

Introduction

ELIZABETH STROUT IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR and critically acclaimed US writers of the twenty-first century. In the last twenty-one years, she has published eight books, including *Oh William!*, which appeared in the fall of 2021. Strout is the rare crossover writer, like Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker, or Marilynne Robinson, appreciated by critics and beloved by hundreds of thousands. Her ability to reach both commercial audiences and literary elites speaks to a particular consciousness, a sensitive, insightful, and humorous one that book buyers from all walks of life value. And it's not just readers. Strout's first novel, *Amy and Isabelle*, was made into a TV movie; her third book, *Olive Kitteridge*, was filmed as an HBO miniseries; the rights to her fourth book, *The Burgess Boys*, have been optioned by Robert Redford; and an adaptation of *My Name Is Lucy Barton* appeared on the London and Broadway stages before the pandemic shuttered them. Her sales and perennial presence on book club lists indicate a tremendous impact on the popular realm, and the growing attention to her in academia charts her importance in American letters. In the wake of the #MeToo movement and the awareness of the political and cultural clout of the White working class, two issues that Strout's fiction anticipated in many ways, this is the writer's moment.¹

Born in 1956, Strout didn't publish her first novel until she was forty-two, sixteen years after the publication of her first short story. She had been working for decades on her fiction, however. As she told Mary Pols, "I spent years and years and years trying to find my storytelling voice and then I found it. And also, I got older, so there were more life experiences that arrived, that one can use in various ways in their work. But I was apprenticing that entire time. I was really working those first 20 years." Following the publication of *Amy and Isabelle* in 1998, several other books appeared: *Abide with Me* in 2006; *Olive Kitteridge* in 2008; *The Burgess Boys* in 2013; *My Name Is Lucy Barton* in 2016; *Anything Is Possible* in 2017; *Olive, Again* in 2019; and *Oh William!* in 2021. She has been not only prolific but also lauded, recognized as a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award, long-listed for the Booker, shortlisted for the Orange Prize, awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Strout's productivity at that particular time in history—the first two decades of the twenty-first century—merits a closer look. Biographically, her career took off once her only child left for college and she left her first marriage. But more broadly, that is a fascinating time for Strout to have made her mark. Those two decades saw the flowering of an immensely popular and influential literary genre, "chick lit," that remains popular (we might think, for example, of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*, or Sophie Kinsella's *Love Your Life*).² If "chick lit" often focuses on striving, young, urban women faced with comic situations related to sexuality, careers, and shopping, Strout's work offers a counterpoint, a kind of throwback to the domestic fiction of Anne Tyler, Sue Miller, and Alice Munro. Strout's work, while often focused on women, is usually set in small towns, features older figures, and humorously and poignantly addresses the challenges of aging.³ I read her fiction as a thoughtful corrective to the frenetic lifestyle captured in so many of the novels aimed at those reveling in (or aspiring to) the thick of it.⁴

Perhaps, then, it's not surprising that Strout's first two novels could be considered historical fiction. *Amy and Isabelle* is set in the early 1970s in the small fictional town of Shirley Falls, Maine; *Abide with Me* is set in West Annett, another fictional small town in Maine, in 1959. With her third and most famous book, *Olive Kitteridge*, Strout moved, if not exactly to the present, then to the more recent past. However, in contrast to the "chick lit" phenomenon, even when Strout's work connects to our current moment, she encourages a reflective sensibility in her readers that encourages us to step back, to read more slowly, to recognize, not only in the cadence of her speech but in the images she captures, the small moments we might miss if we race through our days in the way that hustle culture promotes. Her small town-born protagonists may stay in the villages of their families or they may move, but they maintain a ruminative sensibility born from early struggles. Strout's work offers her readers an unhurried approach to living in the world and engaging with others, meditative rather than focused on getting ahead, reflective rather than brisk.⁵ In this way, her work, with its attentiveness to detail and lyricism, is poetic, evoking her contemporaries Toni Morrison and Marilynne Robinson.⁶ Strout is indeed a careful writer, sensitive to the auditory echoes of her prose. In her 2017 interview with Samantha Vorwald, she observes:

I really believe in the sentence. Every sentence has to have some heartbeat of life to it. Every sentence that gets put down has to come from the sentence before it and lead into the sentence that's coming after. There has to be a "wholeness" at work, and there has to be a heartbeat in every sentence, if that makes sense. And it's not easy to learn to do. I trained myself over the years to get rid of any sentence that's dead weight. . . . That would be the business that carries it forward. . . . When I write, it's very aural. My ear is very, very important to me. So the sentence has to land on the ear the right way, and then if that is landing on the reader's ear the right way, they will be carried forward. But it's something I've learned to hear and learned to do and to get rid of every

twig—what I call twigs—every dead piece of wood. Just to get it out of there.

