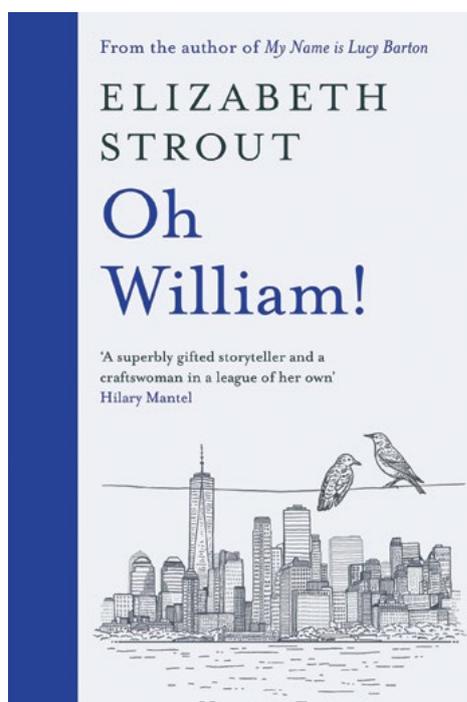




# Reading guide



## *Oh William!* Elizabeth Strout

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## Synopsis

Lucy Barton is a successful writer living in New York, navigating the second half of her life as a recent widow and parent to two adult daughters. A surprise encounter leads her to reconnect with William, her first husband - and longtime, on-again/off-again friend and confidante.

Recalling their college years, the birth of their daughters, the painful dissolution of their marriage, and the lives they built with other people, Strout weaves a portrait, stunning in its subtlety, of a tender, complex, decades-long partnership.

Bestselling author Elizabeth Strout returns to her beloved heroine Lucy Barton in a luminous novel about love, loss, and the family secrets that can erupt and bewilder us at any time.

## About the author

Before writing, Elizabeth Strout had a brief career in the law. She didn't tell people about her ambition to become an author 'because they look at you with such looks of pity. I just couldn't stand that.'

Pity would have been misplaced since Strout has subsequently become a habitué of the best-seller lists: her third novel alone, *Olive Kitteridge*, has sold way more than one million copies, grossed over \$25 million and was made into an Emmy-winning television mini-series. Strout ascribes her authorial career to the fact that she was 'a very bad lawyer' (she only practiced for six months) and that 'my ears are always open... And people will tell you things. Boy, they really will.' This is what gives the relationships in her books the tang of lived experience.

## What the Booker judges said

### In a nutshell

*Oh William!* is one of those quietly radiant books that finds the deepest mysteries in the simplest things. Strout's gentle reflections on marriage, family, love and loneliness are utterly piercing.

### On the book

Strout's writing is steeped in compassion for human beings, damaged and disappointed, full of follies and frailties, but capable, too, of deep understanding.

### On the characters

Lucy Barton is an older woman, divorced, with grown-up children, and yet still coming to terms with her own childhood and learning how little she has understood the people closest to her. Strout writes her with a capacious empathy and probing insight.

## What the critics said

### *L.A Times:*

'Her stories don't need to be grand because human experience is largely not; it is lived on the level of the daily, the conversational, the gestural. There is wonder enough in the silence between two people to fill books even longer than these.'

### *The Scotsman:*

'This is a delightful novel. It rattles along so easily and agreeably in Lucy's voice that it is only gradually that you realise how intelligently it examines the lives of its characters. The easy reading it offers is evidence of Strout's technical mastery.'

### *The Guardian:*

'The miraculous quality of Strout's fiction is the way she opens up depths with the simplest of touches, and this novel ends with the assurance that the source of love lies less in understanding than in recognition - although it may take a lifetime to learn the difference.'

### *New York Times:*

'Marriage is Strout's subject in *Oh William!* and she writes about it with brilliance, whether rendering the refuge and deliverance William and his mother provided Lucy from her impoverished childhood, or the tiny offenses that can accrue toxic symbolism in the course of a relationship: the time William took too long eating a bowl of clams when their daughters were young or the fact that the khakis he wears to begin their Maine adventure are ridiculously short.'

### *Evening Standard:*

'What sets Strout apart is the way she describes people's innermost thoughts and the nuances of their feelings. She is an intimate writer with a particular skill for writing about the thoughts that people often brush away or bury, and the result is that you often forget you are reading fiction. You feel like Lucy's confidante.'

