



BOOK CLUB KIT

# A Letter from Elizabeth Strout

Hello readers,

I'm going to try and tell you just a little bit about *Oh William!*

The idea of the book came to me this way: the actor Laura Linney was about to star in a one-woman show based on my novel, *My Name is Lucy Barton*, in London (it later came to Broadway) and one day I was at a rehearsal with her when the director, Richard Eyre, said something to her about the character William, who was Lucy's ex-husband at the time—I can't remember exactly what he said, but this is what I do remember: Laura murmured quietly something about, "Maybe William had an affair," and she put her glasses up on top of her head and I suddenly thought: Oh William!

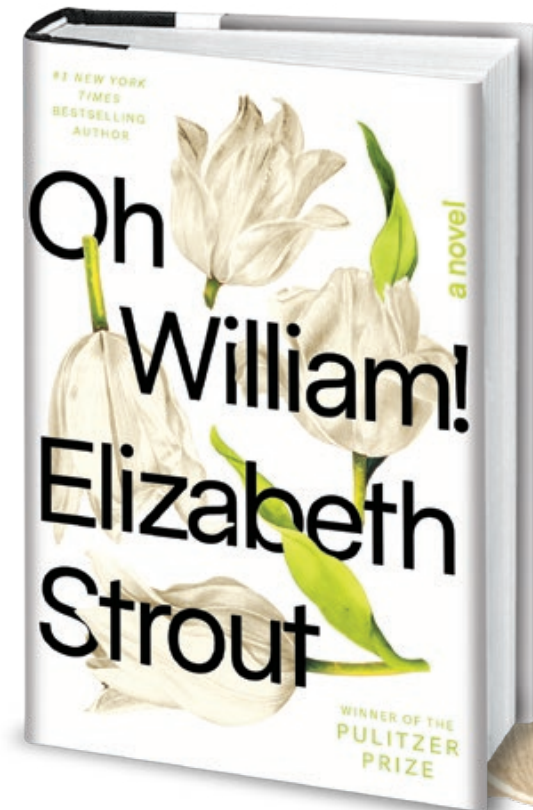
This was the moment when I realized that of course (!) William had his own story—who of us do not have our own story?—and I was suddenly really excited about looking at that part of him. I saw, as I worked this through, that I had already put in the essentials for his story in *My Name is Lucy Barton*. I knew that he was the son of a POW from Germany who had been sent over in World War II to work in the potato fields of Maine and that that man had fallen in love with the potato farmer's wife, Catherine, who became William's mother. So this much I already knew.

I also knew that in real life there is a place in Maine where these POWs had actually come to. (I had read about it years earlier in *The New York Times*.) So my husband and I took a field trip. We went up there, we went to all the places that Lucy and William go on their own trip, and I took furious notes on everything I saw. And when we came back I settled down and wrote their story.

What interests me about people is the murkiness of emotions that we are working from, all the inner parts of our lives that we may not even fully know about ourselves. But when I write I am allowed to know them because I am creating these people. I hope so much to hand to you—the reader—something that is true. You may not be Lucy, or William, but I hope that you can take them into your heart, and hopefully by hearing their story a ceiling may be lifted—even just a tiny bit—in your own world.

Warmest wishes to all of you,

Elizabeth



# Discussion Questions

1. Why have Lucy and William stayed in each other's lives? Did you find yourself wishing they would get back together? How, if at all, did that feeling change over the course of the book?
2. Compare and contrast Lucy's marriages to William and to David. How does she characterize each relationship? How does each man complement her in a different way?
3. What does Lucy learn about herself through her relationship with William? What have you learned about yourself through your relationships with others?
4. Discuss Lucy's relationship with her mother-in-law, Catherine. What does the story about Catherine getting rid of the coat Lucy loved say about their relationship? Did your opinion of Catherine change as you learned more about her past? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. How were Lucy and William influenced by their parents' trauma? How were Lucy and William's daughters influenced by *their* parents' trauma? Do you think there's a way to stop this cycle?
6. "I have never really understood the whole class business in America, because I came from the very bottom of it, and when that happens it never really leaves you," Lucy says. How do the themes of class and money appear throughout the book?
7. Lucy says of William, "When I really cried hard he did not get frightened the way I think David might have; but with David I never cried as I had in my first marriage, not the gasping sobs of a child." Discuss this. Why do you think Lucy cried more with William?
8. "I began to feel a weird sense of something," Lucy says about her wedding to William. "It is very hard to describe but it felt a little bit like things were not entirely real." Why do you think Lucy felt this way? Have you ever experienced a feeling like this?
9. Despite being a well-known writer, Lucy describes feeling invisible "in the deepest way." Discuss her feelings. Does she ever stop feeling this way? Who in her life makes her feel visible?
10. Lucy says she couldn't really have a home without William, but William could have a home without her. What do you think she means by this?
11. To deny her husband the chance of comforting her, Lucy says, was "an unspeakably awful thing." Explain what she means by this. Do you agree? Why or why not?
12. At the close of the book, Lucy says, "We do not know anybody, not even ourselves. Except a little tiny, tiny bit we do." What do you make of this statement? Have you found it to be true in your life?
13. How did you feel about Lucy and William by the end of the book?

