The depressive air is no mistake. Novelist Gabrielle Zevin ’00 wrote The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry (2014) while worrying about Amazon’s widening grip. And in worrying about Amazon’s widening grip, she championed independent stores, libraries, and devoted print readers. “Fikry was really about how we have some ability to affect what our townscapes look like and, to me, bookstores were, and are, an issue of vital importance—I really wanted them to survive,” she says from the Los Angeles home she shares with partner Hans Canosa ’93 and their two aging rescue dogs. “I mean, the French get it: they call books ‘an essential good,’ you know?”

The novel is heartwarming and beautifully crafted; each chapter opens with an ingenious plug from Fikry for a real short story hinting at what’s to come: “Lamb to the Slaughter,” by Roald Dahl, “A Conversation with My Father,” by Grace Paley, among others. But it also offers a salient political and cultural critique—all Zevin’s fiction does.

Her 2010 book, The Hole We’re In, features a family sucked dumbly into consumerism and a daughter’s drive to transcend it. Zevin was interested in “Americans and debt, and how by oppressing people financially, you get to control them politically.” And 2017’s Young Jane Young was finished as Hilary Clinton competed with Donald Trump. It spans four women’s narratives across 13 years, focusing on protagonist Aviva Grossman, an undergraduate intern who has an affair with a married congressman. Strains of a familiar scandal exist, but Zevin’s scope is deeper, exploring slut-shaming, power dynamics, and the pigeonholing of politicized women. In many ways the book presaged both

ALUMNI

The Arts as Essential Goods

“A prescient novelist is hopeful that “after great change, amazing things can happen.”

by nell porter brown

“N o man is an island; every book is a world.” The motto, adapted from John Donne, appears on a weathered sign for the ailing bookshop owned by the irascible A.J. Fikry.

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Chee, with host Seth Meyers, after failing to identify a PalmPilot.
A spontaneous photo of Zevin and her late dog Nico taken on a sofa trashed in Los Angeles. “As soon as we were done, a random guy loaded it into his truck.”

Clinton’s loss and the #MeToo movement, which emerged about two months after it was published.

Fikry fans were baffled, Zevin reports: “What’s she going on about? This is not heartwarming!” Yet both novels address technology’s outsized impact—the influx of electronic-based reading and the Internet’s indelible record of one’s identity and missteps. The novels also reflect how public/private identities and the nature of perceptions alter over time. Time itself often rises to the level of character for Zevin; at once a transmutable human construct, and an indomitable catalyst. Fikry and Grossman change with age, and ultimately seek forgiveness, acceptance, and kinship. “I write characters who, for one reason or another, have difficulties fitting in with the world; they seem like functional, well-adjusted people, but they all grapple with loneliness,” says Zevin. “People have pointed out to me that I often write biracial characters, head traumas, orphans, and car accidents.

Strong women, too. In her debut novel Margarettown (2005) a character appears as five different versions of herself over a lifetime. Thematically, it’s somewhat related to Zevin’s screenplay for Conversations with Other Women (2005) starring Helena Bonham Carter and Aaron Eckhart. Directed by Canosa, its savvy retrospective on a failed marriage unfolds through flashbacks and split-screen editing, echoing the way memories play in the mind.

Zevin’s own creative life split that year, when her other early novel, Elsewhere—which evokes Tuck Everlasting, A Wrinkle in Time, and A Christmas Carol with its original time-twisting premise—launched her as a young-adult author. The book is narrated by a dead teenager who finds herself on the island of Elsewhere, forced to live life in reverse. Zevin initially conceived the story as “an after-life love triangle” and fantastical tale for all ages, like The Little Prince. Seven novels later, it now feels as though another person wrote that book, she says, even if she still struggles with its underlying question: “How do we live in a world when it is filled with so much loss?”

Elsewhere’s success and Zevin’s “lack of a trust fund” led to Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac (2007), and then to developing characters who age into their early twenties for her Birthright trilogy (2011-2013). Protagonist Anya Balanchine is the daughter of a Russian-American crime family, living in a semi-dystopic 2083 New York City—a mix of 1970s urbanism and Soviet-era Russia—where chocolate and caffeine are illegal. “There’s a lot of rationing, love, crime, death, and revenge” amid explorations of young women and power, she says, and “the fact that what is legal can determine what is good and who is good. It probably came out of thinking about the legalization of marijuana.” In March, the trilogy was optioned for television.

Considering how the zeitgeist has crept into her novels, will the tenth one (now under way) integrate aspects of COVID-19? The sudden dissolution of “normal” life reverberates in known and unknowable ways, Zevin allows. It’s a mistake not to view this period as “real time,” she adds: “We have some choice in the way we use it, assuming we’re not desperately ill or desperate for money, so you will either come out on the other side of this having done some things, or having done nothing at all. And, really, life itself is actually like that, too.” All she’ll say about the

Cambridge Scholars

Four seniors have won Harvard-Cambridge Scholarships to study at Cambridge University during the 2020-21 academic year.

Fernanda Baron, of Lowell House, a sociology concentrator with a secondary field in the studies of women, gender, and sexuality, will be the Governor William Shirley Scholar at Pembroke College. Caroline Engelmayer, of Currier House, a classics concentrator, will be the Lionel De Jersey Harvard Scholar at Emmanuel College. Juan Carlos Fernandez del Castillo, of Mather House, a mathematics concentrator, will be the John Eliot Scholar at Jesus College. Bilal Nadeem, of Quincy House, a human developmental and regenerative biology concentrator with a secondary field in global health and health policy and a language citation in modern standard Arabic, will be the Charles H. Fiske III Scholar at Trinity College.
new project is that it has required extensive research and opens in a Harvard-like setting.

