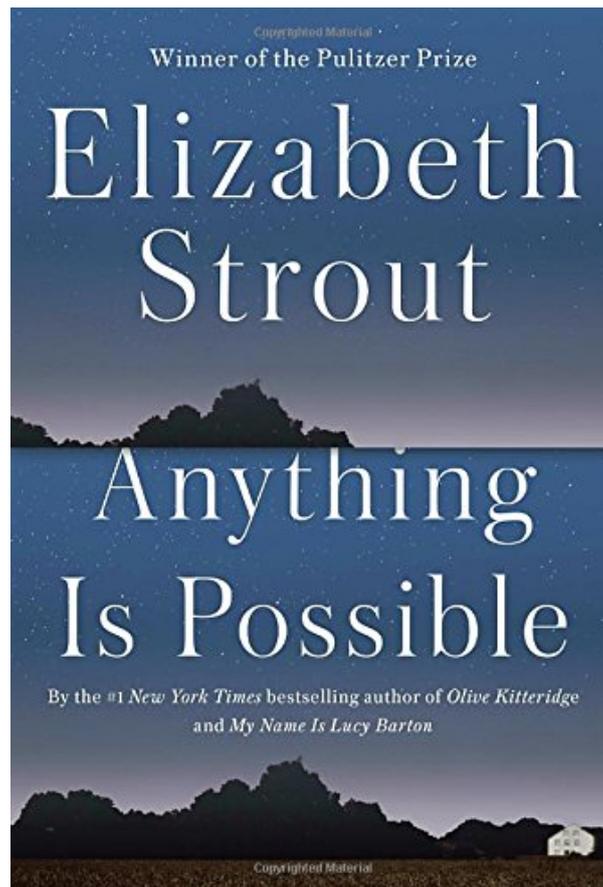
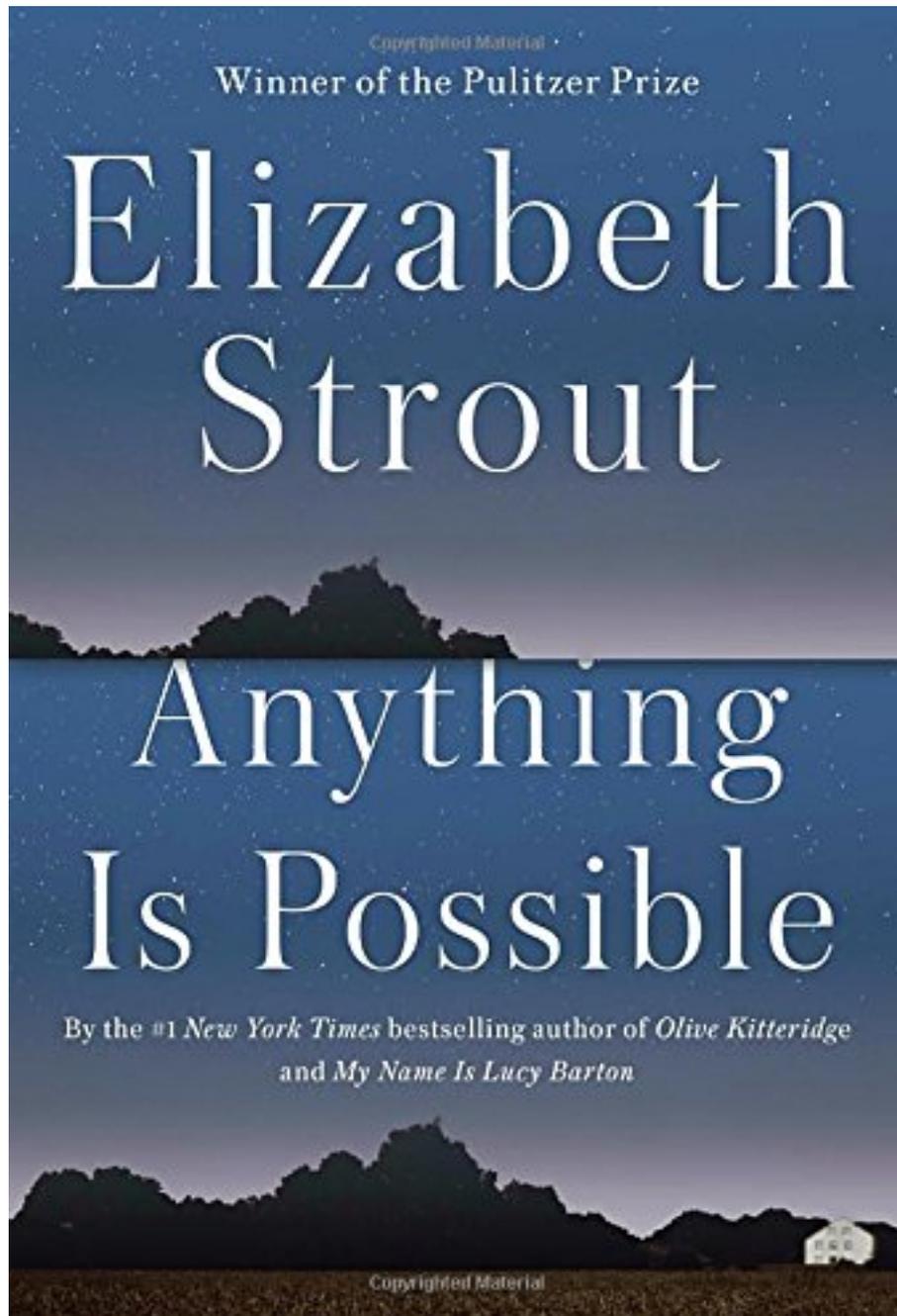


# ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE: A NOVEL BY ELIZABETH STROUT



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## Review

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### The Sign

Tommy Guptill had once owned a dairy farm, which he'd inherited from his father, and which was about two miles from the town of Amgash, Illinois. This was many years ago now, but at night Tommy still sometimes woke with the fear he had felt the night his dairy farm burned to the ground. The house had burned to the ground as well; the wind had sent sparks onto the house, which was not far from the barns. It had been his fault—he always thought it was his fault—because he had not checked that night on the milking machines to make sure they had been turned off properly, and this is where the fire started. Once it started, it ripped with a fury over the whole place. They lost everything, except for the brass frame to the living room mirror, which he came upon in the rubble the next day, and he left it where it was. A collection was taken up: For a number of weeks his kids went to school in the clothes of their classmates, until he could gather himself and the little money he had; he sold the land to the neighboring farmer, but it did not bring much money in. Then he and his wife, a short pretty woman named Shirley, bought new clothes, and he bought a house as well, Shirley keeping her spirits up admirably as all this was going on. They'd had to buy a house in Amgash, which was a run-down town, and his kids went to school there instead of in Carlisle, where they had been able to go to school before, his farm being just on the line dividing the two towns. Tommy took a job as the janitor in the Amgash school system; the steadiness of the job appealed to him, and he could never go to work on someone else's farm, he did not have the stomach for that. He was thirty-five years old at the time.

