



THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK
THE END OF THE POINT

A Novel
by Elizabeth Graver

A precisely observed, superbly crafted novel that charts the dramatic changes a half century brings to bear on three generations of a family—and on the summer property that both shelters and isolates them.

The novel’s four sections, which span from 1942 to 1999, are all set primarily on Ashaunt, a fictional summer community on Massachusetts’ Buzzards Bay.

In the first section, “Jane’s All the World’s Fighting Ships and Aircraft,” Bea, the family’s Scottish children’s nurse, arrives on Ashaunt with her charges to find that part of the land has been taken over by the U.S. Army. So begins a summer where Bea’s identity—as paid caregiver, as single woman far from her homeland—undergoes upheavals that challenge her ideas about both romantic and “maternal” love. Meanwhile, Helen, the oldest daughter, is sixteen, wild, restless, bright and impulsive, missing her older brother Charlie who is away Army Air Corps Training camp.

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In the second section, “Plants and Their Children,” we follow Helen’s passage from enthralled college student abroad to restive early-1960s mother and aspiring intellectual.

Her son Charlie, named for her brother who died in WWII, becomes the problematic focal point of her vicarious ambitions and hopes. She struggles with parenting, with an unplanned pregnancy, and with a desire to return to school for her doctorate.

The next section, “Trespass,” follows Helen’s son Charlie, now nineteen, in 1970 as he returns to Ashaunt after a devastating semester at college in Ohio and tries—through the land, through encounters with a troubled Vietnam Veteran and an attractive college girl, through both avoiding and engaging with his mother—to reassemble himself in tumultuous times.

The final section, “Migrate,” begins on Labor Day weekend in 1999. Helen, age 73, is dying of cancer and finding, in her last days, a kind of luminosity and peace. Charlie, now a prisoner’s

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rights lawyer, has recently married. Bea is 93 and lives alone in Scotland. This closing portion examines how Bea, Helen, and Charlie are all part of the same root system, at once fragile and enduring.

HOW DID THE IDEA FOR YOUR BOOK ORIGINATE?

This book took me a long time to write, both because of the particular challenges and pleasures that went into it and because over the past decade, my non-writing life has been very full—with the birth of two children, the illness and death of my father, the daily routines of teaching and family life, and, perhaps most centrally, the growing sense that I didn't want to rush; time moves fast enough on its own. Over the years, as the story took shape, I spent a part of every summer and many fall and spring weekends at the real place that my fictional place grew out of. Often, while I was there, I wrote. I walked the paths, navigated the rocks to swim in the ocean and began to feel that the land—and the one-room cabin my husband had built on it—was a kind of home to me—not (as it is to my husband and our daughters) a first home, but a surrogate second home, at once alluring and vexed. I watched my children learn to walk, swim and live in nature there, the place a great gift for them but also a complicated privilege and even a danger—for how fully it can shelter and how much it can exclude. I used this real place as a way to begin to imagine my fictional Ashaunt Point.

WOULD YOU SHARE MORE ABOUT THE NOVEL'S SETTING?

I wanted to portray a small place but go deep, to use a narrow lens to examine larger issues of social class, money and property, of parenting and caretaking, of what adults pass on, both literally and figuratively, to children. I look at how this kind of private seaside community can function as a protected or contested space, isolated but never entirely, as its boundaries are porous and the events of history are never far away. I realized partway through that I was also writing about a world whose ways are fast-fading, a world on the way out (for better or worse—probably both).

In the early 1920's, my husband's grandparents and great-grandparents bought twenty-five acres on a small spit of land on Buzzards Bay in Massachusetts. Several of their friends from New York and Connecticut purchased land there too. Due to the rocky coastline, the area was not a popular vacation spot (and even today, remains much less developed than Cape Cod). Generations of my husband's immediate and extended family have spent summers at this place, the land getting increasingly divided up, as smaller cabins were built behind bigger houses and property changed hands or was sold off. During WWII, part of the peninsula was taken over by the army, which established a Harbor Entrance Control Post where it stationed 200 troops. Later, new property owners, "outsiders," bought land and built houses with heat and swimming pools. What used to be fields kept low by sheep have grown into thickets. Still, much—the rocks, the sea, the road cut down the middle, many of the families who spend (increasingly small) portions of the summer there—has remained largely the same. I have liberally fictionalized this real place to create my own imagined place.

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES A PLACE LIKE ASHAUNT POINT HOLD FOR YOU?

My relationship to this sort of place was initially that of a complete outsider. My own grandparents were poor Jewish immigrants. My parents went to city colleges in New York. No one I knew growing up owned a second home. For vacation, we'd sometimes rent a house on the water, but never the same place twice, and I never lived near the sea. Partly because of my own history, the idea of a mile and a half long finger of land and its intergenerational layers of summer people fascinated me, first from the almost anthropological perspective of an outsider and then, as time went on, from the perspective of an in-law somewhere on the margins, neither in nor out (a great position for a writer).

WHAT WAS YOUR WRITING PROCESS FOR THE NOVEL?

The book went through several radical re-visionings, partly because my idea for it—to portray the complexity of a place and its people across half a century—was an ambitious one, and partly because I was dealing with a daunting mix of fact and fiction. My husband's mother and her siblings were raised largely by two Scottish nannies who never married, lived with the family for fifty years, and returned to Scotland in their retirement. I was fascinated by these women (both long dead by the time I came along): who they were, why they came to America, why they stayed so long and then left; the enormous presence they still have in family lore. Their story led me to my fictional character, Bea. The other central characters soon followed, their stories braided with Bea's but also very much their own.

WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH DID YOU DO?