Discussing emerging work "sort of requires switching into promoting mode," Zevin says. "You know, the creative brain has to kind of be a pure brain. The selling brain makes everything disgusting." Every artist, she adds, confronts a semblance of the question: "Am I going to be an elephant or a baby chick today?" The public-facing elephant deals with networking, fans, and marketing. "But the baby chick is the one writing the books; it’s this, like tiny and powerful, seemingly vulnerable thing. I wish I knew another way to do it, but I don’t know how to write a book when I sit down and I’m tough."

At one point she wrote from midnight to 6 a.m.; now she likes the freshness of mornings. Her orderly home office has her preferred white walls, a comfy sofa, bookshelves, and framed art; she is a serious, low-budget collector. A favorite painting, Expo-sé, by Lisa Kranichfeld, of a woman in an ornate, unisex waistcoat and jacket, hangs behind her simple wooden desk. Zevin likes the artist’s series of women in aggressive stances and "how she makes things that are both very hard and very soft in the poses." She dislikes the “romanticizing” of writing spaces, and eschews superstitious routines or talismans. "In fact, I’m kind of suspicious of my nice office," she says, laughing, "like, ‘Are you really necessary?’"

During more than a decade in Manhattan apartments before moving to Los Angeles in 2012, she wrote in a series of “crummy to not-so-crummy places,” without any real privacy even, at one point living, eating, working, playing Nintendo, and hanging out with friends—all on one couch.

Her creative processes morph with each project, but her highly disciplined organizational systems are absolute.

Studying art and languages also opens up “new parts” of her brain, although in discussing her daily life in a recent Japanese class, the translation came out as: “I spend a lot of time doing nothing.” She laughs, explaining that discussions on the craft of writing tend to omit the essentiality of thinking. Daily word counts, or using “prompts,” as often advised, are not nearly as vital, in her view, as time spent “just turning the ideas over in my head.” She’s never taken a creative writing course, believing that “the way you studied writing was by reading, and that the sort of ‘technical aspects’ you would pick up by the doing of it.”

If Zevin and her parents shared any religion at home, it was reading, and that the sort of ‘technical aspects’ you would pick up by the doing of it.”

If Zevin and her parents shared any religion at home, it was reading, and that the sort of ‘technical aspects’ you would pick up by the doing of it.”
child. The incisive and expressive Zevin kept a journal and wrote short stories and essays; she was hired by the local newspaper as a teen music critic based on her angry letter about a “petty” review of a Guns N’ Roses concert.

At Harvard, though, she retreated. The place felt overwhelmingly stimulating, and yet there was so much she wanted to learn. Concentrating in English, with a focus on American literature, “I wasn’t good at putting myself out there,” she says. Instead she curled into “a cocooned state, intensely reading, intensely thinking but not really showing any external results. And I think what’s hard for people of all ages, but more for young people, is that the creative life is not actually that results-oriented.” Eventually she wanted to learn more about writing through acting, so when she met Canosa, then a nonresident tutor at Cabot House who was working on a campus TV show, she joined the cast.

They took what would have been her senior year off to collaborate on Alma Mater, a very low-budget feature film about a gay, tenured Harvard professor set just before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the professor’s Weld Hall roommate. Zevin’s father, one of the funders, jokes that the project constituted graduate school. In many ways it did. The stress and creative pressure to develop words outside a theoretical context—words that actors could bring to life in a coherent, actionable story—taught her to take the craft more seriously, and “that you have to empower yourself to do the work, otherwise you’re never going to do the work.”

She graduated the following year, moved to the Upper West Side with Canosa, and subsisted by optioning her screenplays, while also working on theater productions, short films, and other writing projects. And she learned from all of it. In 2001, when her Berlin debuted at the Tribeca Playhouse, and September 11 intervened, a fellow artist pointed out that “The work is what matters, and the work stays with you,” she recalls. “And I have since found that to be true. I cannot ask anyone to get the thing I wanted them to get from the work. All I can do is to fully participate in it anyway.”

Facing the current pandemic, she feels “a lot of tenderness about everything and everyone right now.” But social distancing, she notes, is “an interesting opportunity for everyone to hit ‘reboot,’ on whatever things they’ve been longing to do. We are all in the cocoon now, a period of dormancy, and who knows what can come out of that? When I allow myself to feel hopeful, that’s what I think about: that after great change, amazing things can happen.”

As they do in The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry. After the aggrieved bookseller’s isolated, intellectual life of books is upended by a mysterious bundle delivered to his doorstep, he ultimately rejoins the larger community, where books and narratives don’t entomb people, but bring them together. Zevin’s message is clear, but not pedantic. “As a reader, I want characters, through time, and I want love,” she says. “Books suggest people beyond yourself, and places beyond where you currently find yourself. The slow contemplation and investment in a life that is not your own. Empathy might be deeply old-fashioned, but show me a better option for living in the world.”

Six years after Fikry appeared, the book is slated to become a movie based on Zevin’s screenplay, starring Naveen Andrews (of Lost, and The English Patient), and directed by Canosa. Amazon, meanwhile, is a more powerful commercial force and the arts as a whole are under even worse threats. Post-pandemic, she now wonders, “Will there be bookstores? Theaters? Movie theaters? Local newspapers? Near my house they’re tearing down the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—to make a better, hugely expensive LACMA that will be smaller?! I’m not against change in general, but the particular timing of this seems ominous. I am a person who is good at solitude—but I like civilization.”