The kids were grown now, with kids of their own who were also grown, and he and Shirley still lived in their small house; she had planted flowers around it, which was unusual in that town. Tommy had worried a good deal about his children at the time of the fire; they had gone from having their home be a place that class trips came to—each year in spring the fifth-grade class from Carlisle would make a day of it, eating their lunches out beside the barns on the wooden tables there, then tromping through the barns watching the men milking the cows, the white foamy stuff going up and over them in the clear plastic pipes—to having to see their father as the man who pushed the broom over the “magic dust” that got tossed over the throw-up of some kid who had been sick in the hallways, Tommy wearing his gray pants and a white shirt that had Tommy stitched on it in red.

Well. They had all lived through it.

This morning Tommy drove slowly to the town of Carlisle for errands; it was a sunny Saturday in May, and his wife's eighty-second birthday was just a few days away. All around him were open fields, the corn newly planted, and the soybeans too. A number of fields were still brown, as they'd been plowed under for their planting, but mostly there was the high blue sky, with a few white clouds scattered near the horizon. He drove past the sign on the road that led down to the Barton home; it still said SEWING AND ALTERATIONS, even though the woman, Lydia Barton, who did the sewing and alterations had died many years ago. The Barton family had been outcasts, even in a town like Amgash, their extreme poverty and strangeness making this so. The oldest child, a man named Pete, lived alone there now, the middle child was two towns away, and the youngest, Lucy Barton, had fled many years ago, and had ended up living in New York City. Tommy had spent time thinking of Lucy. All those years she had lingered after school, alone in a classroom, from fourth grade right up to her senior year in high school; it had taken her a few years to even look him in the eye.

But now Tommy was driving past the area where his farm had been—these days it was all fields, not a sign of the farm was left—and he thought, as he often thought, about his life back then. It had been a good life, but he did not regret the things that had happened. It was not Tommy's nature to regret things, and on the night of the fire—in the midst of his galloping fear—he understood that all that mattered in this world were his wife and his children, and he thought that people lived their whole lives not knowing this as sharply and constantly as he did. Privately, he thought of the fire as a sign from God to keep this gift tightly to him. Privately, because he did not want to be thought of as a man who made up excuses for a tragedy; and he did not want anyone—not even his dearly beloved wife—to think he would do this. But he had felt that night, while his wife kept the children over by the road—he had rushed them from the house when he saw that the barn was on fire—as he watched the enormous flames flying into the nighttime sky, then heard the terrible screaming sounds of the cows as they died, he had felt many things, but it was just as the roof of his house crashed in, fell into the house itself, right into their bedrooms and the living room below with all the photos of the children and his parents, as he saw this happen he had felt—undeniably—what he could only think was the presence of God, and he understood why angels had always been portrayed as having wings, because there had been a sensation of that—of a rushing sound, or not even a sound, and then it was as though God, who had no face, but was God, pressed up against him and conveyed to him without words—so briefly, so fleetingly—some message that Tommy understood to be: It's all right, Tommy. And then Tommy had understood that it was all right. It was beyond his understanding, but it was all right. And it had been. He often thought that his children had become more compassionate as a result of having to go to school with kids who were poor, and not from homes like the one they had first known. He had felt the presence of God since, at times, as though a golden color was very near to him, but he never again felt visited by God as he had felt that night, and he knew too well what people would make of it, and this is why he would keep it to himself until his dying day—the sign from God.

Still, on a spring morning as this one was, the smell of the soil brought back to him the smells of the cows, the moisture of their nostrils, the warmth of their bellies, and his barns—he had had two barns—and he let his mind roll over pieces of scenes that came to him. Perhaps because he had just passed the Barton place he thought of the man, Ken Barton, who had been the father of those poor, sad children, and who had worked on and off for Tommy, and then he thought—as he more often did—of Lucy, who had left for college and then ended up in New York City. She had become a writer.

Lucy Barton.

Driving, Tommy shook his head slightly. Tommy knew many things as a result of being the janitor in that school more than thirty years; he knew of girls' pregnancies and drunken mothers and cheating spouses, for he overheard these things talked about by the students in their small huddles by the bathrooms, or near the cafeteria; in many ways he was invisible, he understood that. But Lucy Barton had troubled him the most. She and her sister, Vicky, and her brother, Pete, had been viciously scorned by the other kids, and by some of the teachers too. Yet because Lucy stayed after school so often for so many years he felt—though she seldom spoke—that he knew her the best. One time when she was in the fourth grade, it was his first year working there, he had opened the door to a classroom and found her lying on three chairs pushed together, over near the radiators, her coat as a blanket, fast asleep. He had stared at her, watching her chest move slightly up and down, seen the dark circles beneath her eyes, her eyelashes spread like tiny twinkling stars, for her eyelids had been moist as though she had been weeping before she slept, and then he backed out slowly, quietly as he could; it had felt almost unseemly to come upon her like that.

But one time—he remembered this now—she must have been in junior high school, and he'd walked into the classroom and she was drawing on the blackboard with chalk. She stopped as soon as he stepped inside the room. "You go ahead," he said. On the board was a drawing of a vine with many small leaves. Lucy moved

away from the blackboard, then she suddenly spoke to him. "I broke the chalk," she said. Tommy told her that was fine. "I did it on purpose," she said, and there was a tiny glint of a smile before she looked away. "On purpose?" he asked, and she nodded, again with the tiny smile. So he went and picked up a piece of chalk, a full stick of it, and he snapped it in half and winked at her. In his memory she had almost giggled. "You drew that?" he asked, pointing to the vine with the small leaves. And she shrugged then and turned away. But usually, she was just sitting at a desk and reading, or doing her homework, he could see that she was doing that.