It's not just Strout's voice that matters—it's what and whom she sees as well: the objects, acts, and people that she draws our attention to. Strout illuminates that which we don't often perceive, those details we live with without even realizing they coincide with our existence. In calling us to notice, for example, the fall of light, the way a woman brushes her hair back, or the stoop of a man's posture, Strout reveals not only her powers of observation, but also the sacredness of everyday life. Strout's fiction privileges qualities that Cecilia Konchar Farr tells us "our scholarly codifications [often] leave out—affinity, empathy, affect, education, and engagement—or, as avid novel readers have explained . . . : sympathetic connections, even identification, from readers to characters; honest appeals to genuine emotion; exciting stories that inspire conversation (and consumption); historical, political or geographical information subtly shared; comfortable settings that tend toward the domestic; and social messages that call readers to action" ("The Gendering," 209). Throughout this book, I hope to show how Strout's fiction illuminates such a practice, a way of reading that values connection and intimacy. Within the academy, these values tend to be most closely aligned with feminist and affect theory, and, not surprisingly, with women writers. Although Strout is reluctant to label herself a woman writer, her subjects—relationships, families, and homes—culturally still tend to be labeled as feminine. That's not to say she's conservative. Strout is not advocating a retreat to home, by any means—and neither are feminist critics. Rather, she encourages her readers to reflect not only on the stories she presents but on the stories of our individual lives as well.

Strout also pays particular attention to that most intense and formative of relationships, the one between mothers and their children. For example, in *Amy and Isabelle*, when Isabelle notices her daughter is suffering, she reacts acutely, mirroring her child: "Isabelle felt a flicker of dread. 'What's wrong?' It was impossible to feel any semblance of peace if something was wrong with her daughter" (65). The two women, like many mothers and daughters, are so close

that Amy's burden becomes Isabelle's own. Later, as she watches her child, "the sight of her pained Isabelle. It pained her terribly to see her, but why? Because she looked unhappy, her shoulders slumped like that, her neck thrust forward, walking slowly, just about dragging her feet. This was Isabelle's daughter; this was Isabelle's fault. She hadn't done it right, being a mother; and this youthful desolation walking up the driveway was exactly proof of that" (206). At a time when parent-child relationships are closer than ever, many readers will recognize Isabelle. In her daughter's very carriage, Isabelle sees her own defeat, her own failures. More recently, in *Olive, Again*, Olive, too, has a similar moment when she senses she has failed Chris, because he appears unhappy and he has chosen to marry a woman who yells at him, the way his mother yelled at his father. In her recognition of the vexed emotions mothers experience, Strout memorializes fleeting feelings rarely articulated on the page. These very moments, she shows her readers, deserve consideration.

Many of those moments emerge from women's relationships and are experienced physically. Those people historically denigrated as anti-intellectual or worthless, her work demonstrates, are valuable and perceptive. Her subjects tell her readers they and their observations matter, and that fiction may have a unique vantage point from which to offer readers that realization. Within Strout's work, both Lucy Barton and Patty Nicely reflect on how reading transformed their lives; when they read, they feel understood. That feeling of seeing oneself on the page is tied not only to the individual reader but also to the social project of Strout's work. If an individual recognizes herself in Strout's work and also sees how she differs from the characters, she may realize that other readers have similar reactions—that in fact they form, if only temporarily, a community of sorts. In telling her readers to pay attention, Strout offers what Janice Radway has termed a "counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimated and nurtured in academic English departments for the last fifty years or so" (ix), and in her valuing of women's insights and women's experiences, Strout speaks to the feminization of our culture.⁷

