FEBRUARY 2016
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Station Eleven
By Emily St. John Mandel
Recommended by guest reader
Katherine Govier
“Here in the present, we play — we play musical instruments at refugee camps. We put on plays in war zones. Immediately following the Second World War, there was a fashion show in Paris. There’s something about art, I think, that can remind us of our humanity.

—Emily St. John Mandel, June 2015 interview with NPR

Set upon the moment of civilization’s collapse, Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel is the spellbinding story of a Hollywood star, a child actor grown up, one would-be saviour, and a traveling troupe of performers who roam the Great Lakes on a mission to bring art to any remaining survivors.

Katherine Govier, award winning author, leads a conversation on her book club selection, Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel. Through Govier’s insights, the book club will explore a future world devastated by illness, the resilience of human nature and the beautiful landscapes of Station Eleven. Through the gentle writing of St. John Mandel and reflection of Govier, you’ll come to see how art allows us to express who we are; who we want to be; what we hope for; and unfortunately there are far too many persecuted for sharing these important truths.

In this guide, you will also meet several individuals who use their creativity to champion human rights. From Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and his provoking exhibits, Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque (better known as Zunar) whose cartoons have been deemed ‘detrimental to public order’, to Atena Farghadani whose drawing of politicians as animals has resulted in her imprisonment by the Iranian government.

Visit page 10 to take action and help to ensure that Atena’s conviction and sentence are quashed. Prior to a second trial on the charge of “illegitimate sexual relations,” Atena experienced coerced “virginity testing,” which is an internationally recognized form of violence and discrimination against women and girls. She now faces sexual slurs and other insults by both prison officials and guards. Help us call for her immediate and unconditional release.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. If you have any questions, suggestions or comments, we’d love to hear from you. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

—The Book Club Team

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person’s voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.
About this month’s guest reader,

Katherine Govier

Katherine Govier’s newest novel, *The Three Sisters Bar and Hotel*, is a groundbreaking portrait of western Canada’s past, with all its contradictions and complexities, an intimate story of romance and family, and a tantalizing historical mystery. Katherine’s novel *Creation*, about John James Audubon, was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. She has won the Marian Engel Award and the Toronto Book Award, and has twice been nominated for Ontario’s Trillium Book Award. The author of twelve books, Katherine has been instrumental in establishing two innovative writing programs, Writers in Electronic Residence and The Shoe Project, which works to improve the written and spoken English of immigrant women. Katherine divides her time between Toronto and Canmore, Alberta, in the Rocky Mountains. *The Three Sisters Bar and Hotel* will be available March 1st, 2016.

About this month’s author,

Emily St. John Mandel

Emily St. John Mandel was born and raised on the west coast of British Columbia. She studied dance at The School of Toronto Dance Theatre and lived briefly in Montreal before relocating to New York.

Her previous novels are *The Lola Quartet*, which was the #1 Indie Next pick for May 2012; *Last Night in Montreal* (a June 2009 Indie Next pick and a finalist for *ForeWord Magazine’s* 2009 Book of the Year); and *The Singer’s Gun* (winner of an Indie Bookseller’s Choice Award, #1 Indie Next pick for May 2010, long-listed for both The Morning News’ 2011 Tournament of Books and the 2011 Spinetingler Awards.)

She is a staff writer for *The Millions*. Her essays and short stories have been included in numerous anthologies, including *The Best American Mystery Stories 2013*. She is married and lives in Brooklyn.
Here is a novel set in an apocalyptic future which is in truth a nostalgic love song for the world we live in today. The Georgian flu, viciously contagious, arrives in Toronto from Russia during a performance of King Lear. Within weeks most people are dead, and the others are walking the highways, their cars stalled bumper to bumper, their broadcasting and internet sources gone silent, food scarce, doctors non-existent, armed and in terror.

But this is not Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, wonderful yet unbearable to read, which keeps you stiff with fear. We are not there, dodging and hiding and starving and cold, having to kill or be killed. At least not most of the time.

