

## **Q & A with Elisabeth Elo, author of *North of Boston***

### 1.) Where did the idea for *North of Boston* come from?

Some years ago, I ran across a book about ambergris (i.e. whale shit) – a substance that was once believed to have all kinds of magical, curative, and aphrodisiac properties, and is still used today as a fixative in some perfumes. The story of ambergris opens all kinds of windows into the human psyche – our fears and desires, our quests for beauty and adventure, and the lengths we will go to fulfill a dream, even when that dream is actually a delusion.

How a fascination with ambergris led to writing *North of Boston* involved many tiny steps that I could not possibly reconstruct. But the path went something like this: ambergris, ocean, sense of smell, marine mammals, boats, perfume, the floorplans of boats, northern lands, cold. In fact, the path was more like a maze, the kind where you often end up right back where you started. Eventually, I had a whole lot of paper on my office floor. (This was back in the days before apps like Evernote, when people still printed things out.) Looking at the stacks of paper, I occasionally wondered whether I might be just a bit crazy, but I had somehow managed to develop a trust in the creative process – which is to say, in myself – so I plodded along.

At the same time, in a sort of parallel universe, I was dealing with a difficult protagonist who had a clear, compelling voice. She had been on my mind for a long time, and there was a sense of urgency in bringing her to life. I knew that part of her story took place on a boat, and that it included near-drowning. Meanwhile, she was enmeshed in various relationships – with a friend, a godson, a father. Each posed a significant challenge.

She also was dealing with her failure at the age of thirty to have found anything resembling love. She wanted to connect with people, but her aloof, independent personality got in her way. Yet she had a certain integrity. I knew she was the kind of person who needed a big adventure to find herself.

The research and preliminary drafts went along side-by-side for awhile, not connecting with each other very well. Eventually, I had about fifty pages of a novel, but every time I tried to get beyond that point, the whole thing fell apart. Finally, with relief and dismay, I abandoned the project. But Pirio didn't go away. She seemed to be living right on my shoulder. So several years later, when things in my life opened up a bit, I took up her story once again.

I think writers often feel as if they're in the dark, out on a limb, on thin ice – pick your cliché. We've got to be OK with being perpetually off-balance. I've come to realize that if I'm not feeling a bit anxious about whatever I'm working on and a bit unsure of my ability to do it, I'm probably not risking enough.

## 2.) Why did you choose to write a thriller?

Because I love the strong protagonists. It's ironic: people tend to think of thrillers and mysteries as being “plot-driven” instead of “character-driven.” But nothing could be further from the truth. In thrillers there tend to be a lot of secondary characters, settings, and plot points – the protagonist is the one who holds everything together and drives the action. She or he has to be tenacious, observant, and morally centered (with humanizing flaws thrown in) because a weak character could not ride the bucking plotline with any success. In the best thrillers the protagonist doesn't simply follow the clues as they emerge; she bends

the plot to her will. It's her creative and powerful impact on the book's events that makes the mystery come out right in the end.

I think the real contribution of the thriller (in addition to its entertainment value) is that it brings this kind of character to the forefront. In so doing, it encodes a crucial hope: That we can conquer our fears and face down the worst of what the world has to offer. That we can have an impact, make a difference. That is very strong, important stuff.

### 3.) Why first-person?

In first-person narration, readers are in the protagonist's mind the entire time: there's no place else to be. They see what she sees, know what she knows, and think what she thinks. They are as limited as she is by her blind spots and foibles.

As an author, I find first-person narration constraining and dream about the wide open vistas of the omniscient third. But I also know that one of the great powers of the novel (as opposed to film, for example) lies in the way it can describe the inner workings of a mind. The first-person narration is the ultimate in this kind of psychological exploration. I think it comes closer than any other art form to portraying what it really feels like to be a human being. Because we are all, always, in first-person mode – able with diligence to change ourselves but never to escape ourselves. So while we may be quite different from the protagonist superficially, on the existential level, our experience is the same. We are trying to develop our strengths and talents and overcome our weaknesses and biases, while simultaneously trying to figure out which is which. Witnessing the struggles of a first-person narrator teaches us about our own.

4.) Your protagonist, Pirio Kasparov, has been described as remarkable. What do you like about her?

Her heroic qualities. These are the same the world over and across every epoch: courage, perseverance, a practical intelligence, integrity, shrewdness, honesty, justified compassion. The problem is that, though we all have access to these qualities and display them at various times in varying degrees, we cannot always or reliably find our way to them. We have shortcomings. And those are the same the world over, too. The list of Pirio's shortcomings is long and varied: mindless rebelliousness, a bit of laziness, misanthropy, reflexive anger, confusion about love and sex, cynicism, aloofness, and recklessness. Bless her heart. I like her as much for her shortcomings as I do for her strengths.

5.) The ocean is a very strong force in this book. Do you have a special relationship with the sea?

I spent a good portion of my childhood trailing after three older siblings who were fanatic sailors. Many of my most exciting and dreadful childhood memories take place on boats.

In high school a summer job at an aquarium on Cape Cod gave me a chance to work and swim with two dolphins named Salty and Spray who had been together in captivity for over a decade. At the end of one summer Salty died of a skin infection, and Spray went to the bottom of the tank, rarely surfaced, and refused to do the shows that she had enjoyed for years. She died in a few months time. Whatever the medical reason, it was clear to the people who cared about her that she'd died of a broken heart. What I learned about marine mammals from that experience never left me.