He pulled up to a stop sign now, and said the words aloud to himself quietly, "Lucy, Lucy, Lucy B. Where did you go to, how did you flee?"

He knew how. In the spring of her senior year, he had seen her in the hallway after school, and she had said to him, so suddenly open-faced, her eyes big, "Mr. Guptill, I'm going to college!" And he had said, "Oh, Lucy. That's wonderful." She had thrown her arms around him; she would not let go, and so he hugged her back. He always remembered that hug, because she had been so thin; he could feel her bones and her small breasts, and because he wondered later how much—how little—that girl had ever been hugged.

Tommy pulled away from the stop sign and drove into the town; right there beyond was a parking space. Tommy pulled in to it, got out of his car, and squinted in the sunshine. "Tommy Guptill," shouted a man, and, turning, Tommy saw Griff Johnson walking toward him with his characteristic limp, for Griff had one leg that was shorter than the other, and even his built-up shoe could not keep him from limping. Griff had an arm out, ready to shake hands. "Griffith," said Tommy, and they pumped their arms for a long time, while cars drove slowly past them down Main Street. Griff was the insurance man here in town, and he had been awfully good to Tommy; learning that Tommy had not insured his farm for its worth, Griff had said, "I met you too late," which was true. But Griff, with his warm face, and big belly now, continued to be good to Tommy. In fact, Tommy did not know anyone—he thought—who was not good to him. As a breeze moved around them, they spoke of their children and grandchildren; Griff had a grandson who was on drugs, which Tommy thought was very sad, and he just listened and nodded, glancing up at the trees that lined Main Street, their leaves so young and bright green, and then he listened about another grandson who was in medical school now, and Tommy said, "Hey, that's just great, good for him," and they clapped hands on each other's shoulders and moved on.

In the dress shop, with its bell that announced his entrance, was Marilyn Macauley, trying on a dress. "Tommy, what brings you in here?" Marilyn was thinking of getting the dress for her granddaughter's baptism a few Sundays from now, she said, and she tugged on the side of it; it was beige with swirling red roses; she was without her shoes, standing in just her stockings. She said that it was an extravagance to buy a new dress for such a thing, but that she felt like it. Tommy—who had known Marilyn for years, first when she was in high school as a student in Amgash—saw her embarrassment, and he said he didn't think it was an extravagance at all. Then he said, "When you have a chance, Marilyn, can you help me find something for my wife?" He saw her become efficient then, and she said yes, she certainly would, and she went into the changing room and came back out in her regular clothes, a black skirt and a blue sweater, with her flat black shoes on, and right away she took Tommy over to the scarves. "Here," she said, pulling out a red scarf that had a design with gold threads running through it. Tommy held it, but picked up a flowery scarf with his other hand. "Maybe this," he said. And Marilyn said, "Yes, that looks like Shirley," and then Tommy understood that Marilyn liked the red scarf herself but would never allow herself to buy it. Marilyn, that first year Tommy worked as a janitor, had been a lovely girl, saying "Hi, Mr. Guptill!" whenever she saw him, and now she had become an older woman, nervous, thin, her face pinched. Tommy thought what other people thought, it was because her husband had been in Vietnam and had never afterward been the same; Tommy would see Charlie Macauley around town, and he always looked so far away, the poor man, and

poor Marilyn too. So Tommy held the red scarf with the gold threads for a minute as though considering it, then said, "I think you're right, this one looks more like Shirley," and took the flowery one to the register. He thanked Marilyn for her help.

"I think she'll love it," Marilyn said, and Tommy said he was sure she would.

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Recalling Olive Kitteridge in its richness, structure, and complexity, *Anything Is Possible* explores the whole range of human emotion through the intimate dramas of people struggling to understand themselves and others.

Here are two sisters: One trades self-respect for a wealthy husband while the other finds in the pages of a book a kindred spirit who changes her life. The janitor at the local school has his faith tested in an encounter with an isolated man he has come to help; a grown daughter longs for mother love even as she comes to accept her mother's happiness in a foreign country; and the adult Lucy Barton (the heroine of *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, the author's celebrated New York Times bestseller) returns to visit her siblings after seventeen years of absence.

Reverberating with the deep bonds of family, and the hope that comes with reconciliation, *Anything Is Possible* again underscores Elizabeth Strout's place as one of America's most respected and cherished authors.

## Praise for *Anything Is Possible*

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### The Sign

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The kids were grown now, with kids of their own who were also grown, and he and Shirley still lived in their small house; she had planted flowers around it, which was unusual in that town. Tommy had worried a good deal about his children at the time of the fire; they had gone from having their home be a place that class trips came to—each year in spring the fifth-grade class from Carlisle would make a day of it, eating their lunches out beside the barns on the wooden tables there, then tromping through the barns watching the men milking the cows, the white foamy stuff going up and over them in the clear plastic pipes—to having to see their father as the man who pushed the broom over the “magic dust” that got tossed over the throw-up of some kid who had been sick in the hallways, Tommy wearing his gray pants and a white shirt that had Tommy stitched on it in red.

Well. They had all lived through it.

This morning Tommy drove slowly to the town of Carlisle for errands; it was a sunny Saturday in May, and his wife's eighty-second birthday was just a few days away. All around him were open fields, the corn newly planted, and the soybeans too. A number of fields were still brown, as they'd been plowed under for their planting, but mostly there was the high blue sky, with a few white clouds scattered near the horizon. He drove past the sign on the road that led down to the Barton home; it still said SEWING AND ALTERATIONS, even though the woman, Lydia Barton, who did the sewing and alterations had died many years ago. The Barton family had been outcasts, even in a town like Amgash, their extreme poverty and strangeness making this so. The oldest child, a man named Pete, lived alone there now, the middle child was two towns away, and the youngest, Lucy Barton, had fled many years ago, and had ended up living in New York City. Tommy had spent time thinking of Lucy. All those years she had lingered after school, alone in a classroom, from fourth grade right up to her senior year in high school; it had taken her a few years to even look him in the eye.