Emily St. John Mandel has a lot of fun with post-collapse North America. A quarantined airport brings a lump to the throat, holding as it does all the comforts of home. A twenty-year-old corporate board document is a primer for bad grammar and clichés, gleefully pored over by survivors. “Did you ever use the phrase ‘in the mix’?” “I don’t think so. No. I wouldn’t have.” “Circle back”, ‘high-functioning’, ‘reach out’, and ‘thx’, have all also gone in the contagion.

I am not generally a fan of speculative fiction; I don’t read science-fiction and I like to settle my nostalgia on the past. But I loved this novel, its intricate time changes, its tangle of connected and half-connected individuals who found themselves together in one theatrical pre-collapse moment, and the way they survive a plague wiping out civilization as we know it.

Station Eleven is a warm novel. It eulogizes all the things I love too: theatre, classical music, newspapers, and books. It finds the earth—where the night stars are brilliant because cities are dark, and fields of ivy green the highways—a beautiful place. There are owls in it. Because although humanity has barely survived, all our depredations are being reversed and the earth itself seems to be doing rather well. Two decades have gone by and most of the killing has stopped. People have time on their hands. They know right from wrong. They have made friends and chosen allies and struggle to make the best of things. This is not about the collapse, but about the rebuilding. It is an optimistic book.

What comes first? What matters? What has lasted? What do we not regret? Celebrity, it seems. What about history? Should children be taught about the world as it was before, or does it just make them angry? Airplanes, electricity, guns—we consider the merits of each.

We hope for our survivors, especially as they come in to contact with the mysterious prophet who has a habit of nabbing young girls for extra wives. (Some things never change.) We admire their courage, and the way they have learned to throw knives. Their patchy memories reveal secret connections that even now, even this long after, seem to matter.

It’s very clever, the way all the pieces come together in Station Eleven. And more than clever, it is beautifully written, and sometimes funny, and certainly sad but not, perhaps, tragic. It is a look at a desperate future and beyond it, to something new. A wonderful read.

—Katherine Govier

“Emily St. John Mandel has a lot of fun with post-collapse North America.... This is not about the collapse, but about the rebuilding.”
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM KATHERINE GOVIER

1. Why do you think the novel begins with a performance of King Lear? What do you think about the significance of Shakespeare, and King Lear in particular—the play, the character? Is it realistic that in a time of global collapse performing the language and poetry of The Bard, and revisiting this character in particular, would come to feel necessary, and if so, why?

2. The lead caravan for the Travelling Symphony carries this line of text: *Because survival is insufficient.* It is a quotation from *Star Trek: Voyager,* the television series. What do you think it means in the context of the book? In the context of Canada?

3. The time frame of the novel is complex, and moves between some years before the start of the collapse, to twenty years after it. Why do you think Emily St. John Mandel does this? What is the effect on you, the reader?

4. Kirsten and August break in to old houses that have been abandoned. Jackson says he doesn’t know how they can stand it. The answer to this is very moving: “We stand it because we were younger than you were when everything ended, Kirsten thought, but not young enough to remember nothing at all. Because there isn’t much time left, because all the roofs are collapsing now and soon none of the old buildings will be safe. Because we are always looking for the former world, before all the traces of the former world are gone.” (p.130)

Again, it is a question of timing. What do they get out of searching abandoned buildings, aside from a few material goods they can use, like a flute mouthpiece?

5. The novel is full of references to starships, airships, planes—and the Museum of Civilization is in an airport. Why are the characters so nostalgic for flight? Why are planes so important? Do they stand for something more than travel?

6. What would you miss most in a collapsed world? The novel mentions cars, air conditioning, the safety of one’s home, being able to stay in one place. Can we even imagine a time when such things have disappeared? Do we need to imagine this? Does it tell us something about today?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM AMNESTY

1. How did you enjoy the book? As the story weaves between time, perspective and place, who or what did you find most compelling and why?