I traveled to Forfar, Scotland, where the real nannies were from, and spent two weeks wandering the streets there, poring over newspaper archives, finding facts but just as quickly spinning them into fiction (one example: the real nanny was a farm girl, but I read about steam laundries in Forfar and was so taken with the imagery that I changed her own and her mother's job).

I also did research about the army base that took over part of the real Point during WWII. After much sleuthing (and with help from a college student research assistant), I located a man in his nineties who had been a soldier on the base. I interviewed him, along with his wife, whom he'd met because she had served on the Rations Board in town. I had some old photos that prompted their memories. The man gave me a copy of the army base Christmas Menu from 1942. He told me about the Cinderella Dance on the base and how he spotted—and dove for—his future wife's blue slipper, a detail that made its way into the book. Other areas of research involved reading about the Vietnam War and about psychoanalysis in the early 1960s. I read about the Wampanoag Indians who had been the original inhabitants of the land, and the early Anglo settlers who had convinced them to “trade” land for blankets, axes, hoes. I also interviewed a number of people who had lived or worked on the real Point. Much of what I learned is invisible in the final version of the novel, but the research informed my sense of the world I was creating, and the treasure hunt was itself a delight.

WITH SO MUCH HISTORY INTERWOVEN IN THE STORY, ARE THERE ANY REAL PEOPLE WHO MAKE AN APPEARANCE?

Only one “real person” walks the pages of this novel, and that is Helen’s grandmother, Mrs. William Starr Dana (or Frances Theodora Parsons; she married twice and published under both names). In real life (as in *The End of the Point*), she was the author of several wonderful nature guides, including a children’s book titled *Plants and Their Children* (Scribner’s, 1896). This volume—by turn charming and didactic—takes its child-readers on a detailed tour of plant life in New England across four seasons. It tells how plants cross shores, grow new roots, struggle, thrive, perish, reseed. The author writes (in a passage I have borrowed for my book’s epigraph): “You discovered that certain plants actually pushed their young from their cozy homes in no gentle fashion, much as a mother bird shoves her timid little ones from the edge of the nest.” My husband’s great-grandmother died when he was a toddler, and he has no memories of her. In my own story, Mrs. William Starr Dana (or Grandmother P.) only has a walk-on role, and yet her book—which asks its child-readers to slow down and learn to *see*—served as a taproot for my own.

HOW DO SETTING AND CHARACTERS COMBINE IN *THE END OF THE POINT*?

At first, I was interested mostly in the place—how it changed, how it remained the same, who owned what, but this quickly led to what, for me, is the heartbeat of fiction: the individual characters. Through the people I invented, I found my way to the central concerns of the book, which I see as being how mothers or caregivers form (or deform) children, and how place can itself serve as a kind of second mother, even as it sits inside—and is never immune to—the wider sweep of generational and historical change. Both place and people in this story go through changes—sometimes very painful ones—that create a kind of shattering and then a hard-won reassembling, where, though the end result may look whole, hairline fractures and tiny cracks remain. The novel is itself, in my mind, that kind of assemblage—a collage of voices and stories of the wounded and the repaired, a sort of song they’ve made, or that I’ve made for them in that mysterious process of alchemy that is for me, the astonishment of writing fiction.

WHAT THEMES DO YOU EXPLORE IN *THE END OF THE POINT*?

The book is about, among other things, something that is increasingly rare in our present day—the constancy of place, the returning of a family generation after generation, to the same small bit of land. In its WWII and Vietnam era settings, it looks at the United States’ involvement in wars that did not take place on our own soil. It is about class, money and privilege, and about the slow economic decline and blending of an American family, and about women’s changing roles. Questions of diaspora, immigration and leaving figure into the story as well, as do the topics of land conservation and development, and the fall-out of environmental disasters.

In addition, the novel asks its readers to think about more timeless questions of motherhood/caregiving/and raising someone else’s child in light of how those roles impact identity and the formation of the self (of both caretaker and cared-for child). While this is a

book deeply concerned with place, it is even more centrally about human beings: who raises them, what they are “born into,” how they are formed, how they negotiate the conflicts between autonomy and independence, expectation and desire, inner and outer, stasis and change. What—through nurture and nature, knowingly or unwittingly—they pass on to the next (and the next and the next, in a long chain) child.

HOW IS *THE END OF THE POINT* RELEVANT TO MODERN AUDIENCES?

Set between 1942 and 1999, it explores an era that, even in the 1999 section, already feels historical. In writing this story, I was acutely aware of how fast the world is changing. In our current culture of on-line media and virtual reality, this is a novel filled with characters (from several different walks of life and generations) who read books, memorize poems, keep diaries, write letters. Almost no one watches television in this summer community. People walk or bike from place to place. In addition to exploring the more timeless themes I mention above, the book tries to document a slower and more tactile, material way of communicating; the characters often find each other and themselves by writing or reading, and there is not a cell phone, e-mail or internet connection in the whole book, though I hope that this lack (and the fact that the story ends right before a new millennium and 9/11) subtly signals what is just around the corner.

WHAT WRITERS OR NOVELS INFLUENCED YOUR WRITING OF *THE END OF THE POINT*?

I thought of several books as I worked on this one, most notably (and each for very different reasons) the following:

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*

Colm Toibin, *Brooklyn*

Julia Glass, *Three Junes*

Anne Enright, *The Gathering*

Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees*

Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*

George Colt, *The Big House: A Century in the Life of An American Family*

Alice Munro (particularly her collection *The View from Castle Hill*, which draws on the real in a way that connects to what I am doing here)

Charles Baxter, *Feast of Love*

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

John Banville, *The Sea*

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Graver is the author of the novels *Awake*, *The Honey Thief*, and *Unravelling*. Her short story collection, *Have You Seen Me?*, won the 1991 Drue Heinz Literature Prize. Her work has been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories*; *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*; *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*, and *Best American Essays*. She is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. The

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