But now Tommy was driving past the area where his farm had been—these days it was all fields, not a sign of the farm was left—and he thought, as he often thought, about his life back then. It had been a good life, but he did not regret the things that had happened. It was not Tommy's nature to regret things, and on the night of the fire—in the midst of his galloping fear—he understood that all that mattered in this world were his wife and his children, and he thought that people lived their whole lives not knowing this as sharply and constantly as he did. Privately, he thought of the fire as a sign from God to keep this gift tightly to him. Privately, because he did not want to be thought of as a man who made up excuses for a tragedy; and he did not want anyone—not even his dearly beloved wife—to think he would do this. But he had felt that night, while his wife kept the children over by the road—he had rushed them from the house when he saw that the barn was on fire—as he watched the enormous flames flying into the nighttime sky, then heard the terrible screaming sounds of the cows as they died, he had felt many things, but it was just as the roof of his house crashed in, fell into the house itself, right into their bedrooms and the living room below with all the photos of the children and his parents, as he saw this happen he had felt—undeniably—what he could only think was the presence of God, and he understood why angels had always been portrayed as having wings, because there had been a sensation of that—of a rushing sound, or not even a sound, and then it was as though God, who had no face, but was God, pressed up against him and conveyed to him without words—so briefly, so fleetingly—some message that Tommy understood to be: It's all right, Tommy. And then Tommy had understood that it was all right. It was beyond his understanding, but it was all right. And it had been. He often thought that his children had become more compassionate as a result of having to go to school with kids who were poor, and not from homes like the one they had first known. He had felt the presence of God since, at times, as though a golden color was very near to him, but he never again felt visited by God as he had felt that night, and he knew too well what people would make of it, and this is why he would keep it to himself until his dying day—the sign from God.

Still, on a spring morning as this one was, the smell of the soil brought back to him the smells of the cows, the moisture of their nostrils, the warmth of their bellies, and his barns—he had had two barns—and he let his mind roll over pieces of scenes that came to him. Perhaps because he had just passed the Barton place he thought of the man, Ken Barton, who had been the father of those poor, sad children, and who had worked on and off for Tommy, and then he thought—as he more often did—of Lucy, who had left for college and then ended up in New York City. She had become a writer.

Lucy Barton.

Driving, Tommy shook his head slightly. Tommy knew many things as a result of being the janitor in that school more than thirty years; he knew of girls' pregnancies and drunken mothers and cheating spouses, for he overheard these things talked about by the students in their small huddles by the bathrooms, or near the cafeteria; in many ways he was invisible, he understood that. But Lucy Barton had troubled him the most. She and her sister, Vicky, and her brother, Pete, had been viciously scorned by the other kids, and by some of the teachers too. Yet because Lucy stayed after school so often for so many years he felt—though she seldom spoke—that he knew her the best. One time when she was in the fourth grade, it was his first year working there, he had opened the door to a classroom and found her lying on three chairs pushed together, over near the radiators, her coat as a blanket, fast asleep. He had stared at her, watching her chest move slightly up and down, seen the dark circles beneath her eyes, her eyelashes spread like tiny twinkling stars, for her eyelids had been moist as though she had been weeping before she slept, and then he backed out slowly, quietly as he could; it had felt almost unseemly to come upon her like that.

But one time—he remembered this now—she must have been in junior high school, and he'd walked into the classroom and she was drawing on the blackboard with chalk. She stopped as soon as he stepped inside the room. "You go ahead," he said. On the board was a drawing of a vine with many small leaves. Lucy moved

away from the blackboard, then she suddenly spoke to him. "I broke the chalk," she said. Tommy told her that was fine. "I did it on purpose," she said, and there was a tiny glint of a smile before she looked away. "On purpose?" he asked, and she nodded, again with the tiny smile. So he went and picked up a piece of chalk, a full stick of it, and he snapped it in half and winked at her. In his memory she had almost giggled. "You drew that?" he asked, pointing to the vine with the small leaves. And she shrugged then and turned away. But usually, she was just sitting at a desk and reading, or doing her homework, he could see that she was doing that.

He pulled up to a stop sign now, and said the words aloud to himself quietly, "Lucy, Lucy, Lucy B. Where did you go to, how did you flee?"

He knew how. In the spring of her senior year, he had seen her in the hallway after school, and she had said to him, so suddenly open-faced, her eyes big, "Mr. Guptill, I'm going to college!" And he had said, "Oh, Lucy. That's wonderful." She had thrown her arms around him; she would not let go, and so he hugged her back. He always remembered that hug, because she had been so thin; he could feel her bones and her small breasts, and because he wondered later how much—how little—that girl had ever been hugged.

Tommy pulled away from the stop sign and drove into the town; right there beyond was a parking space. Tommy pulled in to it, got out of his car, and squinted in the sunshine. "Tommy Guptill," shouted a man, and, turning, Tommy saw Griff Johnson walking toward him with his characteristic limp, for Griff had one leg that was shorter than the other, and even his built-up shoe could not keep him from limping. Griff had an arm out, ready to shake hands. "Griffith," said Tommy, and they pumped their arms for a long time, while cars drove slowly past them down Main Street. Griff was the insurance man here in town, and he had been awfully good to Tommy; learning that Tommy had not insured his farm for its worth, Griff had said, "I met you too late," which was true. But Griff, with his warm face, and big belly now, continued to be good to Tommy. In fact, Tommy did not know anyone—he thought—who was not good to him. As a breeze moved around them, they spoke of their children and grandchildren; Griff had a grandson who was on drugs, which Tommy thought was very sad, and he just listened and nodded, glancing up at the trees that lined Main Street, their leaves so young and bright green, and then he listened about another grandson who was in medical school now, and Tommy said, "Hey, that's just great, good for him," and they clapped hands on each other's shoulders and moved on.