Unlike so many of her peers, Strout is also funny. Her humor is earthy, bawdy, body-based. When we laugh out loud as we read, we are engaging socially and physically with a text and reminded of our bodies and the bodies of others. The realm of human experience, Strout has said, is her canvas, and that includes humans at their most vulnerable and stupid in addition to their most poignant. She lets us into people's lives, with an easy intimacy that is welcoming, humbling, and gross, providing a level of realistic detail that doesn't shy away from warts and ugliness but that celebrates the complications of people's lives and lived experiences. Yet, if Strout is funny, she is reverential, as Lucy Barton and Patty Nicely attest, when it comes to the power of fiction. Psychoanalysis and psychology are fair game for gentle ribbing, but often Strout reiterates how the expansiveness of fiction allows for an appreciation of the nuances of experiences that clinical labels do not. In dwelling on the messy details, fiction can be more honest, accurate, and thorough than particular theories or structures that people use to make sense of their lives. Fiction works, Strout tells us, when readers connect with it—intellectually, emotionally, and physically. We not only engage with the words on the page, but also approach the world and ourselves differently for having read it. In the interview in the appendix, Strout tells us, "I hope for a sense of transcendence to come through to the reader, in whatever way they need that to be, that the world becomes larger to them, that everything may not be just as it seems" (234). Good fiction doesn't just soothe us, though it might do that; it also troubles us, makes us think, stirs us from complacency, and perhaps inspires us to action.⁸

In the chapters that follow, I explore each of Strout's books. I attempt both to offer an interpretation of each work and to tease out the stylistic and thematic threads that link them together. In so doing, I offer a way to appreciate Strout as a writer, her vision, and the books that she's shared with the world. For as renowned as she is, Strout has not received as much critical attention as one would expect (though that dearth could speak to the historical and contemporary sexism and myopia of the academy, its undervaluing, as Barbara Waxman has pointed out, of the details of mature women's

lives).⁹ Another reason for the belated appreciation of Strout's work is the academy's historic valuation of separation or distance rather than, in Rita Felski's words, "relation" or "attachment" (viii); Strout, as I've been attempting to point out, privileges the latter. Her work is about connection,¹⁰ and her career offers us a way to understand the position of the woman writer (though she herself shies away from this label) today.

In her fiction, Strout is a woman speaking primarily to women (the majority of book buyers and fiction readers are women), and most people who read Strout are not introduced to her around the seminar table but through a magazine or book club or Facebook recommendation.¹¹ That audience attests to Strout's particularly democratic consciousness—her readers do not buy, read, and discuss her books because they are told to do so, but for pleasure. They—we—read because we choose to. Hundreds of thousands of people choose to read Strout. We're return readers; we buy her books, we recommend them, we give them to our friends, because we liked one of them. Felski explains that "attachment doesn't get much respect in academia. It is often outsourced to others—naïve readers, gullible consumers, small-town patriots, too-needy lovers—and treated as a cause for concern" (2), but in that exclusion, academia misses out on a lot. "To be attached," Felski claims, "is to be affected or moved and also to be linked or tied. It denotes passion and compassion—but also an array of ethical, political, intellectual, or other bonds" (1). In other words, to move a reader—emotionally, physically, and intellectually—so much that she wants to share that which moved her with someone else is no small feat. In some ways, academics are coming late to the table where Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon, Strout, and a host of other women are already sitting. Those readers know that pleasure might come to them in the form of laughter—for example, cringing at the irascibility of Olive Kitteridge—or from reflection, when they are forced to consider the world as it's represented on the page and then the world around them. There is a certain sobriety in Strout's fiction, which generates its own pleasure. But there is also an edge that is disruptive—allusions to violence, cruelty, and

meanness that trouble any benign reading experience. Encountering sadness and cruelty, in addition to humor and awe, is part and parcel of the pleasurable reading experience of Strout. She doesn't offer only a sop, but she makes her readers reflect, and because of the intimacy she's created, we are compelled rather than repulsed by those troubling moments.

