

The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry

Gabrielle Zevin

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Eccentric book banter tickles the reader, bringing a bookseller to life through humor and dialogue.

Even the stories have stories in Gabrielle Zevin's thoroughly charming novel, *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry*. Open the doors at bookseller AJ Fikry's Island Books and find tragedy, comedy, romance, mystery, and more. Open this book and find an affectionate portrait of a curmudgeonly bookseller who faces loss through literature, with surprising results.

Readers who delighted in the eccentric neighbors in *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, will get the same feeling from AJ Fikry's community at Alice Island in a small, tucked-away corner of New England. Although Zevin's story is not historical fiction, it carries an old-fashioned, small-town feel. If there's an accident, it's probably Chief Lambiase you'll talk to. He'll call your sister-in-law to help you. She'll let herself into your apartment above the bookstore because you never lock the front door. Others seem to know what you need before you do.

Just because it's a small town doesn't mean nothing ever happens, however. That open-door policy lets in a lot more than well-meaning relatives, things that will turn life around for the man who keeps a rare volume of Poe in a climate-controlled case but hates the uber-cheerful Muppet Elmo because he's "too needy." Zevin never explicitly tells us what AJ is like but rather shows us through unique—and often humorous—details like these.

AJ's personality also shines through in the "shelf talkers" scattered throughout the narrative. While most of the book is written in the third person, here AJ gets a chance to talk to us directly. In each of these notes, the book lover describes a piece of classic fiction, his take on it, and his prediction of the reader's reaction. From Flannery O'Connor to Roald Dahl, AJ's notes on works reveal important bits of his own story as it unfolds. It's fascinating to speculate about exactly who he is writing these notes for, and why.

After each shelf talker, we get right back to the story in progress, and a lively story it is, told largely through dialogue. Each character has a unique voice, which comes through clearly in peppy conversations. The topic of many conversations is literature, with AJ himself in the lead in comparing real life to books and finding life wanting. Book lovers will be thrilled by each literary reference (though they do lie a bit thick on the ground at certain points), but the book banter generally feels natural and always serves to move the story along.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Spring 2014)

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