In the dress shop, with its bell that announced his entrance, was Marilyn Macauley, trying on a dress. "Tommy, what brings you in here?" Marilyn was thinking of getting the dress for her granddaughter's baptism a few Sundays from now, she said, and she tugged on the side of it; it was beige with swirling red roses; she was without her shoes, standing in just her stockings. She said that it was an extravagance to buy a new dress for such a thing, but that she felt like it. Tommy—who had known Marilyn for years, first when she was in high school as a student in Amgash—saw her embarrassment, and he said he didn't think it was an extravagance at all. Then he said, "When you have a chance, Marilyn, can you help me find something for my wife?" He saw her become efficient then, and she said yes, she certainly would, and she went into the changing room and came back out in her regular clothes, a black skirt and a blue sweater, with her flat black shoes on, and right away she took Tommy over to the scarves. "Here," she said, pulling out a red scarf that had a design with gold threads running through it. Tommy held it, but picked up a flowery scarf with his other hand. "Maybe this," he said. And Marilyn said, "Yes, that looks like Shirley," and then Tommy understood that Marilyn liked the red scarf herself but would never allow herself to buy it. Marilyn, that first year Tommy worked as a janitor, had been a lovely girl, saying "Hi, Mr. Guptill!" whenever she saw him, and now she had become an older woman, nervous, thin, her face pinched. Tommy thought what other people thought, it was because her husband had been in Vietnam and had never afterward been the same; Tommy would see Charlie Macauley around town, and he always looked so far away, the poor man, and

poor Marilyn too. So Tommy held the red scarf with the gold threads for a minute as though considering it, then said, "I think you're right, this one looks more like Shirley," and took the flowery one to the register. He thanked Marilyn for her help.

"I think she'll love it," Marilyn said, and Tommy said he was sure she would.

Most helpful customer reviews

23 of 27 people found the following review helpful.

Everyday People Expressed In Utter Brilliance

By prisrob

For those of us who read, Elizabeth Strout's, 'My Name Is Lucy Barton' we will not forget Lucy, her mother or the other characters in her town in Illinois. This novel brings it all together, the background, and the drama of all these people and their families throughout the years. This is one of those novels I did not want to end, read it in two sittings.

We met Lucy Barton as a patient in a New York hospital. She had an appendectomy, and spent five weeks suffering from some sort of infection. Her husband had little time for visits and so he sent Lucy's mother from Illinois to stay with her. Lucy and her family had been estranged for many years. Few contacts, Lucy called when her daughters were born, but there was never any discussion of Lucy's life or the life she came from. And, so it is with mom's visit. Mom sits quietly in a chair, refuses all invitations to rest. She sits and she and Lucy talk about the people they knew. All gossip, and all dismal. These families who were gossiped about come to life in this book.

Lucy is a well-known author, rarely visits her hometown, her poor family was disparaged and is thus remembered by the locals. Her brother, Pete, and sister, Vicky are still around, Vicky full of resentment. We meet Tommy Guptill, a janitor at the school who was kind to Lucy and to her brother, Pete. Pete Barton who has lived a spartan life in the old homestead. Patty Nicely, another good person who is insulted by Vicky's daughter, Lila. Patty's sister, Linda and her husband, may be the nastiest of the bunch. The daughter who loves her mother too much. The brother and sister, Abel and Dottie, who each found their way to goodness and kindness. Dottie's story may be the one I will remember and giggle about for a long time. Abel one of those men whom everyone liked. Charley and the Appleby family, all resounding with Issues. Many of the stories in this small town in Illinois have to do with rank and class. The poor and the rich, never the two shall meet, for very long. And, most of all the people who never risked the passion that put them in danger, simply to be near the dazzle of the white sun as Annie Appleby so elegantly expressed.

Elizabeth Strout has given us every emotion from A to Z in these characters who are trying to understand themselves and their neighbors. Such a massive display of every day people expressed in such utter brilliance.

Highly Recommended. prisrob 01-29-17

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Another wonderful book by Elizabeth Strout

By K. Blaine

I am a big fan of the writing of Elizabeth Strout, and I was delighted at the opportunity to review her latest collection of interrelated short stories, "Anything Is Possible."

First, however, it must be said that in order to fully enjoy and appreciate this book, you really must have read her previous book, "My Name is Lucy Barton." In fact, I think of these two books as companions. In "Lucy

Barton," the reader is introduced to Lucy, a writer living in New York City, who is enduring a lengthy hospital stay following complications of surgery. Her mother, from whom she is estranged, shows up one day unannounced and stays at Lucy's bedside for five days. In their conversations, they discuss many people from the past in the small town where Lucy grew up, Amgash, Illinois. In this book, the reader gets a feel for Lucy's traumatic childhood and impoverished family and her remarkable journey to become an esteemed writer.

"Anything Is Possible" tells the reader more about most of the people who were only mentioned in the previous book. It is not a coherent novel with a straightforward plot; rather, it is like a camera giving us a snapshot into the lives of many people from Lucy's past, including her brother Pete and her sister Vicky. It provides us with a backstory on each character, so that what we were told about them in "Lucy" is expanded and fleshed out, making almost all the characters more sympathetic.

I liked all of these stories, but one of my favorites was the first, "The Sign." The main character in this story, Tommy Guptill, whose kindness and compassion are remarkable, is the school custodian who allows the child Lucy to stay after school for hours so that she can keep warm. In "The Sign," we learn about the tragedy that led Tommy to become a custodian, and we see his present day interaction with Lucy's reclusive older brother, Pete. Tommy is one of the most sympathetic characters I have met in a long time.

I also enjoyed "Sister," a story in which the Barton siblings are reunited after many years of not having seen each other. The reader sees how the past has affected each of them and learns new details about the abuse and isolation they endured. I am in awe that they survived at all, given the past; Lucy's panic attack at the end is completely believable.

Strout's writing is wonderful. I am most drawn to the honesty of her observations, her refusal to sugarcoat anything. If you read "Lucy," you will see that this is an obsession of sorts with her, and it is no less evident in this collection of stories. Another collection by Strout, "Olive Kitteridge," is more unified, but given the fact that the unifying character in this book does not even appear in some of the stories, this lack of complete unity did not bother me.