## Create Your Own Tulip Arrangements



Lucy Barton loves her tulips. Learn how to create your own arrangements with [this helpful guide from Real Simple](#), featuring everything from glamorous monochromatic bouquets to exotic groupings featuring orchids, ferns, and zebra leaves.



## How to Hem a Pair of Khakis



*When William met me at LaGuardia Airport I saw him from afar and I saw that his khakis were too short. A little bit this broke my heart. He wore loafers, and his socks were blue, not a dark blue and not a light blue, and they showed a few inches until his khakis covered them. Oh William, I thought. Oh William!*

We've all known someone whose pants are just a bit too short. Share this helpful hemming advice with the William in your life—so no one else's heart has to break over khakis.

### Instructions

1. Measure your inseam to find the right length.
2. Remove the original hem.
3. Measure the amount of excess fabric and trim it.
4. Fold the new hem.
5. Sew new hem by hand or with a sewing machine.

For step-by-step instructions, visit [BusinessInsider.com/how-to-hem-pants](https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-hem-pants)

# Would you like to receive notes and updates from Elizabeth Strout?

We all need more Elizabeth Strout in our lives. And with her new monthly email newsletter we can have just that, with updates on her books, personal stories and observations, and so much more. Here's a sample of the digital joy you'll receive in your inbox when you [sign up today](#).

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Hello readers,

Let me tell you about something I saw as I was walking along the river here in the town I live in, here in Maine. The river walk is a paved walkway that goes along the river for a few miles, and every day during the pandemic I would walk there if the weather permitted. Sometimes I would walk with a friend—safe distancing and with masks—and other times I walked it alone.

One day in May I was walking alone and I found myself following behind an older couple as I was walking back. I mean they were at least ten years older than I am, and I am sixty-five. I slowed down so that I would not pass them, they intrigued me.

He wore corduroy pants and walked with a slight limp, or a slight roll, I should say, and he was not heavy but he was a tall man, a big man, and the woman was a great deal shorter and she had a real limp, I mean it almost seemed as if one leg was shorter than the other. She wore dark blue sneakers and he wore red sneakers, which I got a kick out of. Her hair looked as though she had colored it; but there were streaks of gray that went through it; the rest was a dark brown color. The man had thin hair, white.

So they were walking along, holding hands, and they were really talking. I could see this, they would turn their heads to the other as they talked. And then every so often she would nestle her neck against his arm, and he would put his arm around her. I thought they were lovely. And then every so often they would bump hips and laugh. Only her hips were not as high up as his were, but they were kind of doing that every so

often, and whenever I saw her turn her face to him—I was getting closer—she just looked so happy. Man, it was great to see them.

So finally I had to overtake them and as I did, I said, “I don’t mean to be forward but you guys look so happy it has just made my day.” And they were so kind, and sort of surprised, but very nice, and said something back that was nice, which I can’t remember, and we all waved and I got back to the parking lot.

I sat in my car for a while because I had texts and emails that had come in that I needed to answer on my phone, and by the time I looked up, the couple had arrived at the parking lot. I watched them from my car. They were holding each other and nuzzling, and every so often they would break apart for a moment and speak, and then hold each other again. This went on for some time.

Then they kissed each other on the cheek, and I watched while the man went to one car, and she went to another. They waved and waved and finally got into their separate cars.

So there we are. Who knows?  
I am only telling you what I saw.

But it was terrific.

—Elizabeth

