

LAST NIGHT IN MONTREAL: ABOUT the BOOK

The story opens as Lilia is leaving Eli, a boyfriend she casually acquired in New York. She knows where she is going but not why. Because there are some things she just cannot remember about her past, this young woman is a mystery even to herself.

Lilia Albert's life as an accidental tourist began when she is a tiny child— the moment her father kidnapped her and headed for the open road. They stopped in town after town, continually changing identities and at times staying one maneuver ahead of the police— and Christopher, a Canadian private detective who becomes obsessed with them.

Questions about the case haunt Christopher even as Lilia approaches womanhood on the lamb. Why did her father kidnap her? Was her oddly behaving mother the sort of parent she needed to flee to survive? Or was it her father who posed the greater hazard? Why did Lilia keep secretly leaving ambiguous messages for her pursuers to find in hotel Bibles?

Lilia grows up to be a riddle in motion also to her long strand of lovers, whose locations zigzag across the United States and Canada, just as her fugitive course clipped back and forth between the two worlds. But Eli will not let go. He follows her. He thinks she may be in danger. And in Montreal he does find trouble in the form of an amateur tightrope walker and professional stripper named Michaela. She is as obsessed with Lilia as he, but for very different reasons.

The two young women have a few things in common. For each growing up was harrowing. But Lilia's strange connection to her is one of the reasons why Michaela's childhood proved to be so difficult.

Tension and questions rise as the story moves through desolate roadside cafes, sad-fate strip joints, and the heartless cold of Montreal winter nights. What is each character running from and to?

And Eli, Lilia, and Michaela careen toward a shattering collision. In one night in Montreal, vital questions will be answered. And one woman's answer to the demons that bedevil youth will change everything forever.

In this gripping debut, first-time novelist Emily St. John Mandel uses a deft noire touch to write about refugees of the parent-forsaken millennial generation. And she navigates the waters of modern fatalism with a quirky nuanced touch.

ABOUT the AUTHOR

Emily St. John Mandel did not go to school—and she’s glad. She grew up as a free spirit in Denman Island, off the coast of British Columbia, Canada and spent her childhood reading, taking dancing lessons, and playing in the woods. “I was homeschooled and for this I am intensely grateful,” she says.

“When I was seventeen I studied English literature, political science and Sociology at the local community college for a year, and then I moved across the country to attend the School of Toronto Dance Theatre when I was eighteen, and graduated from the Professional Training Program there when I was twenty-one.”

After graduating, she danced professionally. But the knack she had discovered in her teens called her back to writing. She now lives in Brooklyn and works four days a week as an administrator at a local university “to pay the rent,” she says. And the rest of the time she writes. *Last Night in Montreal* is her first novel.

LAST NIGHT IN MONTREAL: QUESTIONS for AUTHOR

Please tell us about your childhood in British Columbia.

We moved around a couple of times when I was a child, but I was raised mostly on Denman Island, which is a tiny island between Vancouver Island and the mainland – it’s about the same size and shape as the island of Manhattan, but it only has about a thousand inhabitants. My father did tree planting, plumbing and gas-fitting work when I was growing up; my mother stayed home and looked after me and my siblings until I was twelve or so, and then she began working in a shelter for battered women.

Why did you choose to set your book in both Canada and the U.S.?

I wanted to set my book in cities with which I was intimately familiar; the action of the book unfolds mostly between New York and Montreal, which are both places where I’ve lived. Also, the story is partly about the dislocation of two characters, Eli and Michaela, who don’t speak French; my personal experience of Montreal was that it can be a difficult place to live if you’re not fluent in French, and I thought the deep alienation that comes from speaking the wrong language made sense in the context of their respective storylines.

While Canada and the U.S. are so close geographically, from the viewpoints of many Americans, Canada is a remote entity about which they

know little. Why do you think this is true? (That is, if you do think it is true.)

I do think that's true. One of my favorite books is Nabokov's *Pale Fire*; the last line of that book (in reference to the fictional kingdom of Zembla), is "A distant northern land." I think that line generally sums up the way many Americans perceive Canada. This is a sweeping generalization with a lot of exceptions, but my experience has been that on the whole, Canadians know much more about the United States than Americans know about Canada. That said, I think that type of imbalance in knowledge is inevitable in any situation where a country with a relatively small population and a relatively small military is in close proximity to a superpower.

