

Q&A

1. *Elsewhere*, your first YA novel, begins after fifteen-year-old Liz Hall is hit by a taxi and killed. What motivated you to write a book about life and death?

When I first came up with the idea for *Elsewhere*, I thought it might be mainly about Owen's character—that is to say, about an adult man aging backward who has lost the love of his life and finds a new one. And then I sort of put the idea aside for around six months, and when I came back to it, I realized that it would be a far more interesting (and complex) story if it was about a teenage girl aging backward. Because a teenage girl wouldn't have gotten to experience nearly as much of life as the adult man had. And I knew that, when I was a teenager, the only thing I wanted to be was older. So I knew from experience that this girl's dilemma would have the possibility for much more drama in it. And as I went along, I realized the story wasn't a love story at all (although it had that element)—it was really a sort of reverse coming-of-age story, or a going-of-age story, if you will. And the further I got into the story, the less it became about the afterlife and the more it became about this life. Aside from the fact that Liz is aging backward, she is dealing with the same sorts of issues I think most "living" teenagers deal with, issues I still deal with.

It is difficult to say just what motivated me to write a book about "life after death," except that I had just celebrated a fairly significant birthday (twenty-five), my best friend from childhood had just announced her engagement, I was at something of a professional crossroads, etc., etc. I think I was just at a place where I wanted to reflect on my own life—and writing about the next one was a way for me to do that.

2. Liz is heartbroken when she realizes she will miss rites of passage, such as attending her prom and getting her driver's license. But meaningful experiences—including romance, family, and friends—await her in *Elsewhere*. Is *Elsewhere* a second chance, or a next step?

I think when we're growing up we feel like these cultural "rites of passage" (the prom, etc.) are much more significant than they turn out to be. Mainly, these "rites" serve as ways to mark time. Part of Liz's growth in *Elsewhere* is learning to separate the "events" of maturity from what it actually means to mature, if that makes sense: e.g., going to the prom is not the same as falling in love. Certainly, I can remember thinking, at various points in my own life, "Once I drive, I'll be grown up," or "Once I'm in college, I'll be grown up," but actually all the real growing up happens in between the photo opportunities.

For Liz, *Elsewhere* is not a second chance, in that she never really had a first chance. However, I think that for many of the other characters, *Elsewhere* is most definitely a second chance. For example, Betty gets to be a mother to Liz in a way that seems to heal her own relationship with her daughter, Olivia. Or Owen gets a second chance with Emily, although it doesn't work out the way he had hoped. Or even Aldous gets a second chance with his oral hygiene.

3. Many of the characters in the book are grieving (Liz is grieving her own death; her parents and best friend on Earth are in mourning; Owen is longing for his wife on Earth), and yet there is a feeling of growth, of hope. Can you tell us more about the process the characters are going through?

I am glad that you perceive "growth" and "hope," because it was very important to me to not write another sad book about death. We already have plenty of those kinds of books, many of them wonderful.

For the characters in the story and for all of us, I think it's about learning to not be afraid of grief or death or any of our darker emotions and, also, learning to accept a full spectrum of human emotions and experiences as healthy and normal. To allow happiness and sadness to coexist, or life and death for that matter—I suppose it's a bit Taoist in that respect.

For example, Alvy, Liz's brother, clearly moves on in his life, but

he never forgets Liz either. She is part of his life in a positive way, even though she is physically absent.

Despite the physical regression of the characters, I think there is a feeling of "growth" in the book because many books about the afterlife (or heaven) don't conceive of it as an active place—often the story involves a person looking down on his/her own life and never moving much past anything that happened on Earth. I liked the notion of there being more to do in the next life (if indeed there is one) than watching the life you've just left.

4. Liz is told by her acclimation adviser in Elsewhere that she will need to choose an "avocation." This is clarified as not a job but something a person does to make his/her soul complete. Why was this aspect essential to life in Elsewhere?

To be honest, I think the notion of an "avocation" is really more about the way language can change our experience of the world. So I don't believe an avocation is all that much different from a job (as Liz herself notes), except that the term itself makes people really consider how they want to spend their time, which is to say, their life.

I also wanted it to be an aspect of life on Elsewhere that Liz, having never had a "real job," could not truly appreciate as much as some of the other, older residents. Hopefully, this makes the reader more aware of the kinds of experiences (not all of them good) Liz has missed by dying young. Because there's nothing like doing something you hate to make you realize what you would really love to do.

5. Residents of Elsewhere watch Earth by using the Observation Deck, and those determined enough communicate with the living through the Well. Why did you create these links between the living and the "after-living?" What caused you to choose water as the means of direct communication between worlds?

