

[PDF] You Are One Of Them

Elliott Holt - pdf download free book

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Author: Elliott Holt

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Description:

Amazon Exclusive: Author One-on-One with Elliott Holt and Michael Cunningham

is the author of the novels , , , and , winner of the Pen/Faulkner Award and Pulitzer Prize. His latest novel is . He lives in New York.

Michael Cunningham: Where did the idea for this book come from?

Elliott Holt: The book began as a short story, which I wrote in your workshop in grad school, inspired by Samantha Smith. She was the American girl who became famous for writing a letter to Yuri Andropov asking for peace in 1982. I didn't know Smith (she lived in Maine and was two years older than I was) but when I was a kid, worried about nuclear war, I followed her highly publicized trip to the USSR with great interest. Anyway, I had an idea for a story in which two girls write letters to Andropov, but only one gets a response and becomes famous. My original story was a rant

by the narrator—the one left behind by her famous friend—and it was very satirical. It was too arch for its own good. I decided that my short story didn't work, but I couldn't let go of the premise.

MC: Did you know where the story was headed? To what degree did you rely on your conscious ability to chart scenes and characters, and to what extent did you rely on intuition?

EH: Once I started writing my way into the book, I was operating almost entirely by intuition. Sarah's parents and her family's story emerged from my subconscious. But the decision to send Sarah to Moscow in search of her childhood best friend, Jenny, was a conscious one. My narrator, Sarah, loses her best friend when they are twelve and then gets a mysterious letter from Moscow that suggests that her friend didn't really die.

I think of grief as a process of detection. When we lose the people we love, we turn into detectives, trying to make sense of the loss, trying to understand the person who is no longer in our lives. I think it's common to fantasize about having another chance to see the person you've lost, an opportunity to do the past over again. So my book is a mystery of sorts because grief is a mystery.

MC: The book is set in Washington, D.C. (your hometown) and Moscow, where you lived for a while. Moscow is a wild and fascinating place (I visited the city just once, two years ago). How did your life there inform the book?

EH: I lived in Moscow from 1997-1999 (though I first visited the city in 1993). I taught English for a few months, and then I worked in an American ad agency, which was fascinating because consumer culture was brand new. My Russian friends were all conspiracy theorists (not surprising, given their country's history) and they all drank and smoked a lot. My life as an expat definitely informed some of the Moscow scenes in the book.

One of the things I love most about Russia is the way literature and writers are revered. When I moved there, I didn't speak a word of Russian, but I loved Chekhov and Tolstoy so much that I couldn't wait to visit their houses (now museums).

MC: Sarah's mother is so memorable. What inspired her character? I wouldn't want to make assumptions, but parents, in fiction, often resemble, sometimes rather closely, the writer's own parents. So many readers want to know about the degree to which a novel is autobiographical. Does that feel to you like a legitimate question, posed to a fiction writer?

EH: When readers assume that a novel is autobiographical, it's usually because the book is so vivid, so lived in, that it feels true. So if people assume that the parents in this book are like my own parents, I'll take it as a compliment and assume that I've done my job as a writer. But the fact is that my parents are nothing like the parents in this book. My late mother, in fact, was the complete opposite of Sarah Zuckerman's mother. I grew up in Washington and used elements of my life there to animate the scenes, but my family life was nothing like Sarah Zuckerman's. I don't consciously base characters on people I know, but aspects of people (even myself) often end up in my characters.

MC: You left the ending of the book open to interpretation. Without giving any spoilers, could you talk about your choices in crafting the ending?

EH: I don't want to give anything away, but yes, I crafted the book very carefully—with clues along the way—to make the ambiguity of the ending work. There are two possibilities, both supported by evidence. What matters ultimately is what Sarah (the narrator) decides has happened. It's her emotional arc that interests me.

I like Chekhovian endings (somewhat inconclusive) in fiction. (Chekhov was Russian, of course, and I

think that Russians are generally more comfortable with ambiguity than most Americans are.) Endings that are too tidy and pat seem artificial to me. But I also don't like fiction that feels like it's manipulating the reader. I think the best fiction is, to quote Flannery O'Connor, both "surprising and inevitable." Surprising enough to keep you turning pages, but inevitable enough to feel like you're not being manipulated. It should be surprising in some fundamental way, but still ring emotionally true. So I tried to craft an ending that was true.

Photo Elliott Holt ©Rebecca Zeller

Photo Michael Cunningham ©Richard Phibbs

From Holt perfectly melds the personal and the political in this spot-on portrait of a girlhood friendship set against a Cold War backdrop. Sad 10-year-old Sarah Zuckerman, whose older sister has died and whose father has abandoned the family, finds great comfort in her friendship with Jennifer Jones, who lives across the street in their wealthy D.C. neighborhood. Then Jennifer becomes a media sensation when a letter she writes to Yuri Andropov asking for peace is made public. Sarah once again feels the sting of abandonment, and when Jennifer's family is ultimately killed in a plane crash, their friendship seems like a distant memory. Ten years later, upon graduating from college, Sarah receives a mysterious e-mail hinting that Jennifer might still be alive. She heads to Moscow and an internship, determined to find out the truth. Holt ably captures both the paranoia of the Cold War and the shabby yet genteel aura of an exhausted Moscow just after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. But it is her razor-sharp insights into the turbulent dynamics of female friendship that give this novel its heft. --Joanne Wilkinson

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