What does it mean to you to have grown up in Canada as opposed to the United States? In what ways does it make you different from the Americans that you meet in Brooklyn?

What it means to me is that I've had the extraordinary good fortune of having lived in more than one country. I think that everyone should, if at all possible, live in more than one country over the course of their lives; living in a foreign country (even an only-somewhat-foreign-country, as the differences between Canada and the United States aren't overwhelmingly vast) challenges all of the assumptions that you grew up with and changes the way you perceive the world.

Having said that, I don't think I'm that different from the Americans I know in Brooklyn; most of my friends here are writers, musicians, actors, or are involved in the film or literary worlds in some other way. We're all engaged in similar pursuits.

What inspired you to create a peripatetic character like Lilia? Is she a composite of different people? Were you spurred on to create her by cases that you had heard about through the news media?

In all honesty, I've been thinking about this story for so long that I can't remember exactly how Lilia came about, but she's not a composite of anyone I know or based on any particular news story. Part of the inspiration for her came from my experience of leaving home, and the unsettledness of the five or six years that followed; I moved alone across the continent at the age of 18, and the upheaval in those first few years was considerable—even before I started moving from city to city, I lived in a half-dozen apartments in Toronto.

Later there was a somewhat hectic period wherein I moved from Toronto to New York to Montreal to New York in the course of a year; and I remember thinking, as I was immigrating by train from Canada to New York for the second February in a row, that it would be easy to just keep going on like this forever; cheap apartment shares, odd jobs, a rootless way of living that could carry you on from

city to city for years. I'd already been thinking about Lilia by that point, but that thought represented a moment when I began to really understand who the character was.

One of the characters has an obsession with tightrope walking. Do you have an interest in that art as a result of your background in dance?

I'm fascinated by tightrope-walking. It's a breathtaking art. I hadn't thought of the connection between tightrope walking and dance before, but it's true that dancers and tightrope walkers have a few things in common; as a dancer, it's your job to give the impression of defying both gravity and the conventional limits of the human body, and you're always acutely aware of the mechanics of balance.

I think of tightrope walking as a somewhat escapist art. I love the photographs of Phillippe Petit walking on a tightrope between the Twin Towers in 1974; there are pictures of him smiling as he walks on a 7/8" cable one hundred stories above the surface of Manhattan, and he strikes me as a man as much (or more) at home in the sky as on the earth. He's at ease in an entirely different element. It seemed like an appropriate obsession for a character who longs to escape.

Eli appears to be obsessed with Lilia. Why did you choose to write about a man who is left behind yet cannot forget?

I think almost all of us, or at least a lot of us, have been in a position of being left behind in one way or another and finding ourselves unable to move on. Eli represents a somewhat extreme example of this, but I think a lot of us can relate to the basic set-up; he's been betrayed, but he can't let go. There's of course a negative connotation to Eli's inability to move on with his life, but the flipside is that he's genuinely concerned for Lilia's safety. In some ways, he's a noble character; he's not very resilient, but he's doing his best and he's trying to do the right thing.

Michaela's mother and father and Lilia's represent different kinds of parents. Were you trying to explore parent-child relationships and their outcomes?

I didn't specifically set out to explore parent-child relationships, although the parents in this book are generally a pretty questionable lot. I think it's a truism that not everyone's cut out to be a parent, and I'm interested in the ways in which the failings that make us human impact the next generation. Michaela's father never sets out to abandon her, for instance, but his distractedness and obsession with his work profoundly impact the course of her life.

Michaela loses her job because of a French language law and struggles with the language issue much of her life. Are you a French Canadian?

How do you perceive the language situation in Quebec? And just what is the situation now, post millennial?

My understanding of the current situation in Quebec is that approximately 95% of the population is fluent in French, and a little more than 80% of the population uses French as their dominant language. I think it could be said that the language laws have achieved their goals; the French language is certainly in no immediate peril there.