Although I loved this book, I recognize that it is not for everyone. Some members of my book club were put off by the lack of plot in "My Name Is Lucy Barton," and I especially caution readers who have not yet read "Lucy." Yes, of course you can read these stories on their own, but it is hard for me to see what meaning they would have for you unless you had read the previous book. If you are looking for a tight plot, look elsewhere. However, I highly recommend this book for people who appreciate superb, closely observed writing and can tolerate some scenes of almost unspeakable abuse of children.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

A companion piece to MY NAME IS LUCY BARTON

By switterbug/Betsey Van Horn

One of the things I liked best in MY NAME IS LUCY BARTON, Strout's previous novella, was the understated prose that delivered evocative emotion. Her writing stayed beneath the narrative, out of the way, but the story shined. Strout is superb at illuminating small-town lives of traumatized people who are often suppressed by their abusive pasts. In this novel, the author extends or expands on LB, even including her as a character, and one referred to by other characters in the novel. The things that happened to most of these people from (or near) the town of Amgash, Illinois, are enough to diminish a person's ego, confidence, and sense of personal safety. And, even more, they are filled with almost unendurable shame. But they endure.

At first, I thought that in this serial narrative, all roads led to Lucy Barton, but by the end, I observed that it

was more of an intersecting or periodically parallel cast, most characters being a protagonist in one chapter, and a small presence or reference in another. They were either related to each other or had a connection with at least one other person in another chapter. There's a little bit of an OUR TOWN feel to it, but rated R, and more contemporary (and yet timeless in ways). And yet, MY NAME IS LUCY BARTON has a show of meta-fiction here, as several characters in ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE decided to read Barton's memoir, the same novella that we read as fiction.

As in her previous work, the prose is mostly understated, although a few times—and this could just be me, I'm not speaking for everyone—it bordered on a little bit twee, where Strout pushed the “naturalness” so that I felt I saw the woman behind the curtain. It wasn't often, and didn't spoil the story for me, but at moments I questioned a few granules of authenticity. Sometimes, the characters were SO nice or placid that they felt stilted or too controlled by the author. However, most of the cast was off-kilter or shaky enough to add substance.

One of the most alarming but sympathetic characters was a man named Charlie who suffered PTSD from the Vietnam War. There was both sadness and a gritty edge to his character that was as good as an occasional gut punch. Strout focused more on upper-middle-aged and elderly characters, and did a fine job of giving them purpose (instead of just being props or archetypes).

Lucy Barton's memoir also serves as an inspiration to those she left behind: “...Lucy Barton's book had understood her. That was it—the book had understood her...Lucy Barton had her own shame; oh boy did she have her own shame. And she had risen straight out of it.”

Nearly all characters were terribly abused in various ways. Could the author have portrayed torment, trauma, loneliness, and shame without characters always possessing a background of abuse? That's an issue to discuss with fellow readers. Occasionally, it wearied me, and I wanted a relief from all the abused men and women. However, Strout also framed the story with a cautious hope that included nuggets of reciprocal love, as well as junctures of insight (vs. inorganic epiphanies). This is a must-read for fans of Strout or even just her last book; however, you can read this as a stand-alone—and then go back and read LB.

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# ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE: A NOVEL BY ELIZABETH STROUT PDF

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## Review

“In Elizabeth Strout’s *Anything Is Possible*, her stunning follow-up to *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, a famous author returns to the Midwestern hometown of her childhood, touching off a daisy-chain of stories narrated by those who knew her—memories of trauma and goodwill, resentments small and large, and the ever-widening gulf between haves and have-nots. Strout, always good, just keeps getting better.”—Vogue

“Full of searing insight into the darkest corners of the human spirit . . . *Anything Is Possible* is both sweeping in scope and incredibly introspective. That delicate balance is what makes its content so sharp and compulsively readable. . . . Strout’s winning formula . . . has succeeded once again. With assuredness, compassion and utmost grace, her words and characters remind us that in life anything is actually possible.”—San Francisco Chronicle

“*Anything Is Possible* is a stunner. It is unblinking in its psychological portrayals of a cast of characters raised in socially impaired households in a small, Northern Illinois community. . . . A score of major and minor characters are drawn in such rich, crisp detail that they sear the heart. . . . Strout’s gifts as a storyteller are evocative of Edward Hopper’s captured moments of American life. Like Hopper, in *Anything Is Possible*, Strout leaves impressions you’ll not soon forget.”—Portland Press Herald

“While we recommend everything by the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer—like, say her recent book *My Name Is Lucy Barton*—this novel, which explores life’s complexities through interconnected stories, stands on its own. . . . It’s a joy to read a modern master doing her thing.”—Marie Claire

“If you miss the charmingly eccentric and completely relatable characters from Pulitzer Prize winner Elizabeth Strout’s best-selling *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, you’ll be happily reunited with them in Strout’s smart and soulful *Anything Is Possible*.”—Elle

“Strout pierces the inner worlds of these characters’ most private behaviors, illuminating the emotional conflicts and pure joy of being human, of finding oneself in the search for the American dream.”—NYLON

“We devoured Strout’s last novel, *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, and her latest—which is loosely linked to *Lucy Barton*—is no different. Told from multiple points of view, it’s about residents of a small town in Illinois struggling with the most relatable and quotidian problems . . . you’ll swear you know these characters. (In fact, it reminds us a bit of another of Strout’s masterpieces, the excellent *Olive Kitteridge*.)”—PureWow

“Amgash, Illinois, will be familiar to Elizabeth Strout fans as the hometown of the protagonist of her 2016

novel, *My Name Is Lucy Barton*. In *Anything Is Possible . . . Lucy's legend looms large . . . but no prior reading is required to enjoy Strout's powerful writing and empathy.*—Real Simple

“In her latest work, Strout achieves new levels of masterful storytelling.”—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“The epic scope within seemingly modest confines recalls Strout's Pulitzer Prize winner, *Olive Kitteridge*, and her ability to discern vulnerabilities buried beneath bad behavior is as acute as ever. Another powerful examination of painfully human ambiguities and ambivalences—this gifted writer just keeps getting better.”—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“With her latest work, Pulitzer Prize winner Strout (for *Olive Kitteridge*) crafts a deep and complex inside view of the hearts and minds of individuals who make up a community.”—Library Journal (starred review)

“It's hard to believe that a year after the astonishing *My Name Is Lucy Barton* Elizabeth Strout could bring us another book that is by every measure its equal, but what Strout proves to us again and again is that where she's concerned, anything is possible. This book, this writer, are magnificent.”—Ann Patchett

