

## Elizabeth Strout humanizes place and characters

by Anndee Hochman

A childhood piano teacher taught Elizabeth Strout the difference between notes and music. He was old and strict, a taskmaster who demanded technical proficiency. “It was quite grueling,” she recalls. “But I really respected him. He’d say, ‘Can’t you hear it? Hear it!’ He was getting me to play music, not just notes.”

Strout, author of several novels and a Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of stories, says she transferred that discipline from one keyboard to another. In prose, she aims to “get it right”—a phrase that captures both her commitment to craft and her fearless rendering of human nature.

She will be the featured reader at this year’s People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos benefit, to be held Friday, April 11 at the Nassau Club in Princeton.

Strout, 58, grew up in small towns in Maine and New Hampshire. Her parents didn’t believe in television, but they were enthusiastic about books. She recalls her mother talking about *To Kill a Mockingbird* when it was published in 1960; by the time Strout reached high school, she had read Updike, Salinger and Hemingway. “My childhood was very isolated—a bad thing for a child, but a good thing for a writer,” Strout said recently. “Reading was essential to me. It connected me to the world.”

At the same time, she began to write—at first, in notebooks her mother gave her with the suggestion to “write down what you did today.” She published her first story at the age of 26. In addition to *Olive Kitteridge*, the collection of linked stories that won the Pulitzer, she is the author of novels *Amy and Isabelle*, *Abide with Me* and her newest, *The Burgess Boys*.

Strout “animates the ordinary with an astonishing force,” *The New Yorker* wrote on the publication of *Olive Kitteridge*, which has become a popular book club choice. The *San Francisco Chronicle* praised Strout’s “magnificent gift for humanizing characters.” Her work is suffused with details of place: the rocky coast of Maine; the jammed and buzzing sidewalks of Manhattan, where she has made her home for more than thirty years. And true to her rigorous musical education, Strout aims to end her stories with “a sound...something that’s been traveling throughout the story.”

“I like to see some kind of change take place in a story,” she says. “It can be a tiny shift or a large event that opens up a different door. The ending is not necessarily as an escape or road that leads someplace, but a way of seeing something differently.”

Readers have, at times, taken issue with the opinions of Strout’s characters; one woman at a reading was angry because a story contained what she thought were anti-Semitic views. But Strout says it is the task of literature to describe the whole range of human experience, not only the aspects that are socially acceptable.

“I’ve always thought literature is the place we go to find out the things we’re not saying in ordinary civilized society,” she says. “That’s why it’s important for writers to be truthful. Where else are we going to go to find out what the human experience is like for someone else? It’s the job of literature to provide a safe place for all those different responses to life to be spoken.”

“Writers need to show people at their most naked; that would include their best and their worst. It doesn’t do anybody good to pretend that we’re not who we are.”

*The People & Stories benefit featuring Elizabeth Strout is open to the public. Invite your colleagues, neighbors and members of your book club! Details at [www.peopleandstories.org](http://www.peopleandstories.org).*

## Transforming parents and kids at Christina Seix

The story may be 120 years old, but it felt achingly familiar to one contemporary reader, the single mother of a student at a Trenton-area private school.

In “The Story of an Hour,” written in 1894 by Kate Chopin, a woman reacts with both grief and secret gladness after learning that her husband has been killed in a train accident. When she finds out, at the story’s end, that the news was an error and that her husband is actually alive, she dies of a heart attack—what her doctors, ironically, term “joy that kills.”

Chopin describes Mrs. Mallard’s retreat to her bedroom after she first hears news of the train crash: “When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: ‘free, free, free!’ ... She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her.”

Myriam felt close to the protagonist’s struggle. “In certain parts of this story, I can fill in my own life. I was married for ten years, and I didn’t begin to live for myself until well after our separation. It was like a breath of fresh air, like a weight was lifted off.”

Across the table, Chris, a teacher at Princeton Day School, nodded in understanding. “This is so long ago,” she said, indicating Chopin’s work, “but this is my mother’s story. She’s 83. My dad died a couple of years ago. She misses him terribly, and she loved him. But she’s free.”