I'm not French Canadian. I grew up in a region of Canada where the primary language is English, and the most common secondary languages are Mandarin and Cantonese; before I moved to Montreal, I'd heard French spoken in passing perhaps a half-dozen times, and I'd never studied the language. There are a lot of great things about Montreal and it's in many ways a very tolerant city, but that tolerance unfortunately doesn't always extend to Anglophones; when I moved there I was under the impression that it was a bilingual city, but as it happens, it's not a place you want to live if you're not fluent in French.

When I lived there I was working in the stock room of a large store, and I occasionally had to come up to the sales floor. On the sales floor I would inevitably be approached by customers; I learned enough French to apologize and tell them that I didn't speak French and to ask if they'd prefer to speak to a French-speaking associate. Their reactions were interesting: some people switched to English without skipping a beat, some politely requested a French associate, some glared at me, and two or three were so disgusted by me that they actually stormed out of the store. The anti-English graffiti in the book was quoted verbatim from actual graffiti that I saw in the streets. During my first week in the city a man approached me on the street to ask for directions, and then spat at my feet when I couldn't give him directions in French.

This isn't to suggest that I didn't meet a lot of perfectly lovely French-speaking people; I did. And I respect the right of the Quebecois to conduct their affairs in French, but given that Quebec exists in the context of a country where English is an official language, I think the issue of how the English-speaking minority are treated in that province deserves a second look.

What sort of literature do you most like and why?

I've been interested in noir lately – I just finished Walter Mosley's *Fearless Jones*, and I'm reading Raymond Chandler's *The Simple Art of Murder*. The spareness of the prose in noir/detective fiction appeals to me, as does the overall style and atmosphere; it's a heartbroken genre, and I like fedoras and snappy dialogue. Beyond that, I like anything that's well-written with a strong narrative; I mostly read literary fiction and occasionally memoir.

Who are your favorite authors and books?

If I had to name one favorite book, which is of course impossible, it would probably be *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortazar. I love Ernest Hemingway's work, particularly *The Sun Also Rises* and *Islands in the Stream*. I love Nabokov, *Pale Fire* especially, and everything written by J.D. Salinger. This list is by no means comprehensive, but a few other favorites are *The Executioner's Song* (Norman Mailer), *The Fortress of Solitude* (Jonathan Lethem), *The Corrections* (Jonathan Franzen), *Everything is Illuminated* (Jonathan Safran Foer), *The Way the Crow Flies* (Ann-Marie MacDonald), most of Michael Ondaatje's body of work, *American Pastoral* and *The Counterlife* (Philip Roth), *Remote* (David Shields), everything I've ever read by Milan Kundera, and *Alice in Wonderland*.

LAST NIGHT in MONTREAL: QUESTIONS for DISCUSSION

Why do you think Lilia leaves Eli? Is Lilia a somewhat callous person, or is she simply a troubled one?

What is behind Eli's obsession with Lilia? Is it love or an attraction to the seemingly unattainable?

Lilia's father is a man with a criminal background who kidnaps his little daughter. At first are you suspicious of his motives? Why or why not?

Of the four parents frequently portrayed in the book— Lilia's mother and father and Michaela's mother and father— who is the worst? Who is the best? Are there many people who should simply never be parents? Give reasons for your answers.

Why does Lilia keep leaving messages in Bibles in hotel rooms? Are her words really a request to be left alone or a request for help?

Did Lilia's father do the right thing, or would she have been better off with her mother?

Why do you think Lilia has so many lovers? And why does she keep leaving them?

Why does she have female lovers as well as male lovers? Is it because she is young and modern? Or confused? Or bisexual?

Why does Michaela become interested in Lilia? What do the two have in common?

How do you feel about the book's portrayal of the French language controversy in Montreal? Do you think English-speaking people are discriminated against in Quebec? Why or why not?

Do you think Michaela's behavior self-destructive? Or experimental? Why or why not?

Does it ever seem to you as if Eli might be in love with Michaela, not Lilia? In which passage (s) and why?

LAST NIGHT IN MONTREAL: RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Farewell My Lovely by Raymond Chandler

Life After God by Douglas Coupland

Going Down Swinging by Billie Livingston

The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammet

On the Road by Jack Kerouac