

*North of Boston* Reading Group Guide: Conversation with Elisabeth Elo

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*1. Where did this story begin for you, and what was your journey to publishing it?*

This story began in several places at once. First, a character had been living on my shoulder, so to speak, for a long time, and I knew that at some point I would write her story. Second, I missed the kind of books I'd enjoyed as a child -- the ones that had mystery, adventure, and new knowledge all wrapped up together. I wanted to write that kind of book, only mine would be for grown-up girls and boys who'd done some hard living, so of course it would delve into difficult relationships and troubling topics. I guess you could say that I wanted to write the kind of book I wanted to read.

As far as the journey from finished manuscript to publishing goes, there are two words that sum it up: persistence, luck.

*2. Befitting a great thriller, Pirio is a complex protagonist. What about her is most endearing to you and what do you see as her fatal flaws?*

I love Pirio's courage and perseverance. I love that she calls things exactly as she sees them, and that she's deeply loyal to the people she cares about people, despite her occasional harshness. She's a powerful person, but she's also restless and unhappy. Her flaws are numerous, and not particularly small. For example, she gets by on her privileges without working as hard as she will eventually need to if her life is to have any sort of shape or meaning. She can be childish and unforgiving; she confuses sex and love; she's cynical and aloof. Bless her heart. I like her as much for her shortcomings as I do for her strengths.

*3. You're from Boston, and this book is steeped in that city's culture, yet the title refers to an "elsewhere." Can you explain the tension or conflict between these places for you as the author, and for your protagonist?*

One of the joys of writing fiction is that you get to travel. Even if it's only in your mind or on your computer, it's still a wonderful experience. In *North of Boston*, each setting is different from the last, not just in its physical aspects, but also in the rules that govern it and in the challenges and possibilities it affords the characters. Boston is a civilized city; the open seas are less so, though there are still laws that must be followed; in the wilderness, anything can happen. On each step of the journey, as the trappings of society fall away, Pirio comes closer to understanding her true self. In fiction, the outward journey is always an inner one, too.

*4. Writing this book must have required a fair amount of research—into hypothermia, perfumes, whales, the fishing industry, and Inuit life, to name just a few things! Which topics were most fascinating to you and why?*

Well, I did NOT like researching hypothermia and drowning, although it was pretty easy to get the basic facts. The fishing industry is complex: the laws are always changing. So that part was challenging. I loved, loved, loved learning about whales and perfume. These two things are not as different as you might think, because sperm whales produce ambergris, a resinous oil that has been used since ancient times as a base in perfumes. In fact, the unlikely connection between whale vomit and perfume served as one of the inspirations of the book!

*5. Why did you choose to make Pirio the daughter of perfumers? What significance did it have for the story?*

Perfume is an endlessly fascinating subject because it touches upon so many complex and contradictory aspects of human life. It draws its elements almost exclusively from the natural world – flowers, herbs, grasses, etc. Yet its manufacture depends on the complicated science of chemistry. It's an ancient esoteric art that is famous for its rather closed, secretive society and its legendary masters. But it's also a competitive, potentially lucrative business that reaches into every strata of society. Finally, smell is the most mysterious of the senses. Even with all the advances in brain science, we still don't really know how it works. It's deeply emotional and primitive, the sense of the animals, yet it provides the most sublime pleasures.

When Pirio's mother makes her first perfume, and with her husband's help, starts the company that will make the family rich, she deftly bring all these elements together. Inessa Mark, Inc. reveals her parents' symbiotic genius, yet it doesn't explain what really interests Pirio – the cause of their unhappiness. It's a treasured legacy, and something of a burden. In the next book, Pirio is going to have to figure out what it means to her to be a perfumer and whether she even wants to do it.

*6. This mystery runs deep. Which aspects did you know when you sat down to start the book and what changed over the course of writing?*

I knew that Pirio's story would begin with her almost drowning and that at some point she would face her fear of drowning and overcome it somehow. I also knew that a

portion of the story would take place on a boat, and that there would be a child who needed her. The rest got filled in as I went along. I planned the book's sections rather loosely, and quickly tossed aside what didn't work. A writer shouldn't try to be too clever with the plot, I 'think. Each event has its natural implications and repercussions. Ideally, you just follow along.

*7. The story is framed with Thomasina's substance abuse struggles. What was behind this choice?*

I know too many people whose lives have been affected by alcoholism. You probably do, too. (The American Medical Association estimates that about 10-20% of men and 5-10% of women will meet the criteria for alcoholism at some point during their lifetimes.) Alcoholism is an especially difficult disease because it makes no rational sense to people who not affected. They just see someone destroying themselves. And a lot is stolen from the sufferer as the disease progresses -- not just their health, but also the finer aspects of their hearts and characters and even the small joys of living. It's like Alzheimer's -- you lose them inch by inch.

*8. Class and political divisions are a subtle thread throughout North of Boston. In what ways do they define Pirio, Thomasina, and others?*

One of the paradoxes of modern life is that class boundaries can be fluid in some cases and extremely rigid in others. As immigrants to this country, Pirio's parents rise from poverty to riches. Isa is a fashion icon who has been cruelly exploited. Milosa buys expensive oil paintings, but still wears his "Russian shoes." Johnny, a native Bostonian, has

aspirations he can't fulfill: his education, profession, and temperament trap him in the lower middle class. He's filled with hatred for his boss, Dustin Hall, an MBA who knows next to nothing about the business he's running, and is easily manipulated by richer men.

Thomasina, raised in wealth, was deprived of love. Though she's capable of spending ten thousand dollars in a weekend, her inner world is bankrupt; she seeks stability in a social class that she doesn't belong to and will never be welcome in.

I think that class issues make most Americans uneasy to some degree. Many of us are in some kind of transition – we're either going up or down – and there's anxiety either way. We don't talk about this subject much, but it's always there, casting shadows around us.

*9. Reading about the world of the people onboard the Galaxy is absolutely chilling. What was the experience of writing those scenes like?*

Fun! Those were among the easiest scenes to write. In fact, the book flowed much more easily for me in the second half. The closer I got to the end, the more confident I felt as a writer (even in the worst parts).

*10. What are you working on now? Can we expect more Pirio Kasparov adventures in the future?*

Yes, Pirio has another big challenge ahead. Through a really bizarre turn of events, she ends up in Siberia, where she becomes embroiled in a plot that involves ballet dancers, political intrigue, and diamond mines.

I went to Siberia this summer to do research for the book. I spent some time in Yakutsk, a city of approximately 300,000 in the Sakha Republic. The average winter temperature is -40 degrees F, but the summer temperatures are similar to Boston's. 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 meadows are very green, dotted with clear glassy lakes and tumbling streams, and the air smells sweet. Shaggy Sakha horses roam and graze where they will, without fences, and return to their homes of their own accord. The people I met in Siberia greeted me warmly and gave me a glimpse into their lives. I'm immensely grateful for their hospitality and hope to be able to bring some small portion of what I learned into this next book.