“It was inconceivable to think a woman could be joyful that her husband was dead,” said Tarshia, who also teaches at Princeton Day School. “But in the story, she started to visualize her future, the possibilities.”

On a frosty Saturday morning, in a conference room at the Christina Seix Academy, Chopin’s story was the catalyst for a discussion that brought together parents of children at Christina Seix, administrators from the school and teachers from Princeton Day. The Crossing Borders program, along with a Gente y Cuentos program for Spanish-speaking parents, has

become a Saturday-morning fixture at Christina Seix, where the mission is to transform families as well as children.

The school, started by Christina Seix, former investment manager and daughter of a single, Puerto-Rican-born mother, enrolls children in single-caregiver households (which may include single moms, dads, grandparents or other relatives); every child receives a \$40,000 annual scholarship to cover tuition uniforms, books and transportation. Families pay a nominal amount based on their resources. And the school’s Irma Rivera Family Center, named for Seix’s mother, provides parents with advocacy and practical support (crafting a resume, applying for a driver’s license), English classes, leadership training and opportunities for community service.

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**“We wanted [CSA] parents to see that although they may not have read any literature in their lives, they could learn to love reading.”**

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“We hope that the experiences at the school are transformational for the families,” says Rossy Matos-Miranda, director of the family center. Through People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, “we wanted our parents to see that although they may not have read any literature in their lives, they could learn to love reading.”

Alma Concepción, who led the Gente y Cuentos group, watched that happen among a group of Spanish-speaking parents who had roots in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico and Puerto Rico. Some connected to a story by Junot Diaz, “Sin Cara” (“Without a Face”) because it described a coffee farm in the countryside. “All the participants had grown up in the countryside,” Concepción recalled. “One participant had grown coffee as a child, and he explained the process from seed to caring for the growth of the plants.”

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***“The one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision. So write and draw and build and play and dance and live as only you can.”***

--Neil Gaiman

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When the group read “La Señorita Fabiola,” by Julio Ramón Ribeyro, about a “very ugly woman who is a teacher, and who inspired the author to become a writer, the text evoked memories of learning to read and write in first grade. “One person said that the stories are sometimes funny, sometimes nostalgic and sometimes sad,” Concepción said. “Another said he liked the program because it helped him relax.”

And participants were stunned, during the last session, to learn the identity of a “mystery guest”—Jose Martí, author of “El De Soto de Rita Hayworth,” the story they had just read and discussed. At the end of the discussion, Concepción told readers that she had a surprise; she then introduced Martí. “They couldn’t believe he was the author. They said they never thought they would meet a writer,” she recalled.

At Christina Seix, 21 out of 89 families are learning English. Parents’ average age is between 20 and 30. For them, Gente y Cuentos offered a respite from the daily efforts to parent and provide. “It was about coming together to do something for yourself that you’d never had an opportunity to do,” said Matos-Miranda.

One woman in the Gente y Cuentos group had been raised in the U.S., with English as her first language; she came to the sessions hoping to get closer to her Spanish-language roots, but worried that she would not be able to follow the dialogue. “Initially she was a little quiet. But she started, little by little, to voice her opinion. In one session, she articulated perfectly a dissenting point of view,” Concepción recalled. “She recovered her Spanish language and was very proud.”

Other participants realized the richness of their experience, even if they lacked formal education, said Matos-Miranda. “Just because you have not gone to college doesn’t mean you can’t critically look at a piece of work and talk about how it connects to life.”

The Crossing Borders program brought another dimension, establishing common ground among parents from two different communities—Trenton and Princeton—who typically do not interact. In the conference room where Chopin’s story was on the table, it was impossible to tell who was connected to Christina Seix Academy and who came from Princeton Day School. The discussion bounced from grief to guilt,

from the irony of Chopin’s ending to the poetic associations of her title.

