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.”

Centennial Medalists

The graduate school of Arts and Sciences Centennial Medal, first awarded in 1989 on the occasion of the school’s hundredth anniversary, honors alumni who have made contributions to society that emerged from their graduate studies. It is the highest honor GSAS bestows, and awardees include some of Harvard’s most accomplished alumni. The 2020 recipients, announced on May 27, are: Stephen Cook, Ph.D. ’66, a computational theorist and mathematician; Albert Fishlow, Ph.D. ’63, a development economist and historian; Margaret Kivelson ’50, Ph.D. ’57, RI ’66, a space and planetary physicist; and Helen Vendler, Ph.D. ’60, Porter University Professor emerita, beloved Harvard teacher and poetry critic. For more about the honorands, see harvardmag.com/centennial-20.