As an adult, I lived for many years close to the water in Newburyport MA, a beautiful seaport town about thirty-five miles north of Boston. My house was just a few blocks from the water. The ocean's many moods affected my own. Its peace was comforting; its rage was frightful. I've had both dreams and nightmares involving the ocean. It has some kind of direct route to my psyche.

Newburyport has a modest fishing fleet. (The real fishing industry is in Gloucester, further south.) I passed by trawlers and lobster boats every day. I always thought they were ugly, but I found them fascinating as well. A friend of mine, a lobsterman, died suddenly, not in any nefarious way, but it was a tragic death, as he was only in his thirties and left behind twin girls. I had lost both my parents before I was twenty-five, so I often thought about these girls and wished I could help them fill a gap that I knew would never be filled. You see these concerns coming out in Pirio's relationship with Noah, and in her struggles to accept the early loss of her mother and her father's illness.

#### 6.) How did you become a writer?

I didn't start writing fiction until my early thirties -- after a short professional career in magazines, advertising, and marketing; and a long stint in graduate school where I wrote dull papers analyzing literary texts. At that time I was a new mother and part-time adjunct professor and found myself for the first time since high school with unstructured time on my hands. Ironically, graduate school had really turned me off from fiction, and I had no particular ambition to write it. I intended to become a freelance science writer. So imagine my surprise when I got up one Sunday morning and wrote the entire first draft of a short

story that had been given to me whole and complete as I slept. Then imagine my even greater surprise when I had no trouble placing it in a respected literary journal.

Fiction writing grabbed me that Sunday morning and hasn't let go since. But it's a treacherous road, not one for the faint of heart. Unless you're one of the lucky few who rockets to success right away, you have to put in a long apprenticeship and get beat up quite a bit along the way. Luckily, I'm fairly stubborn.

### 7.) Boston.

I am writing this (part of it, anyway) in the main reading room of the Boston Public Library. I had a job here in high school, so I know the place well. I used to wheel the cart filled with books to be shelved far into the labyrinthine stacks, sit down on the cold floor, and read them. My boss didn't seem to notice or care that the little part-time girl shelved only one cart of books a day.

The windows of the main reading room look east over Copley Plaza. Old cloistered Trinity Church stands on the other side. I can't look at it without remembering the beautiful way my mother described it in 1944, in one of her love letters to my father, who was serving his tour of duty as a fighter pilot in the Pacific. On the north side of the plaza, a few blocks up on Arlington Street, is the entrance to the Taj Hotel, formerly the Ritz, where my family and I had Easter dinners, and my child's eyes were dazzled by the pastel-colored decorations and the luscious yellow cake with more layers than I could count. On the south side of the plaza is the gracious gray-stoned Copley Hotel with its red awnings and liveried doormen. My senior prom was held there, under sparkling crystal chandeliers. I wore a slinky gown

that was more sophisticated than anything I had ever worn, and covered my nerves by smoking thin brown Tiparillos, a suitably feminine cigar.

The whole city of Boston is full of memories for me: The Museum of Fine Arts, where, as a very unsupervised child, I often went by myself to wander the marble hallways in awe. The underground subway system, which I explored for the fun of it, learning to make my way around the entire city on twenty-five cents and transfer tickets. The drab Catholic Liturgical store on West Street, where rosary beads, scapulars, and lace mantillas were bought, and, a few doors down, the world-famous Bailey's Ice Cream Parlor, birthplace of the ice cream sundae, where the chocolate sauce and whipped cream dripped from the high silver bowl onto the marble-topped table and where, at the tender age of twelve, I had my pocket picked for the first time.

As I got older, more of the city opened up to me: Bars, any number of them. Neon lights and nightlife on every corner, it seemed. The restaurants where I waitressed when I was home from college. The little cafes where I met friends. Boston Harbor, where I sailed with my brothers and sister as the big-bellied planes flew low overhead on their approach to Logan Airport and the closely passing freighters might be five or more stories tall. The narrow shop on Newbury Street where my husband and I bought our wedding rings. The arched stone bridge into Cambridge, where I taught when I was pregnant. The outdoor square at Government Center, which my small children watched expectantly every spring, waiting for the circus to arrive. And this: the boardwalk along the harbor where the wind is always brisk.

Today, as I look eastward from the second-floor reading room onto Copley Plaza, I also see the scene of the Boston marathon bombings. My husband and daughter were only

one block away from the explosion. The city intends to erect a permanent memorial to the victims. Perhaps selfishly, perhaps naively, I wish they wouldn't.

8.) Any plans for another book?

This summer I spent a few weeks in Yakutsk, a city of approximately 200,000 in the Sakha Republic of northeastern Siberia. It has a ballet, an opera, and a university. In the winter the average temperature is -40 degrees F. I traveled from Yakutsk to a small village called Cherkeh, on the other side of the Lena River, about a five-hour drive on deeply rutted, sparsely populated roads. The Siberian meadows are very green in summer, dotted with clear glassy lakes and tumbling streams, and the shaggy Sakha horses roam and graze where they will, without fences, and return to their homes of their own accord. The people in Siberia greeted me warmly and gave me a glimpse into their lives. My next novel will be set in Boston and this region. It will involve ballet dancers, political intrigue, and diamond mines. Stay tuned.