“I think we’ve all had an hour like that, an hour that changed our lives. A phone call or an incident. It could be changed for the good or the tragic,” Chris said. When Stephanie Hanzel, coordinator of the group, asked about the protagonist’s “possession of self-assertion” on learning of her husband’s death, Alison, 19, responded, “I think she’s saying that it doesn’t make sense for her to throw herself into love if she’s losing herself.”

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**“They said the most important thing was to be able to offer their children a better future.”**

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Readers brought a range of experiences and perspectives to the table. When Hanzel asked how the group imagined the lives of women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lakeshia said, “Sneaky. If you weren’t allowed to do anything, then it would have to be behind closed doors.” And Tarshia added that women of that time, in the years following the Civil War and emancipation, must have felt “frustrated” as they observed the lives of freed slaves. “They must have been wondering, ‘When’s our turn?’”

Both People & Stories and Gente y Cuentos will continue at Christina Seix, and several parents who participated in the first series plan to be trained as coordinators.

Concepción said she will remember the participant in Gente y Cuentos who said that he learned the meaning of words he had only heard, but never understood. She’ll remember the woman who observed that she’d learned to listen to other points of view. And she’ll recall all the parents who showed up on Saturday mornings, tired from the work week but eager to read, listen and connect.

“They talked a lot about their children. They said the most important thing was to be able to offer their children a better future, and they understood that was going to be through education.”

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***“The ability to have somebody to tell your story to is so important. It says, ‘I was here. I may be sold tomorrow. But you know I was here.’”***

--Maya Angelou

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# Numbers tell only one part of P & S accomplishments

by Patricia Andres

**“If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.”**

--Orson Welles

Our spring newsletter usually includes a review of the past year, typically with a theme that ties our activities together. *Program outcomes, organizational expansion, participant growth, evaluation strategies*—all among past themes—continue as points of focus for our work. Yet, as we grow, describing our diverse programs and activities with a single theme may sacrifice complexity for coherence.

So, in reviewing 2013, I want to address a number of aspects of our mission: to create access to enduring literature for those who have not yet experienced its beauty and power.

Why do we devote ourselves to this goal? Short stories with a poetic texture touch readers’ emotions and their intellects, carrying the potential to kick-start internal change. We have seen how participants begin to voice their ideas, examining their life stories in light of the literary story. As *People & Stories/ Gente y Cuentos* founder Sarah Hirschman wrote, participants become more likely to see themselves as change agents, as “more active and discerning members of a civil society.”

The “outputs” in the sidebar provide one measure. Since the core of our work is literature, I am happy that 96 stories were read in English and 49 in Spanish. Since we aim to boost access, I am thrilled that 1,022 people participated in our programs this year. Since we want to reach those who generally have not taken part in literature discussions before, I’m pleased to see that we connected with many marginalized and non-traditional groups—29 organizations in all, 16 of them correctional facilities.

While those numbers tell one story of what we’ve accomplished, I also appreciate the power of this quote, from a letter by a recent participant in one of our re-entry programs: “*I want you to know what you have done for me... you have re-taught me that reading and writing can change*

*people’s lives and bring them closer. You not only saved me from years of mental pain and suffering, but you showed me the power of words, poems and choices...I can’t thank you enough.”*

## 2013 Service Report

<b>Participants Served:</b>	<b>1,022</b>
<b>Sessions:</b>	<b>409</b>
<b>Hours of instruction:</b>	<b>622</b>
<b>Programs:</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Partner sites:</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>New partner sites:</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Coordinators:</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Books &amp; Certificates awarded:</b>	<b>675</b>
<b>Short Stories Read in English:</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Short Stories Read in Spanish:</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>English programs:</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Spanish programs:</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>“Crossing Borders” programs:</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>“Reading Literature/Writing our Stories” programs:</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Re-entry/Prison:</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Youth:</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Seniors:</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Community/Grassroots Groups (includes GyC, parents, recent immigrants etc.):</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Adults with Disabilities:</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Recovery:</b>	<b>2</b>

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***“Writing is an extreme privilege, but it’s also a gift. It’s a gift to yourself and it’s a gift of giving a story to someone.”***

--Amy Tan

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# Reading aslant through eyes of Camden youth

by Anndee Hochman

Where I saw éclairs, Anthony saw Twinkies.