#### Praise for Elizabeth Strout's *My Name Is Lucy Barton*

“There is not a scintilla of sentimentality in this exquisite novel. Instead, in its careful words and vibrating silences, *My Name Is Lucy Barton* offers us a rare wealth of emotion, from darkest suffering to . . . simple joy.”—The New York Times Book Review

“Spectacular . . . *My Name Is Lucy Barton* is smart and cagey in every way. It is both a book of withholdings and a book of great openness and wisdom. . . . [Strout] is in supreme and magnificent command of this novel at all times.”—The Washington Post

“*My Name Is Lucy Barton* is a short novel about love, particularly the complicated love between mothers and daughters, but also simpler, more sudden bonds. . . . It evokes these connections in a style so spare, so pure and so profound the book almost seems to be a kind of scripture or sutra, if a very down-to-earth and unpretentious one.”—Newsday

“A quiet, sublimely merciful contemporary novel about love, yearning, and resilience in a family damaged beyond words.”—The Boston Globe

“Sensitive, deceptively simple . . . It is Lucy's gentle honesty, complex relationship with her husband, and nuanced response to her mother's shortcomings that make this novel so subtly powerful. . . . *My Name Is Lucy Barton*—like all of Strout's fiction—is more complex than it first appears, and all the more emotionally persuasive for it.”—San Francisco Chronicle

#### About the Author

Elizabeth Strout is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Olive Kitteridge*; the #1 New York Times bestseller *My Name Is Lucy Barton*; *The Burgess Boys*, a New York Times bestseller; *Abide with Me*, a national bestseller and Book Sense pick; and *Amy and Isabelle*, which won the Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction and the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize. She has also been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize in England. Her short stories have been published in a number of magazines, including *The New Yorker* and *O: The Oprah Magazine*. Elizabeth Strout lives in New York City.

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## The Sign

Tommy Guptill had once owned a dairy farm, which he'd inherited from his father, and which was about two miles from the town of Amgash, Illinois. This was many years ago now, but at night Tommy still sometimes woke with the fear he had felt the night his dairy farm burned to the ground. The house had burned to the ground as well; the wind had sent sparks onto the house, which was not far from the barns. It had been his fault—he always thought it was his fault—because he had not checked that night on the milking machines to make sure they had been turned off properly, and this is where the fire started. Once it started, it ripped with a fury over the whole place. They lost everything, except for the brass frame to the living room mirror, which he came upon in the rubble the next day, and he left it where it was. A collection was taken up: For a number of weeks his kids went to school in the clothes of their classmates, until he could gather himself and the little money he had; he sold the land to the neighboring farmer, but it did not bring much money in. Then he and his wife, a short pretty woman named Shirley, bought new clothes, and he bought a house as well, Shirley keeping her spirits up admirably as all this was going on. They'd had to buy a house in Amgash, which was a run-down town, and his kids went to school there instead of in Carlisle, where they had been able to go to school before, his farm being just on the line dividing the two towns. Tommy took a job as the janitor in the Amgash school system; the steadiness of the job appealed to him, and he could never go to work on someone else's farm, he did not have the stomach for that. He was thirty-five years old at the time.

The kids were grown now, with kids of their own who were also grown, and he and Shirley still lived in their small house; she had planted flowers around it, which was unusual in that town. Tommy had worried a good deal about his children at the time of the fire; they had gone from having their home be a place that class trips came to—each year in spring the fifth-grade class from Carlisle would make a day of it, eating their lunches out beside the barns on the wooden tables there, then tromping through the barns watching the men milking the cows, the white foamy stuff going up and over them in the clear plastic pipes—to having to see their father as the man who pushed the broom over the “magic dust” that got tossed over the throw-up of some kid who had been sick in the hallways, Tommy wearing his gray pants and a white shirt that had Tommy stitched on it in red.

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This morning Tommy drove slowly to the town of Carlisle for errands; it was a sunny Saturday in May, and his wife's eighty-second birthday was just a few days away. All around him were open fields, the corn newly planted, and the soybeans too. A number of fields were still brown, as they'd been plowed under for their planting, but mostly there was the high blue sky, with a few white clouds scattered near the horizon. He drove past the sign on the road that led down to the Barton home; it still said SEWING AND ALTERATIONS, even though the woman, Lydia Barton, who did the sewing and alterations had died many years ago. The Barton family had been outcasts, even in a town like Amgash, their extreme poverty and strangeness making this so. The oldest child, a man named Pete, lived alone there now, the middle child was two towns away, and the youngest, Lucy Barton, had fled many years ago, and had ended up living in New York City. Tommy had spent time thinking of Lucy. All those years she had lingered after school, alone in a classroom, from fourth grade right up to her senior year in high school; it had taken her a few years to even look him in the eye.

But now Tommy was driving past the area where his farm had been—these days it was all fields, not a sign of the farm was left—and he thought, as he often thought, about his life back then. It had been a good life, but he did not regret the things that had happened. It was not Tommy's nature to regret things, and on the night of the fire—in the midst of his galloping fear—he understood that all that mattered in this world were

his wife and his children, and he thought that people lived their whole lives not knowing this as sharply and constantly as he did. Privately, he thought of the fire as a sign from God to keep this gift tightly to him. Privately, because he did not want to be thought of as a man who made up excuses for a tragedy; and he did not want anyone—not even his dearly beloved wife—to think he would do this. But he had felt that night, while his wife kept the children over by the road—he had rushed them from the house when he saw that the barn was on fire—as he watched the enormous flames flying into the nighttime sky, then heard the terrible screaming sounds of the cows as they died, he had felt many things, but it was just as the roof of his house crashed in, fell into the house itself, right into their bedrooms and the living room below with all the photos of the children and his parents, as he saw this happen he had felt—undeniably—what he could only think was the presence of God, and he understood why angels had always been portrayed as having wings, because there had been a sensation of that—of a rushing sound, or not even a sound, and then it was as though God, who had no face, but was God, pressed up against him and conveyed to him without words—so briefly, so fleetingly—some message that Tommy understood to be: It's all right, Tommy. And then Tommy had understood that it was all right. It was beyond his understanding, but it was all right. And it had been. He often thought that his children had become more compassionate as a result of having to go to school with kids who were poor, and not from homes like the one they had first known. He had felt the presence of God since, at times, as though a golden color was very near to him, but he never again felt visited by God as he had felt that night, and he knew too well what people would make of it, and this is why he would keep it to himself until his dying day—the sign from God.