Strout's appeal is important to recognize for several reasons. Five of her books are set in small towns in Maine and Illinois. Her protagonists are not the striving professional class of "chick lit" fame, but teachers, guidance counselors, and janitors. In shifting the center of gravity from the urban metropole to the periphery, Strout shows us that the United States is far vaster than the concentrated cities of the East and West Coast. Her characters are thoughtful people wrestling with how to live in the world, even if they don't share the education or address or political affiliation of many of her readers. Like one of her most famous fans, Oprah, Strout is a kind of democratizing influencer; her fiction welcomes readers of all class and education levels, not by catering to our base impulses but by calling us to our better angels.¹² She shows her readers we can find evidence for grace, hope, and despair across our nation.¹³

And fiction, she tells us, is a particularly effective way to reach other people; for, as Helen Taylor contends, "reading fiction seems to facilitate women's imaginations and engage us with others, so that we make productive connections between those stories and other people" (7). Reading and discussing fiction may serve as a conduit, a means for people to connect in a way that is not superficial, simple, or banal. What we read can inherently exclude—here we might think of fan fiction or Christian romance or traditional literary criticism as genres that assume certain audiences and exclude others—but arguably fiction can bridge divisions, show readers how others are suffering, and consequently how they can learn to appreciate their humanity and empathize with others. Suzanne Keen defines empathy as "a spontaneous sharing of feelings, including physical sensations in the body, provoked by witnessing or hearing about another's condition" (*Empathy and the Novel*, xx). That kind

of empathy project is crucial to Strout's work and central to my reading of her. In my privileging of empathy, Felski warns I might sound "perilously close to adolescent infatuation or amateurish enthusiasm, to a treacly and treacherous cult of feeling" (30), but that diminishment does a disservice to the work of reading that Strout proffers—the comfort, the illumination, and the troubling of lazy identification.

If Strout reaches out to her readers, she also reaches back to a grand literary tradition. Suzanne Keen shows us that nineteenth-century novels try to model for their readers how to care for others, and in her exploration of individuals and individual families, Strout, like her predecessors, shows the ubiquity of suffering. Dickens, the Brontës, and Eliot all underscore the private suffering of individuals, the difficulties they have in communicating, and the necessity for compassion. And like Dickens in particular, Strout creates a multiverse; his sprawling novels encompass hundreds of characters and conversations; Strout's are briefer, but the same characters and settings pop up across her novels, rewarding her longtime readers. Unlike the Brontës and Eliot, Strout is funny (here of course she recalls Dickens, Austen, and Thackeray); her worldview is not solely sober but lively, acerbic, and sharp. And that humor in some ways makes the trials her characters face bearable. Of those characters, Strout says, "I suspend judgment. . . . When I go to the page, I am so free of judgment of my characters, and that's so fun. It's so liberating because I don't care how badly behaved they are—as long as they're truthfully badly behaved, I don't care. So I just love them, and they can do whatever they need to do, and I'm free from judgment" (Vorwald). This insight helps us understand not only Olive marking up Suzanne's sweater and stealing her shoe but also Lucy's troubled father. There is room in Strout's world for humor and pathos. Following Keen, I believe the "affective transaction across boundaries of time, culture, and location may indeed be one of the intrinsic powers of fiction and the novel a remarkably effective device for reminding readers of their own and others' humanity" (*Empathy and the Novel*, xxv).

But we also need to be wary of projections or the appropriation of others' experiences. In a commencement address Strout gave in May 2019 at the University of Maine Farmington, which awarded her an honorary doctorate in the humanities, she reflected pithily on a conversation with her mother, who told her "you never really know what goes on in someone else's house," or, as Strout inferred, "we will never, ever really know what goes on in someone else's mind." But what we can do, Strout explained, is listen to that person and try to understand her perspective. Writing, she continued, is an act of faith that attempts to imagine the world from others' perspectives and is, therefore, a necessarily empathic exercise that bridges the apparent distance between individuals. And, as she explains in the interview included in the appendix, "I guess I see writing as an act of faith because you just don't know. I mean you just don't know if it will land on the person who needs it, or will be received in a way that I hope it will be. So it's an act of faith—you put it out there and you hope" (233). In the pages that follow, I try to untangle how each of Strout's books is an act of faith, and explore the evolution of her voice, themes, and concerns. From classic domestic spats between a mother and daughter to hate crimes aimed at Muslim houses of worship, from historical fiction to snapshots of contemporary life, Strout portrays humanity at its most brutal and its most intimate. My approach to this analysis of Strout is colored by the lenses of feminist theory, psychoanalysis, new historicism, and close reading practices. Time and place, or historical specificity, is of crucial import to her work—both that which is set in the past and that which is contemporary. If Strout's works are about individuals, I argue that they're also, by being situated at specific historic moments, about public events. Strout shows how both the long sweep of history and the vast shadows of current global struggles extend their reach into private kitchens, porches, and bedrooms. Fiction is necessarily, paradoxically, personal and public—an individual writer's reflections presented to an audience outside her home. In this wrestling with momentous events and their effects on individuals, Strout is not alone. Maria DiBattista and Deborah Epstein Nord explain that for