## Questions and discussion points

Strout has often been praised for her realistic narrative voice. In *Oh William!*, the prose is deliberately pared back. **Why do you think this is particularly effective in creating the everyday and something so familiar - and bringing her novels and characters to life?**

The structure of *Oh William!* could be considered unusual. In the opening lines (p.3) Lucy addresses the reader directly, before beginning to recount details of their relationship and lives in a - for the most part - chronological manner. There are also no chapters or definitive sections within the text. **Discuss the narrative structure, the author's intention, and how that shapes your experience as a reader.**

When Lucy decides to take William's surname when they get married, she states: *I had spent my whole life not wanting to be me.* (p. 4). **What does Lucy mean by this? What is she trying to escape through the gesture of this name change?**

At one point during the novel, Lucy comes to the realisation that *William is the only person I ever felt safe with. He is the only home I ever had.* (p.38) **Why then do you think their relationship ended in divorce?**

When Lucy and William's child is born, they have dinner in a restaurant. Lucy recalls the following interaction on p. 56: *'You know, Lucy, I think I would feel better if she had been a boy.' It was as though something dropped deep inside of me, and I did not say anything about it. But I have always remembered that. At the time I thought, 'Well, at least he is being honest'. But we had these surprises and disappointments with each other, is what I mean. What does Lucy mean by 'surprises and disappointments'?*

William is presented as a character who is often self-interested and checked out. *He did not know the names of all the doormen though he had lived in the building for almost fifteen years; this particular doorman was one whose name William could not remember.* (p. 57) **Discuss how these traits affected his relationships with those closest to him.**

William's mother is a notable figure in the book. Lucy tells us: *Catherine, when I first met her, would introduce me to her friends, and she would say quietly with her hand on my arm, 'This is Lucy. Lucy comes from nothing.'* (p. 47). **Discuss this in relation to Catherine's character arc and why class seems important to her.**

*Never would I kill myself. I am a mother. As invisible as I feel, I am a mother.* (p. 162) **What does Lucy mean when she says she feels invisible, and to whom?**

The Booker judges said that 'Lucy Barton is one of literature's immortal characters - brittle, damaged, unravelling, vulnerable and, most of all, ordinary, like us all.' **Why does Lucy, and her experience, resonate with so many readers?**

*People are lonely, is my point here. Many people can't say to those they know well what it is they feel they might want to say.* (p. 119) Loneliness and the inability to communicate with those closest to us is a recurring theme in Strout's novel. **Do you think Strout's depiction of the human condition is realistic?**

Both Lucy and William are struggling to make sense of their childhoods and lives together - William's mother, their children, Lucy's impoverished upbringing, and so on. **To what extent is it a novel about the burden of the past, or how people can never really escape their families, or how loved ones cause one another pain?**

**How do you think Catherine's long-kept secret affects William - now or in retrospect - and what does it lead Lucy to understand?**

## What the author said

'I think - I hope - that many readers have taken Lucy into their hearts because she is honest in what she presents, and also her voice (which is really her) is an intimate one, and yet leaves the reader enough space to enter the book on their own terms.'

'It was not a conscious decision to explore the relationship of Lucy and William at that point in time, but as the book developed I realised: "Look at this! These people - especially as I wrote their dialogue (and their silences) - really know each other in a way that goes beyond having just met in their youth." They have a special thing, is what I felt as I wrote the book, and that is what was so fascinating for me, to try and open that up - and then to give it to the reader.'

Read more of Elizabeth Strout's interview on the Booker Prize website.



## Lucy Barton's world

*Viv Groskop writes:*

With Lucy Barton, Strout has done something generally discouraged within contemporary literary fiction, despite being common in commercial fiction: created a universe around a character over multiple books. She has done it without turning any of these books into the obligatory prequels, sequels or any other kind of trope from genre fiction so beloved of marketing departments. So whenever Lucy Barton pops up, you can be sure that she is part of a bigger story. And yet you can also be equally sure that each book stands independently. The Lucy Barton novels are constructed in such a way that they can be discovered on the reader's terms, not the writer's.

There is something refreshingly trusting about this and reminiscent of classical works of fiction. Recurring characters crop up across the works of Balzac, Zola and Nabokov, travelling across novels and short stories and inserting themselves into other narratives. Strout borrows the idea, subverts it and twists it into something completely unique. In terms of plot or spoilers the order of reading is irrelevant, although arguably you do gain a certain something by unravelling Lucy Barton's world in the same way Strout has unravelled it in her own mind.

## Resources and further reading

Elizabeth Strout interview in the *Guardian*:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/oct/17/elizabeth-strout-oh-william-interview-lucy-barton>

The official Elizabeth Strout website:  
<https://www.elizabethstrout.com/>

The *New Yorker* feature on Lucy Barton:  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/19/lucy-bartons-experiments-in-empathy>

Elizabeth Strout on BBC Radio 4 show *Books and Authors* discussing *Oh William!*:  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0b6kwms>

Watch Laura Linney in the Broadway adaptation of *My Name Is Lucy Barton*:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ukcMFm3ISg>

## If you enjoyed this book, why not try...

Elizabeth Strout, *My Name is Lucy Barton*

Elizabeth Strout, *Anything Is Possible*

Elena Ferrante, *The Neapolitan Quartet*

Mary Lawson, *A Town Called Solace*

Anne Tyler, *A Spool of Blue Thread*