

This or Something Better: A Memoir of Resilience

Elisa Stancil Levine

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Through her lyrical memoir *This or Something Better*, Elisa Stancil Levine revisits painful events from her past and endeavors to become more empathetic.

Levine's story of resilience is framed by an account of a fire in California that threatened her home, her horses, and human life. Scenes from the blaze and its aftermath are interspersed with traumatic episodes from her childhood: her step-grandfather molested her, and her mother was depressed. Her prose dazzles, even when she is recounting painful, ugly events: a fire is captured in terms of "bright ash [that] rained down like falling stars," and her grandpa's "white whiskers [sit] against weathered skin like sugar on a donut."

Later events also prove significant, from Levine's divorce at nineteen to the death of a lover. A high school dropout and a single mother, she ended up living in a farmhouse in Rescue, California, and earning enough money from making and selling a children's book and corduroy aprons to move to the city. Discovering that "journalism was not a gold mine," she established a successful career as a decorative artist and saw her work featured on the cover of *Architectural Digest*.

The book is inspiring as it shows Levine setting goals, making lists, and achieving her desires. Sifting through her memories, Levine also seeks to understand why she sometimes struggles with interpersonal relationships. But although she grew up surrounded by unhappy women, she writes about managing to forge healthy relationships with the young women in her life—and to find a caring partner.

Driven by new experiences and personal revelations, the fascinating, creative memoir *This or Something Better* is a story about remaking a life.

SUZANNE KAMATA (May / June 2022)

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