“our most powerful and influential women writers, a critique of domestic life was more common than its celebration, the embracing or public debate and the social questions of the day more frequent than their avoidance” (2). Yet certainly Strout’s focus on interpersonal relationships, especially familial ones, emphasizes patterns of human behavior revealed by psychoanalysis and psychiatry, including the work of Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok, and Bessel van der Kolk. The lingering effects of trauma on generations, the desire for individuation of children from their parents, and the complex love we have for our birth and chosen families are themes that Strout situates at particular historical moments. If the complexities of familial relationships and coming of age are constants in Strout’s opus, specific contexts create new stories around these themes.

My reading of Strout is as an explicitly social writer. Her books make us consider not only the wonder described on the page but also the evil in the world—evil which, particularly in our indifference to others, we may be responsible for. If anyone is criticized in her work, it’s the people who fail to see and to salve the suffering of others around them. Her work shows us we bear a collective responsibility for others. The affluent New York parasitologist and socialite share a world with the family who eats beans and bread for dinner. In this acknowledgment of our shared world and responsibility, Strout is tapping into a kind of consciousness within academia most often aligned with feminist theory, and in popular culture most clearly personified in Oprah Winfrey. Like Winfrey, Strout uses her privilege to listen to and to elevate others, but she also recognizes the value of her voice and her perspective. That willingness to listen is often coded as a particularly feminine virtue; women are socialized to listen, to help others, to put others before themselves.¹⁴ Women, in general, are not encouraged to elevate themselves, not to take themselves or their observations seriously. Strout answers this most forcefully in *My Name Is Lucy Barton*. Her voice and her perspective matter.

Academics might be better off if we did more listening, if we were more open to hearing what fiction resonates with women and

middle-class readers. The humanities have been in decline for years, perhaps because academics have not effectively made their argument for relevance. But women are reading fiction. And we are reading communally—if not in universities, then at home. Nowhere is this more evident than in the prominence of Oprah’s Book Club, where “readers are invited to engage in a process, to read both reflectively and empathically, in both academic and popular modes, and to talk about books” (Farr, *Reading Oprah*, 49). In other words, Winfrey is creating a community of readers that practically speaking reaches more people than university English classes do. And academics ignore that development at our peril. If the discipline of English studies is to survive, we might take a cue from Strout and Winfrey rather than speak to an increasingly smaller scholarly audience. Best-seller lists point to our culture’s values and interests, and, as Farr points out, Winfrey’s selections inspire people to buy (to read and to talk about) books. Winfrey does, then, what the professoriate has failed to do—encourage people to buy and to read fiction.

Strout is right there with her—literally and figuratively (*Olive, Again* was one of Winfrey’s picks in fall 2020). Strout as a writer and Winfrey as her acolyte call for a reading practice that is critical, reflective, and appreciative. As Farr points out, “Winfrey leads middlebrow reading into the borderlands of these highbrow academic modes, to criticism, to delighting in poetic language and in the subtleties of narrative. Then she moves back confidently to comfortable popular modes, to identification, to embracing characters and life lessons, and to listening with her readers to what novels ‘have to say’” (*Reading Oprah*, 51). Delighting in, embracing, and listening to are all practices that Strout’s work encourages. In her work, through her characters and their observations, Strout calls her readers to an attentiveness that is respectful, mindful, and receptive.