There were eight of us—seven young men in navy jumpsuits, and me—around the table at the Camden Youth Center, a detention facility for teens in Blackwood, New Jersey. I'd just finished reading "Fat," by Raymond Carver; like all Carver stories, this one left a lot of guesswork between the minimalist lines. Why did the fat customer in the diner refer to himself as "we"? Why did the waitress linger over the fat man's sugar bowl, saying, "I know now I was after something"?

And why, on her first glimpse of the fat man, did she particularly notice his "long, thick, creamy fingers"? I read that a second time, letting my voice caress the adjectives. "What does that make you think of?" I asked the boys. To me, those words had always evoked a French bakery, poufy éclairs oozing with sweetened cream, an image that shows the fat man's appeal to the waitress along with his exceptional size—a glimpse of delicious abundance that may, by evening's end, change her life.

Anthony's response put an end to my Parisian reverie. "Twinkies," he said. "His fingers sound like Twinkies." Immediately I thought of Dan White and his famous "Twinkie defense" for the murder of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978. I pictured a man pale, swollen and unhealthy. I remembered my own college days, when I tried to assuage loneliness with chocolate-chip cookies and succeeded only in making myself sick. And for a moment, I glimpsed a bigger context for Carver's story: a tale of solitude, self-destruction and yearning.

Fingers like Twinkies. It was not the first time that a participant's response has made a story spin on its axis. It happened often at the Camden Youth Center, a program funded by the Subaru of America Foundation, where participants and I had such starkly different life experiences.

Week after week, the boys challenged my assumptions and taught me to read familiar stories in fresh ways.

For our first session, I chose "Thank You, M'am," Langston Hughes' accessible tale of an older woman and the young boy who attempts to steal her purse. The story begins, "She was a large woman with a large purse that held everything in it but a hammer and nails." I immediately pictured my grandmother, whose pocketbook, when I was a child, was a cavern of tissues, plastic rain bonnets, shoehorns, Roloids, hard butterscotch candies and crumpled dollar bills.

The boys had a different idea. "She might have a gun in there," Jaime said. "She knows how to take care of herself." Ping! I had a new take on the story's power dynamics: "Thank You, M'am" was an encounter between a woman who may appear vulnerable, but is in fact armed for disaster, and a boy whose attempt at petty theft masks his own powerlessness.

Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones—as she later introduces herself—started to seem a little dangerous, her character more complex than the tough-but-loving mother-figure I'd always imagined. This was a woman who, perhaps, had been on the receiving end of violence. This was a woman who knew too well the risks of walking alone in the city close to midnight.

The boys had words for Roger, too—the "frail and willow-wild" young man who gets no purse, but instead a hot meal and a life lesson, from his presumed victim. "He's a dirtball," said Joshua. "He probably doesn't have any parents, or his parents are in jail."

Joshua's word reminded me of the importance of perception and how much it rests on our own backgrounds and biases: some people might describe Joshua and his classmates at the Camden Youth Center as "dirtballs," or something even more derisive. Only prolonged contact—such as the evening Mrs. Jones spends with Roger, or the time each week when we read the same story through different eyes—can unpack such stereotypes, showing us new ways to see.

"Okay," I said, "so he's a dirtball. But what does Mrs. Jones see when she looks at him?"

"The little boy," Joshua said.

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***"No story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather we who read it are no longer the same interpreters."***

--George Eliot

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# Prison literacy sparked passion for board rep

Talking with Virginia Kerr

by Anndee Hochman

She had a law degree, she'd represented prisoners and she'd worked in a prison litigation clinic. But until Virginia Kerr volunteered with a literacy program at the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, she had never stepped inside a maximum-security facility.

New Jersey State Prison, one of the oldest in the country, "is truly medieval when you go in there: lots of locked doors, a huge atrium. The physical environment is very dramatic. What troubled me was that my legal education hadn't ever taken me into one of these [facilities]. Jail is the end of the line for a lot of people; I thought everyone should have this experience."