Still, on a spring morning as this one was, the smell of the soil brought back to him the smells of the cows, the moisture of their nostrils, the warmth of their bellies, and his barns—he had had two barns—and he let his mind roll over pieces of scenes that came to him. Perhaps because he had just passed the Barton place he thought of the man, Ken Barton, who had been the father of those poor, sad children, and who had worked on and off for Tommy, and then he thought—as he more often did—of Lucy, who had left for college and then ended up in New York City. She had become a writer.

Lucy Barton.

Driving, Tommy shook his head slightly. Tommy knew many things as a result of being the janitor in that school more than thirty years; he knew of girls' pregnancies and drunken mothers and cheating spouses, for he overheard these things talked about by the students in their small huddles by the bathrooms, or near the cafeteria; in many ways he was invisible, he understood that. But Lucy Barton had troubled him the most. She and her sister, Vicky, and her brother, Pete, had been viciously scorned by the other kids, and by some of the teachers too. Yet because Lucy stayed after school so often for so many years he felt—though she seldom spoke—that he knew her the best. One time when she was in the fourth grade, it was his first year working there, he had opened the door to a classroom and found her lying on three chairs pushed together, over near the radiators, her coat as a blanket, fast asleep. He had stared at her, watching her chest move slightly up and down, seen the dark circles beneath her eyes, her eyelashes spread like tiny twinkling stars, for her eyelids had been moist as though she had been weeping before she slept, and then he backed out slowly, quietly as he could; it had felt almost unseemly to come upon her like that.

But one time—he remembered this now—she must have been in junior high school, and he'd walked into the classroom and she was drawing on the blackboard with chalk. She stopped as soon as he stepped inside the room. "You go ahead," he said. On the board was a drawing of a vine with many small leaves. Lucy moved away from the blackboard, then she suddenly spoke to him. "I broke the chalk," she said. Tommy told her that was fine. "I did it on purpose," she said, and there was a tiny glint of a smile before she looked away. "On purpose?" he asked, and she nodded, again with the tiny smile. So he went and picked up a piece of chalk, a full stick of it, and he snapped it in half and winked at her. In his memory she had almost giggled.

“You drew that?” he asked, pointing to the vine with the small leaves. And she shrugged then and turned away. But usually, she was just sitting at a desk and reading, or doing her homework, he could see that she was doing that.

He pulled up to a stop sign now, and said the words aloud to himself quietly, “Lucy, Lucy, Lucy B. Where did you go to, how did you flee?”

He knew how. In the spring of her senior year, he had seen her in the hallway after school, and she had said to him, so suddenly open-faced, her eyes big, “Mr. Guptill, I’m going to college!” And he had said, “Oh, Lucy. That’s wonderful.” She had thrown her arms around him; she would not let go, and so he hugged her back. He always remembered that hug, because she had been so thin; he could feel her bones and her small breasts, and because he wondered later how much—how little—that girl had ever been hugged.

Tommy pulled away from the stop sign and drove into the town; right there beyond was a parking space. Tommy pulled in to it, got out of his car, and squinted in the sunshine. “Tommy Guptill,” shouted a man, and, turning, Tommy saw Griff Johnson walking toward him with his characteristic limp, for Griff had one leg that was shorter than the other, and even his built-up shoe could not keep him from limping. Griff had an arm out, ready to shake hands. “Griffith,” said Tommy, and they pumped their arms for a long time, while cars drove slowly past them down Main Street. Griff was the insurance man here in town, and he had been awfully good to Tommy; learning that Tommy had not insured his farm for its worth, Griff had said, “I met you too late,” which was true. But Griff, with his warm face, and big belly now, continued to be good to Tommy. In fact, Tommy did not know anyone—he thought—who was not good to him. As a breeze moved around them, they spoke of their children and grandchildren; Griff had a grandson who was on drugs, which Tommy thought was very sad, and he just listened and nodded, glancing up at the trees that lined Main Street, their leaves so young and bright green, and then he listened about another grandson who was in medical school now, and Tommy said, “Hey, that’s just great, good for him,” and they clapped hands on each other’s shoulders and moved on.

In the dress shop, with its bell that announced his entrance, was Marilyn Macauley, trying on a dress. “Tommy, what brings you in here?” Marilyn was thinking of getting the dress for her granddaughter’s baptism a few Sundays from now, she said, and she tugged on the side of it; it was beige with swirling red roses; she was without her shoes, standing in just her stockings. She said that it was an extravagance to buy a new dress for such a thing, but that she felt like it. Tommy—who had known Marilyn for years, first when she was in high school as a student in Amgash—saw her embarrassment, and he said he didn’t think it was an extravagance at all. Then he said, “When you have a chance, Marilyn, can you help me find something for my wife?” He saw her become efficient then, and she said yes, she certainly would, and she went into the changing room and came back out in her regular clothes, a black skirt and a blue sweater, with her flat black shoes on, and right away she took Tommy over to the scarves. “Here,” she said, pulling out a red scarf that had a design with gold threads running through it. Tommy held it, but picked up a flowery scarf with his other hand. “Maybe this,” he said. And Marilyn said, “Yes, that looks like Shirley,” and then Tommy understood that Marilyn liked the red scarf herself but would never allow herself to buy it. Marilyn, that first year Tommy worked as a janitor, had been a lovely girl, saying “Hi, Mr. Guptill!” whenever she saw him, and now she had become an older woman, nervous, thin, her face pinched. Tommy thought what other people thought, it was because her husband had been in Vietnam and had never afterward been the same; Tommy would see Charlie Macauley around town, and he always looked so far away, the poor man, and poor Marilyn too. So Tommy held the red scarf with the gold threads for a minute as though considering it, then said, “I think you’re right, this one looks more like Shirley,” and took the flowery one to the register. He thanked Marilyn for her help.

“I think she’ll love it,” Marilyn said, and Tommy said he was sure she would.

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