. A few genuinely grim moments (death appears frequently and suddenly) are leavened by the animating spirit behind the whole, a light tone marked by earnestness, a straightforward approach to love and joy, and a felicitous charm.

What distinguishes this romance is its setting. Zevin knows the book-selling business, the overly optimistic sales reps, the neighborhood book clubs and the desperate spirit of the bricks-and-mortar store filled with bound books in the digital age. Zevin has a very funny set piece with an out-of-town author on hand for a reading who gets rip-roaringly drunk, and there's a poignant story about the fate of good but overlooked writing.

Despite Fikry's disdain for gimmicks, at the head of each chapter are what appear to be shelf-talkers: brief notes recommending a classic short story or collection of short stories. But these are more than just anonymous notes to passing customers. They're small expressions of a parent's love, passing along a passion for writing and reading and good stories.

Zevin has done something old-fashioned and fairly rare these days. She has written an entertaining novel, modest in its scope, engaging and funny without being cloying or sentimental. On top of all that, it is marvelously optimistic about the future of books and bookstores and the people who love both.