Kerr volunteered with ABC Prison Literacy, a Princeton group that, at the time, ran a program in which some prisoners were trained to tutor others. Kerr taught poetry, Shakespeare and other classes to the tutors as enrichment. Because there was little turnover among those serving long sentences, Kerr taught the poetry class as a comprehensive survey, beginning with ballads, moving through Shakespeare and ending with modern poetry; class members read and wrote.

"The prisoners produced some remarkable poems. There are some amazingly talented guys there. You're dealing with human beings who have made some hideous mistakes *and* who have all sorts of things to give, and want to give.

"It's something I think we always need to be reminded of: the humanity of all of us. Mistakes do not define the person. Crimes do not define the person."

While volunteering at the prison, Kerr met People & Stories executive director Patricia Andres and learned about the program from prisoners who had taken part. "I liked the basic idea of taking literature to people who might not otherwise be exposed to it, and to do it in a way where a particular level of literacy

wasn't required. You're reading stories out loud together, creating a common experience through literature without the entry barrier of the written word."

Last year, Kerr joined the People & Stories board. She continues to work as a litigating attorney; she also volunteers at the Mercer County Correctional Center, teaching poetry to women who are serving short sentences or awaiting trial.

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**"It's something I think we always need to be reminded of: the humanity of all of us. Mistakes do not define the person. Crimes do not define the person."**

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Kerr traces her passion for literacy—in particular, literacy among prisoners—to a 2005 film called *The Last Graduation: The Rise and Fall of College Programs in Prison*, about the last class of prisoners to receive federal Pell grants for higher education expenses. Her own interest in reading goes back further—to her childhood on an Indiana farm, where there were few distractions and plenty of books.

"I used to take a book and sit and read on the animals. I had a very fat Shetland pony; I could prop my book up on him," she recalled. Today, she often listens to audio books on an iPod, while driving or walking her dog; she's a fan of the *Game of Thrones* fantasy series and just finished *The Orphan Master's Son*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel set in North Korea.

Kerr recently completed a Crossing Borders series at Bo Robinson Assessment and Treatment Center in Trenton. "Human beings are storytellers," she says. "Those stories got heard and shared long before we were inundated with words on the page. People & Stories is taking us back to the essential thing we do: we tell stories. Stories connect us to one another. That's a very good thing."

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**"A story to me means a plot where there is some surprise. Because that is how life is—full of surprises."**

--Isaac Bashevis Singer

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April 11, 7:30 p.m.  
People & Stories benefit  
*an evening with writer  
Elizabeth Strout,  
author of Olive Kitteridge*

Nassau Club  
Princeton, NJ

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## On the Bookshelf...

*Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, by Gregory Boyle.  
New York: Free Press, 2010.  
by *Stephanie Hanzel Cohen*

Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest known lovingly by ex-gang members as “G-dog,” believes that “boundless compassion” for those on the margins can heal communities afflicted by poverty and injustice. In his heart-opening book (winner of the 2011 PEN Center USA Literary Award for Creative Nonfiction), Boyle, founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries, weaves stories, poetry and theology to show the human face of people caught in South Central Los Angeles’ gang culture.

Homeboy Industries, the country’s largest “gang-rehabilitation center,” offers training and employment in silk-screening, baking and landscaping. More importantly, the center brings together former rivals

who start to see one another’s humanity and work on a common goal.

Boyle’s inclusion of literary voices, from Rumi to Denise Levertov, points to his former years teaching “Theological Issues in American Short Fiction” at Folsom Prison. He also integrates theological voices, such as Pema Chödrön, an ordained Buddhist nun, to bolster his belief that “...it has been God’s joy to love you all along.”

As the director of a non-profit agency, Boyle understands the challenge of demonstrating measurable outcomes. “If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with those who give us good ones,” he writes. “If I’m true to myself, I just want to share my life with the poor, regardless of result.” His book will push readers to think critically about what the poor “must carry” and the reflexive judgment that makes their load even more burdensome.

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