Toril Moi explains that that attentiveness has “nothing to do with sentimentality and misplaced compassion. A just and loving gaze allows us to see the world as it is” (228). This perspective, I think, is crucial to how Sarah Payne would address the critics who see her as mawkish; I would extend this outward to those academics

who find Strout or popular women's writing frivolous or the practice of reading that privileges connection naive. It isn't. If we are hungry for connection, as Janice Radway contends the popularity of Winfrey suggests contemporary humans are, we both want to understand others and to be understood by them. Strout's fiction and Winfrey's empire are built, I believe, on the foundation of recognizing the importance of understanding, not in a way that's idealized and perfect, but in one that recognizes that all perspectives are necessarily limited. I do attempt here to look at Strout with respectful discernment. Her work addresses specific people with particular foibles and frailties, indicative of their individual historical situating. Though she writes with extraordinary sensitivity about the effects of poverty, she, perhaps unconsciously, trucks in cultural myopia, and so, like her characters, she reveals she is engagingly and markedly human. We all are. And noting our limitations allows us to grow and to connect with others. *A Companion to the Works of Elizabeth Strout*, like Strout and Winfrey, is concerned with making connections, and I hope is part of a larger movement in which academics reach out generously, receptively, and humbly to listen to, learn from, and connect with the public. Strout explains in the appendix, "I want to write books that—as Lucy Barton says—make people feel less alone. But I also want to write books that open up things to the reader that they might not have quite known they knew, or maybe didn't know at all until they read about someone different from themselves" (235).

Strout's own humility connects to her affability; she presents herself as likable, down-to-earth; if pensive, she doesn't appear judgmental. Her website bolsters this perception, noting that she was "born in Portland, Maine, and grew up in small towns in Maine and New Hampshire" and that "from a young age" she was drawn to books, spending "hours of her youth in the local library lingering among the stacks of fiction" and in the outdoors, "writing things down, keeping notebooks that recorded the quotidian details of her days." She was close to her mother, a high school English teacher, and recalled in a profile by Ladette Randolph how she and her

mother would “imagine the lives of strangers they saw around town. It seemed to me, . . . from an early age, that nothing was as fun as that. . . . The first ambition I remember having was that of becoming a writer. It seemed as natural as the fact that I would have another birthday. . . . It did not seem a wish, but a fact of life” (174). Her father was a professor at the University of New Hampshire, “and the family lived in New Hampshire during the week, but Maine remained their emotional home throughout her childhood” (Randolph 176). Her family’s isolation, Strout has observed, was self-imposed, and she “ended up spending hours alone with tree toads and pine needles, and turtles and creeks, and the coastline, and collecting periwinkles, so I think it is right to say that my interests when I was young were the beauties of the physical world” (Randolph 176). Socially isolated (anticipating Lucy Barton) and always writing, Strout was unhappy in high school, which she left early to enroll at Bates College.

At Bates, Strout found a mentor in James Hepburn, the chair of the English department, who in independent studies, Strout said, would “just let me write and he would comment, and I would turn in another story, and he would comment. . . . It was enormously helpful, his odd belief in me” (Randolph 177). Strout’s gratitude to Hepburn speaks to the air of appreciation and the importance of generosity within her work. Over and over again, her work celebrates and troubles acts of kindness and caring relationships. While in school and on graduating, Strout worked in the secretarial pool at Bates, cleaned houses, played piano, and tended bar. Eventually, she enrolled in Syracuse’s law school, where she met and married her first husband, Marty Feinman. Soon after earning her JD and beginning to work for Legal Services, she left the profession, feeling “like ‘an unspeakably bad, incompetent lawyer’” (Randolph 178), and turned to teaching English at Manhattan Community College. Her only daughter, Zarina, was born in 1983, and Strout juggled caring for her with teaching and writing as well as she could. Ariel Levy explains of those days that “Strout and her family lived in a brownstone in Park Slope, which [Strout] said ‘felt almost like a village,’ except that it was full of people she didn’t know. She joined

a writing group, and took classes from the editor Gordon Lish. ‘She really found what she was looking for in New York,’ Zarina said. ‘I remember clearly stacks of manuscripts throughout my childhood on the dining-room table. They weren’t sacred—we’d kind of eat on them and live around them.’” She published the occasional short story in *New Letters*, *Seventeen*, and *Redbook*. Reflecting on this part of her life years later, Strout observed,

There was one period of time back then when I’d probably been writing for about fifteen years with very little—a few stories—but very little acknowledgment. And I did think to myself, “I have to stop. It’s just not making sense.” So I decided to go to nursing school. . . . And the application was so confusing that I just thought, “Oh, forget it. I’m just going to stick to being a writer.” . . . I just felt, “This isn’t working,” and then by the end of that day I thought, “No, too, bad, I’m just going to try this story one more time—try it a different time—try it a different way.” . . . I’m always, always going back and trying it one more time.

