

BOOK CLUB KIT



“This was a fantastic book club pick, as those who are both mothers and daughters and those who are just daughters were able to provide a thought-provoking discussion on what the affliction was that impacted this secretive community.”

—POSITIVELY MAD READERS BOOK CLUB



An Interview with Alexis Schaitkin

How did you come up with the idea for *Elsewhere*?

I wanted to write a novel about motherhood, but I was also so tired of mothering all day that the notion of writing about it too was painful. I wanted to give myself the freedom to explore more essential and mysterious aspects of motherhood: the experience of loving someone so much, how euphoric and also how dangerous it can feel. The timeless questions motherhood raises: How much should you let yourself lose yourself in this role? How much of yourself should you hold back from your child to maintain some separate identity? How do you live with the inevitable truth that you will harm your child, some way, somehow, no matter how fiercely you love them?

And somehow the idea came to me that the dark, terrible thing this town lives with, its “affliction,” is that mothers disappear. Every so often, the community wakes up in the morning and a mother is simply gone, vanished. And they believe there is a logic to this affliction, that the women who disappear are chosen because there is something out of balance in the nature of their love for their children.

This is a novel about how becoming a mother transforms—at once deepens and threatens—a woman’s identity. It’s about self-revelation. But it’s also about community, about group identity, and the allure and danger of losing yourself in something much larger than yourself.

Elsewhere is much more of a speculative novel than your previous book, *Saint X*. What made you decide to move into this genre?

I knew I was diving into a story that was very different from *Saint X*, moving from “thriller” to “speculative.” But while these books may be categorized in different genres, I think there’s so much that connects them. *Saint X* revolves around a girl’s mysterious death. *Elsewhere* revolves around the mysterious disappearance of mothers. Both books present as mysteries from the start, but as readers immerse themselves in the story, my hope is that they realize the stakes are less about solving the mystery than about seeing how these characters live with it. How do we live alongside something that we will never understand? How do we know who we are, how do we live and how do we love, when some of the most fundamental parts of ourselves—things we think we need—are unknown to us, and always will be? I like to think these books are part of their own little invented genre. They’re inverted mysteries, almost.

You paint a vivid depiction of the fictional town in which Vera lives. What inspired this unique setting? And how did you go about building this world?

Fifteen years ago, I was traveling alone—I don’t even want to say where I was, because the town in *Elsewhere* isn’t meant to be set in any real part of our world. For a few nights, I stayed at a guesthouse in the mountains, set on the grounds of what had once been a small

boarding school. It was like something out of a storybook: ivy growing over everything, thick moss on the rooftops, stone passageways. Every day as afternoon drew to a close, clouds settled in and just filled the air. I have this distinct memory of sitting in the library, on this sofa that was damp because everything there was damp, always, and the doors had been left open and I could see the clouds flowing right into the room.

I remember taking photographs while I was there, but this was before we all uploaded every picture to social media, and those pictures are lost now. Which is ironic, because photography is a major motif in *Elsewhere*. The town is a creation inspired by long-ago memories.

I wrote the first draft of *Elsewhere* during the early months of the pandemic, when we were locked down at home with our toddler. I was writing while my husband cared for our son, and my desk is in the hallway, so I could hear the laughing, the crying, the snacks, everything. To shut that all out and get myself into the headspace to evoke this town, I listened to the same song every morning when I sat down to write: Bedrich Smetana's "The Moldau." It's just this gorgeous, moody piece, and I never grew tired of it. It was my way of transporting myself to the town.

One could say that *Elsewhere* is as much about mother-child relationships as it is about women's self-identities. How did your own mother-child relationships impact your telling of this story?

There aren't any characters in *Elsewhere* who are very much like my mother or me or my children, yet the power and intimacy of those relationships are the heart of this story.

The early months of the pandemic were so challenging, but they also heightened and intensified my relationship with my son right when I was in the throes of writing *Elsewhere*. Whenever I wasn't writing, I was with my son. We spent hours alone together, often in the woods, nobody else in sight. By the end of the day, I could hardly say where I ended and he began. It felt like we became something together that was... not more than the sum of our parts, but different; our relationship was like this strange creature that was neither of ours to control. All of this reminded me of my relationship with my own mother when I was a young girl, that tangled, all-encompassing connection between a parent and a young child.

I had started *Elsewhere* before the pandemic, but until those locked-down months, I was still searching for the heart of the story. I found it in the woods with my son. It's the strangeness and singularity of every parent-child bond, the secret world you inhabit together, a world nobody else can understand, and the way the ecstasy of inhabiting that world lives alongside this constant questioning: Is this love I'm giving my child good? Is it right, is it balanced?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you believe the author intends the affliction to represent?
2. Do you have any theories as to why the affliction may have started in the first place?
3. The people of the town speculate as to why certain mothers may have disappeared. Why did the mothers disappear? Was there a common bond amongst them?

Submitted by Read Spin Repeat Book Club

4. What notions of motherhood does this book challenge? Does it challenge any of your own views on motherhood?
5. “Was I the way I was because I had a mother, or because I didn’t?” Discuss Vera’s comment and how her thought influenced her decision to leave the community.

Submitted by book club (Vancouver, BC)

6. When did you first realize Ruth’s true identity?
7. Was the way in which Vera “disappeared” an anomaly specific to her family, or do you think all mothers from the town go missing in this way?
8. What do the childless women in the town represent? What is their place in the town? In the story? What questions does this book provoke about women who lie outside a given norm?
9. Why do you think Vera sees the town differently upon her return? Is the town’s true beauty hidden from her now, or was she blind to its ugliness in the beginning?
10. Mr. Philips says he wonders whether the town exists “because we require it.” What does he mean by this, and is it true?



We lurked at the edge of the skinfruit grove when they gathered the fruits in their baskets and pulled down the spent vines. Sometimes a mother split one of the black fruits open and ate it right there, sucking out the red membrane and cracking the white teardrop seeds with her teeth. The mothers said the fruit was like nothing else. I tried to imagine it, but I couldn't; my mind doubled back on itself when it tried to think up a taste it had never tasted.

SKINFRUIT TART

Yield: One 8-inch tart

Crust:

Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees.

Crush the vanilla wafers in a food processor until very fine; if you do not have a food processor, place the wafers in a zip-top bag and crush them.

Add the ground ginger and mix.

Melt the butter and add to the crumb mixture. Mix until it becomes a sand-like consistency.

Grease an 8-inch pan with pan spray, oil, or butter. Press the mixture down on the bottom and sides of the greased pan.

Bake for 15 minutes.

Filling:

Slowly heat up the half-and-half in a sauce pan.

In a bowl, combine the sugars and egg yolks.

Once the half-and-half begins to simmer, temper the egg mixture by slowly adding the half-and-half to the egg mixture and whisking constantly.

Pour the half-and-half/egg mixture back into the sauce pan and cook on medium heat until the filling thickens and can coat the back of a spoon.

Remove from heat and add the vanilla and lemon zest.

Cool in fridge until ready to assemble.

Assembly:

Spread the filling into the cooled crust.

Use skinfruit wedges to decorate the top of the tart.

Ingredients

Crust:

2 cups vanilla wafers
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
6 tablespoons butter

Filling:

1 ½ cups half-and-half
2 tablespoons brown sugar
2 tablespoons white sugar
1 egg
3 egg yolks
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
Zest of half a lemon

Topping:

3 large skinfruits*
peeled, sliced into 3-inch wedges

*If skinfruits are not in season, substitute with blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, peaches, and/or kiwis. **See photo.**



THE TOWN OF

ELSEWHERE

BY ALEXIS SCHATKIN

THE GRAUBACH

THE SKINFRUIT GROVE

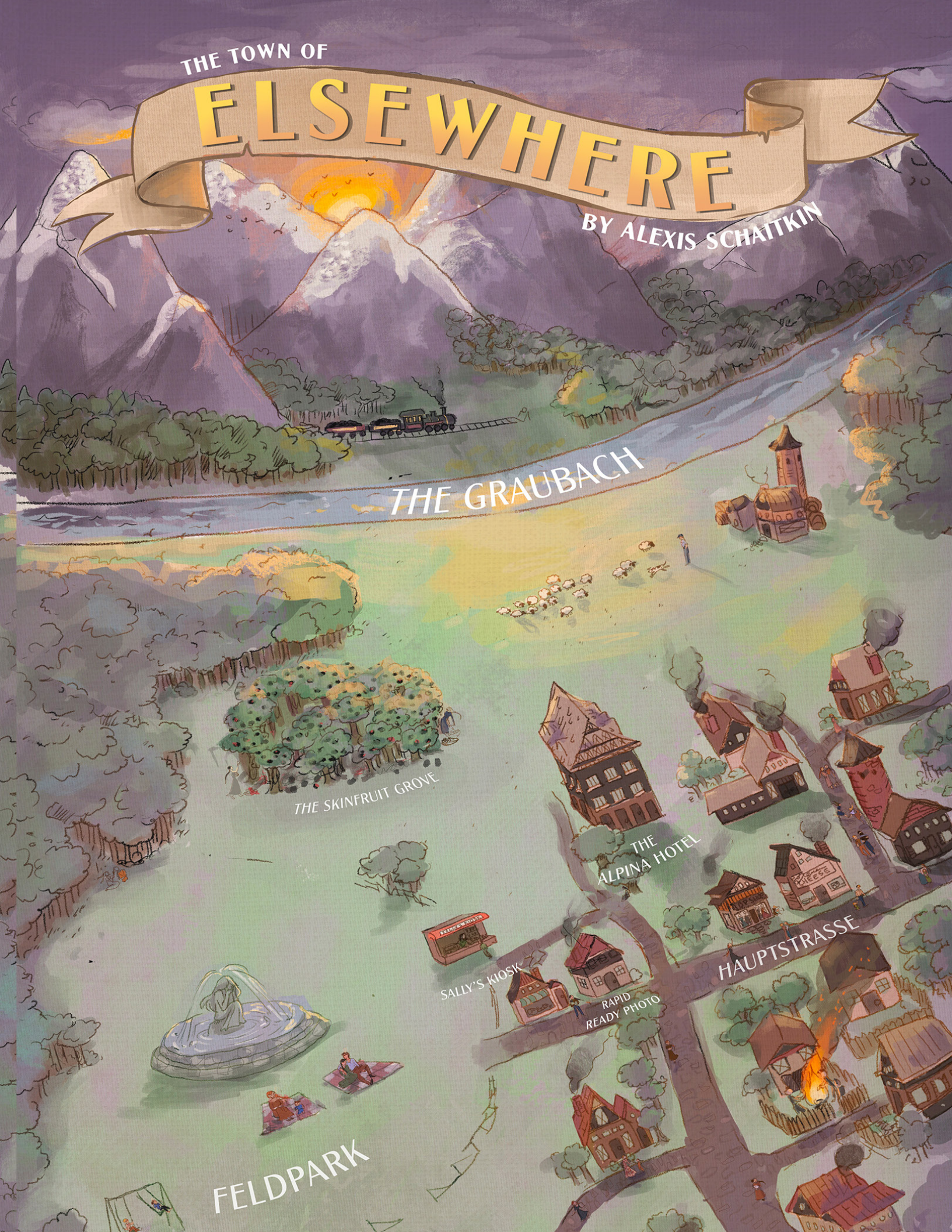
THE ALPINA HOTEL

SALLY'S KIOSK

RAPID
READY PHOTO

HAUPTSTRASSE

FELDPARK





If you decide to adopt *Elsewhere* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at reader@celadonbooks.com or post on social media using the hashtags **#CeladonBookClub** and **#ElsewhereBook**.

Thank you for your consideration.

Your friends at Celadon Books

