

READING GUIDE
SOME OTHER TOWN
by
Elizabeth Collison

About the Book

Channeling the emotional intensity of Susan Minot and Amy Bloom—and infused with a witty, dream-like surrealism reminiscent of Margaret Atwood—this mesmerizing debut takes us inside the unsettling world of Margaret Benning, which turns upside down when she falls in love...and then unravels before our eyes.

"But here is the strangest part. Now in the mornings when I wake from the dream, for an instant it's as if there are two of me. The one that will rise and go off to work and come home again to Mrs. Eberline. And the one that awakes from the dream of the van and feels something inside of her rising. Quickening, yearning, keening."

Margaret Lydia Benning, twenty-eight and adrift, still lives in the same Midwest town where she went to college. By day, she works at the Project, a nonprofit publisher of children's readers housed in a former sanatorium. There she shares the fourth floor with a squadron of eccentric editors and a resident ghost from the screamers' wing. At night, Margaret returns to her small house on Mott Street, with only her strange neighbor, Mrs. Eberline, for company.

Emotionally sleepwalking through the days is no way to lead a life. But then Margaret meets Ben Adams, a visiting professor at the university. Through her deepening relationship with Ben she glimpses a future she had never before imagined, and for the first time she has hope . . . until Ben inexplicably vanishes. In the wake of his disappearance, Margaret sets out to find him. Her journey will force her to question everything she believes to be true.

Discussion Guide

1. One of the themes of the book has to do with “moving on” in one’s life. Through Margaret, it explores the possibility of squandering a life, of never finding a purpose. Why do you think Margaret has stayed on in the town, on the street where she lives? How do you think her life changes over the course of her story?
2. When Ben tells Margaret he would like to believe in ghosts, that for the dead they might be a “kind of second chance,” she responds that she’d like to believe in second chances too. “But ghosts, Ben?” she says and gives him a pat. “Sometimes, you know, Ben, it’s too late.” What are your views on second chances? Do you think it’s ever too late for a second chance?
3. Do you believe Ben loved Margaret? Why do you think Margaret refuses his offer to go away with him? Do you think Margaret loves Ben?
4. Why do you think the author set the story in the early 1970s? What historical, technological, and cultural signs of that time can you find in the book?
5. Why do you think the author set the story in the Midwest? How does the physical landscape, the place in which a novel is set, affect the story? Are there passages in the novel that illustrate the relationship between story and setting?
6. What is the significance of the ghosts and Emmaline in the story?
7. How does the book’s structure, the way the story unfolds, affect the mood of the narrative? In what ways does the structure reflect the pervading themes?
8. Why do you think the book uses two narrators? What are the benefits and drawbacks of Margaret’s first-person narration? How do they compare with those of the book’s

omniscient, third-person narration? How are the narrative and writing styles in this book different from those of other novels you've read?

9. What role does Margaret's recurring dream play in the book? How does the dream evolve throughout the book? Is there a pattern to the changes?

10. What did you make of the ending? Were you surprised by it? Did it make sense, or did you find it too ambiguous? How do you interpret Ben's fate? What do you think will happen to Margaret after the book's story is over?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Collison grew up in the Midwest and now lives in the San Francisco Bay area. She received her MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has worked as an editor, graphic artist, and technical writer. This is her first novel.

Critical Praise

"In her charming, emotionally true debut novel, Elizabeth Collison captures the queasiness of young adulthood as an intelligent young woman discovers just what, and whom, she wants." —Michelle Huneven, author of *Round Rock*, *Jamesland*, *Blame*, and *Off Course*

"Wry, peculiar, and compelling.... The novel asks: how do you restart a stalled life? It's not a new question, but *Some Other Town* is certainly a funny, fresh, and real answer." —NPR.org

"In Elizabeth Collison's *Some Other Town*, bad neighbors, ghosts, and breakups converge into one beautiful story." —Bustle.com