We see in these assessments Strout’s characteristic humility, her work ethic, and her humor, but they also reveal how seemingly insignificant quotidian details profoundly affect our decisions and lives. In the same interview, she observes, she was the

poster child for rejections. . . . But what kept me going was that I just wanted to do it. And also what kept me going was that I understood intuitively that my work wasn’t yet good enough. I *always* understood that. . . . But I also understood that it was getting better. . . . And then there was an editor at the *New Yorker* for fifteen years who kept rejecting my stories, but his rejection letters kept getting longer and longer, and he was helpful to me. But mostly I was just always trying. I just kept trying. I understood it wasn’t good enough, I understood that it was within reach, and I just had to keep going. And I was surprised that it was taking me so long. I just thought, “Ugh, boy, I had no idea

you'd be this slow." But I did eventually figure out how to get those sentences down in the right way. I figured out how to make a muscular sentence that could carry all the stuff it needed to carry. (Vorwald)

Her first published novel was an immediate popular and critical success. *Amy and Isabelle* appeared in 1998 and was made into a 2001 TV movie starring Elisabeth Shue. The skills that Strout had toiled away at for years were seeing fruition. Strout continued to write and revise, crafting scenes and characters that would eventually find themselves in books of increasing popularity and critical attention, yet her writing routine remained consistent.

In an essay that appeared in *The Guardian* in 2017, Strout reflected, "These days I write first thing in the morning after having breakfast with my husband; my writing day starts as soon as he leaves the apartment, which is usually right after breakfast. Then I clear the table and sit down to work. I write mostly by hand, transcribing it on a computer when I can no longer read my writing, when I have made too many marks on the paper to be able to see the scene I am trying to write." She continued,

Almost always I will start by writing a scene or a piece of a scene. I have learned over the years to take anything that is most pressing to me—it may be as mundane as a concern about upcoming dental work [we might recall *My Name Is Lucy Barton* and *Olive Kitteridge*], or as serious as worrying about the safety of my child—and to transpose that emotion into a character. This will give the scene life, as opposed to having it wooden. I am a very messy worker—I push these scenes around our table. It is a big table, and over time I realise which scenes are connected. I have never written anything from beginning to end, not a story or a novel. I just collect different scenes, and the ones that aren't any good to me, get slipped on to the floor and eventually into the wastebasket. (There are many of those.)

Of the nuts and bolts of writing, the process, Strout said to Joe Fassler in *The Atlantic*, My favorite time to work is first thing in the morning. There's a quietness then. The longer we spend in the real world during the day, the further away that imaginary world becomes. For me, the imaginary world is more accessible when I can get to it without having had too many interactions. In the afternoon, it's harder because you've been living in the real world longer. I try and write first thing in the morning, all the way until lunch. I'll put lunchtime off as long as I can—maybe to 1:30 or 2:00 p.m., until I start to pass out from hunger. There's something about having lunch—even if it's just a simple lunch, which it always is—that breaks up the pattern for me. I've just learned that it does, so I'll put it off as long as I can.

Revising is integral to her process as well. In her interview with Vorwald, Strout noted that before the scenes she's written are

actually connecting or before that has solidified enough, there's a stretch of time where I feel like a washing machine where all the soap is coming out the doors. I feel like, "Oh, oh, oh dear, oh dear." I just feel like I'm out of control of it, that I'll never be able to pull it together in a structure that's needed. And that can last for months, and that's a difficult period because it makes me feel crazy with anxiety. . . . I do eventually get it sorted out, even though every single time it feels like I won't. Every time, at that particular phase of it, I think, "Ugh, this isn't going to happen." But then it does.

Thankfully, Strout is successful, and her routine works to bring clarity and joy to her readers. To Sally Campbell and Martha Green-grass, Strout observed, "I do write so that people will feel less alone. But I would go further than Lucy [Barton]: I write so that people can also see others, can understand hopefully—even briefly—what it means to be another person, and this can make them more empathic. This is my hope."¹⁵ In the hands of Strout, such a humble hope becomes something transcendent—part calling, part salve—an act of faith.¹⁶