2. If you were going to give a performance in a post-apocalyptic world, what would it be?

3. If “survival is insufficient,” as it says on the lead caravan of the Travelling Symphony, what do you feel makes life sufficient enough to live?

4. At times, Kirsten feels as if the previous world was a dream. She mistrusts her memories, and wonders whether things like light in the refrigerator were actually real; yet she keeps on flipping switches in homes and trying to connect to the past. Why does it matter that we remember our past?

5. The Symphony carries “Shakespeare, weapons and music.” We do not typically imagine art to be combative, and yet these travelers must defend their right to perform and inspire others. Why is the expression and sharing of art worth protecting? Is art in itself a weapon?

4. This month’s Amnesty action features artists who have, with their drawings, songs and more, defied government and/or societal pressure to remain subversive. Can you think of a moment where a song, performance, image or book inspired you—and perhaps even challenged you to take action?
There are moments of true beauty in *Station Eleven*, despite the devastation and violence of a society unravelled. For the Travelling Symphony, survival is insufficient – there must be more to life. Through their performances, they bring humanity and collaboration.

Emily St. John Mandel weaves a story about a collection of people who have found a common cause, who are inspired and motivated by one another, and who choose to continue their travelling performances despite the risk of life on the road.

The performers in *Station Eleven* are prepared to take this risk. They have made a choice. And in their wake, they leave a small piece of the world changed.

“There was a hush come over the assembled crowd. The conductor stepped forward in the stillness, smiled at the audience and bowed, turned without a word to face the musicians and the bay. A seagull glided overhead. The conductor raised her baton.” (p. 247)

“The afternoon Garrett hummed a Brandenburg concerto while he worked in the gardens, Dolores whispered fragments of Shakespeare to herself while she swept the concourse floors, the children practised swordplay with sticks. Clark retreated to the museum. He ran a feather duster over his objects and thought of the Symphony moving away down the coast, carrying their Shakespeare and their weapons and music.” (p. 303)

The Travelling Symphony dares to remind people of their humanity. They accept the dangers. *Station Eleven* may be a work of fiction, but in reality many courageous musicians, writers, artists and creators face these risks every day, and still continue with their work.
My pen has a stand

Meet Malaysian Cartoonist Zuikiflee Anwar Ulhaque, better known by his pen name Zunar.

Malaysian police and authorities have claimed on several occasions that Zunar’s cartoons are “detrimental to public order” and run afoul of the country’s draconian sedition law. He is now facing nine charges under Malaysia’s Sedition Act – a colonial-era law the government is using to harass and silence critics. Zunar considers laughter an important form of public protest. He is noted for saying, “How can I be neutral? Even my pen has a stand.”

Amnesty International has long expressed concerns about the sedition law in Malaysia, which criminalizes a wide array of acts. The law does not comply with international human rights law, and in particular violates the right to freedom of expression.

“Never retreat. Retweet!”

Internationally recognized Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has been a brave and unrelenting critic of the Chinese government, and has done so at great personal cost.

One of his exhibits includes a list of the names of each of the more than 5,000 schoolchildren who died during the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 as a result of the poor construction of schools. In the days following the Sichuan earthquake the Chinese authorities refused to acknowledge the names or the number of victims.

“Everything is art. Everything is politics.”
— Ai Weiwei

In 2011, Ai Weiwei was jailed without charge for 81 days for “economic crimes.” His detention was largely viewed as a message from the authorities that those who speak out risk punishment including detention and long term prison sentences. Ai Weiwei remains in China and cannot travel without official permission. The restrictions on his freedom of movement are all too common for activists, dissidents and even lawyers in China.
We can be heroes

Music has been a compelling source of inspiration for political and social movements.

Musicians around the world face censorship, exile, disappearances and torture for their music and lyrics, which can become anthems for social movements.