I believe the dead are very much present in our lives, and not in

an "I see dead people," ghostly sort of way. It may sound corny to say, but I think the love we have for people who are no longer living never really disappears. In a way, this love becomes the "ghosts," or whatever you want to call it. So it seemed entirely natural to me that "the living" would be present in the lives of "the dead." And that for "the dead," "the living" would become the "ghosts." (My, that certainly is a lot of quotation marks . . .)

On the other hand, the Observation Deck in the book is certainly not a good thing when abused (as Liz does abuse it). In the story, the O.D. was about Liz learning that watching her old life was not really living, and that she had to accept the life she had, her Elsewhere life. Actually, I think that on Earth, many people aren't really "present" in their lives, and spend a lot of time wishing that things were different or just living in the past: psychological O.D.s really. And if you really consider the O.D.s and the way the binoculars work, they are entirely in a person's head anyway. (No two people can look at the same binoculars at the same time.)

One of the reasons water is so present in Elsewhere is that, scientifically speaking, there is more water than land on Earth, and yet, here on Earth, we don't really spend much time thinking about all that water. Of course, it probably began for me with thinking about birth (how a woman's water breaks and the birth canal, etc.) and also thinking about the story of Moses, and all the other epic water stories, both biblical and throughout literature. And also, I always saw Elsewhere as a bit touristy, maybe because one of the places I lived as a child was a beach town on the coast of Florida.

6. Liz maintains a connection with her family dog, Lucy, throughout the story. Why was this relationship important? What inspired the idea for Liz to have the ability to speak Canine in Elsewhere? Would you like to see this, or any other aspect of Elsewhere, here on Earth?

The relationship between Liz and Lucy was important because dogs age so much more rapidly than humans, and in the timeline

of the story, I wanted to give Liz a chance to reunite with someone she loved very much, but who wouldn't be dying an untimely or unnatural death. Also, Liz and Lucy die at about the same age, and yet, in Lucy's case, death is no great tragedy. I hoped that readers would draw this parallel. This is why the chapter with Lucy begins the book.

Actually, it's a sort of funny story . . . The book originally began with Liz on the boat, and my agent, Andy, suggested I could make more of the beginning. I was up very late one night, thinking about this note, and my own pug, Mrs. DeWinter (who is called D-Dub), kept barking at me to get me to go to bed—she doesn't like it when I stay up too late. And then I looked at her, and realized that she wasn't just telling me to go to bed—she was telling me how to begin my book! The beginning with Lucy is probably one of the parts of which I'm most proud, and I'm really glad that the book now starts and ends on Earth.

As for the Canine, about a year before I began writing my book, D-Dub got three lumps, and I was convinced it was cancer and that she would probably die at any moment. The lumps turned out to be fatty cysts and completely benign. But for a time I became quite obsessed with dog mortality. I still would like to believe that there's an afterlife, not so much for myself but for my pug. I was equally obsessed with my dog's inability to tell me *in English* if she was sick or would, say, just like a snack.

Honestly, the dirty secret of Liz speaking Canine is that I think it was an ability she possessed *before* she came to Elsewhere. I think she would have been a terrific Canine-speaking veterinarian on Earth, had she lived. She just wouldn't have had a term for it.

Hmm, I do wish I could speak Canine, although the more I observe my own dog, the more I'm aware that dogs are pretty clear about most of their desires, if we really take the time to listen to them. (One of my favorite television shows is *The Dog Whisperer*—I think the trainer on that show is amazing. I suspect he wouldn't entirely approve of the way dogs are portrayed in the book, though.)

As for anything else I would like to bring over from Elsewhere? Well, I wish that our culture wasn't so obsessed with aging and trying to find ways to combat aging. I wish that we all dealt with death in more productive ways. (Maybe these are two sides of the same coin actually?) And of course, I wish that there were avocations, though this probably isn't very practical. I am lucky enough to have found an avocation at a relatively young age, but for a long time I wasn't even sure if this would be possible for me.

7. Who was your favorite character? What type of person do you think Liz becomes her next time around on Earth?

Well, it is hard for me to choose a favorite because, in order to write a character (and I know other writers have said the same thing), I have to love him/her/it at least a little. Even, or maybe especially, the "bad" characters. So I feel a little guilty singling out just one. Okay, I had a lot of fun writing Curtis Jest because he made me laugh with all his pretentious philosophy. But in a way Curtis probably "matured" as much as Liz did during the course of the story. So it's funny that Liz should have inadvertently chosen him as a mentor when he was as clueless as she was (maybe more so) in many respects. I was also very fond of Liz's brother, Alvy, because of the way he tried (and I emphasize *tried*) to use humor to cope with Liz's death. I probably had the most fun writing the dogs, though, above all, Lucy—who was based on my own pet pug, Mrs. DeWinter. My own writing ceases to be very emotionally effective for me around the first draft, but I still get a bit choked up when the pug comes to Elsewhere.

And Liz? I think the next Liz will be eager to experience everything. I think her parents (or whoever) will constantly be having to hold her back.