David Bowie reminded us of the role of art when it comes to breaking down walls, challenging stereotypes and building community. His song “Heroes” was recorded in West Berlin in 1977, a few months after East German border guards shot and killed an 18-year-old trying to cross into West Berlin. The song is remembered as an anthem of optimism and defiance, capturing the hopelessness and desperation of a city divided.

Ten years later, in 1987, Bowie performed in a three day Concert for Berlin, held on the western side of the Berlin Wall but loud enough that people in East Germany could hear.

Bowie has said it was one of the most emotional performances he had ever done.

“And there were thousands on the other side that had come close to the wall. So it was like a double concert where the wall was the division. And we would hear them cheering and singing along from the other side. God, even now I get choked up. It was breaking my heart. I’d never done anything like that in my life, and I guess I never will again. When we did “Heroes” it really felt anthemic, almost like a prayer.” — From The Complete David Bowie by Nicholas Pegg

On the final day of the concert, East German authorities violently attacked and arrested young people who had gathered near the wall to listen to the concert. Many people believe that the violent police crackdown was a critical turning point in the falling of the Berlin Wall. East German authorities, by overreacting, had turned the gathering of concert listeners — people who just wanted to hear music — into a subversive political act.
Athena the artist

In June 2015, satirical cartoonist Atena Farghadani was sentenced to 12 years and nine months in prison for multiple offences, including insulting Iran’s MPs and its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, after publishing a series of satirical cartoons depicting legislators as monkeys, cows and other animals.

The cartoon was in protest of a bill that seeks to criminalize voluntary sterilization and restrict access to contraception and family planning services.

Atena’s trial lasted just half an hour. The “evidence” against her relied on Atena’s answers under long stretches of interrogation, while she was held in solitary confinement without access to a lawyer or her family.

In August 2015, Atena reported that she was forced to undergo a “virginity and pregnancy test,” prior to her trial on the charge of “illegitimate sexual relations” for shaking hands with her male lawyer. Coerced “virginity testing” is internationally recognized as a form of violence and discrimination against women and girls.
While in prison, Atena Farghadani has been verbally abused with sexual slurs and other insults by both prison officials and guards. Her lawyer was also arrested for the hand-shaking “offense”, but released when he paid a bail amounting to around $60,000.

Amnesty International believes the charges are politically motivated and are a blatant attempt by the Iranian authorities to harass Atena and hinder her lawyer’s work to represent her.

Call on the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Head of the Judiciary to:

- Release Atena Farghadani immediately and unconditionally as she is a prisoner of conscience.
- Ensure that Atena’s conviction and sentence are quashed.
- Not punish citizens for expressing their right to free speech, including through artistic activities, as they are protected by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a signatory.

On line action: bit.ly/HelpAtena

*This online action will not remain active indefinitely. For a list of all current online actions please visit Amnesty.ca

Write to:

Head of the Judiciary
Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani
c/o Public Relations Office
Vali Asr Avenue, Above Pasteur Intersection
Azizi 2 Street, Number 4
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Leader of the Islamic Republic
Ayatollah Sayed ‘Ali Khamenei
The Office of the Supreme Leader
Islamic Republic Street –
End of Shahid Keshvar Doust Street
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
To celebrate International Women’s Day, the Amnesty International Book Club is thrilled to announce our March 2016 novel, which showcases a strong female protagonist and takes the reader on a journey to early pioneer days. A fictional story based upon the real history of Charlotte Taylor, you will encounter not only her struggles, but her triumphs and strengths.


Through our March selection, you will live in the front row of history. In 1775, at the young age of twenty, Charlotte flees her English country house and boards a ship to Jamaica with her lover, the family’s black butler. Soon after reaching shore, Charlotte’s lover dies of yellow fever, leaving her alone and pregnant in Jamaica.

Using a seamless blend of fact and fiction, Charlotte Taylor’s great-great-great-granddaughter, Sally Armstrong, reclaims the life of a dauntless and unusual woman and delivers living history with all the drama and sweep of a novel.

The discussion guide will be sent out in early March.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca.