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About Katherine Ashenburg



Katherine Ashenburg is the prize-winning author of two novels, four non-fiction books and hundreds of articles on subjects that range from travel to mourning customs to architecture. She describes herself as a lapsed Dickensian and as someone who has had a different career every decade. Her work life began with a Ph.D. dissertation about Dickens and Christmas, but she quickly left the academic world for successive careers at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a radio producer; at the Toronto newspaper *The Globe and Mail* as the arts and books editor; and most recently as a full-time writer.

Her first book, *Going to Town: Architectural Walking Tours in Southern Ontario*, won the Ontario Historical Society's award for best regional history. Her second book, *The Mourner's Dance: What We Do When People Die*, was a finalist for two important prizes. Her third book, *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History*, is a spirited chronicle of the West's ambivalent relationship with the washed and unwashed body. It has been published in a dozen countries and six languages. Recommended for 9- to 12-year-olds, *All the Dirt: A History of Getting Clean* was inspired by *The Dirt on Clean* and has been described approvingly as "a real stinker of a book." It was a finalist for several readers' choice awards and won two prizes.

Sofie & Cecilia, the story of two Swedish women who find their own way through the constraints of marriage and a traditional society, is Katherine's first novel. It was a popular and critical success.

And now comes *Her Turn*, to be published in the summer of 2021 in Canada and the U.S. Liz, a divorced newspaper editor, finds her tidy life overturned when the woman now married to Liz's ex-husband submits a personal essay to the column Liz edits. Wife #2 has no idea that she is sending her essay to Wife #1, and Liz decides to keep that a secret, with surprising results. Elizabeth Renzetti writes of it, "It is infused with the joyful spirit of Nora Ephron and lit with a charm all its own."

<https://ashenburg.com/biography/>

A 49th Shelf Interview

<https://49thshelf.com/Blog/2021/08/05/Her-Turn-A-Conversation-With-Katherine-Ashenburg>

Her Turn: A Conversation With Katherine Ashenburg

By Kerry Clare · August 5, 2021

Katherine Ashenburg's second novel, Her Turn, is out this week, a complex, funny and poignant portrayal of a woman at midlife.

49th Shelf: *I loved this smart, funny and very sly novel. I have a few theories about its literary foremothers, but I'd love to know your take. Who are the authors who inspired you to write a book like Her Turn?*

Katherine Ashenburg: In the 1990s, I had Liz's job at *The Globe and Mail*, editing the Facts & Arguments page, which gave pride of place at the top of the page to a personal essay. As happens with Liz, no one outside the *Globe* except my close friends and family knew who edited the page, and I would receive submissions from acquaintances and out-of-touch friends who had no idea they were submitting pieces to me. That, and the fact that strangers all over the country were writing to me about their hopes and fears, their love lives and more mundane things, made me think at the time that a woman with my job would be a perfect Carol Shields heroine. Shields would have done something brilliant with such a character. Little did I dream that I would go on to write novels, including one inspired by that very job.

I think as I wrote *Her Turn* I wanted to combine Shields' dry wit and a certain ironic distance from her characters with genuine affection for them—especially with the heroine, Liz. It was my editor, Lynn Henry, after the book was written, who first invoked the holy name of Nora Ephron in connection with *Her Turn*. In my dreams.

49th Shelf: *Her Turn is very specifically set in the autumn on 2015, when the reality of what might transpire in the US election the following year was beginning to suggest itself and everybody was already talking about Hillary Clinton. Why was this backdrop important to the book you were writing?*

KA: I have to back up from the election to discuss the choice of Washington, DC, as the location for the novel first. I thought, because there are some autobiographical elements in the novel, such as Liz's job, that I would feel more free if I took it outside Toronto. But I needed a big city with a national newspaper for the plot to work. I grew up in the US and am a dual citizen, and the big American city I know best is DC. I was an undergraduate and graduate student there, and although it is never named in the novel (just called "the paper"), the *Washington Post* is a national paper. So that's why Liz lives in DC. I also wanted the book to be as contemporary as possible, but I knew I couldn't cope with Trump as president—he would suck up all the oxygen. So I settled for 2015, when he and Hillary Clinton are running for their party's nomination. In a city as obviously obsessed with politics as Washington, it was obvious that the presidential race was going to be on everyone's mind, even that of the apolitical Liz. As a reader, I love the spirit of place in books and it was interesting for me to discover with *Her Turn* that having running comments on the election was a way to convey the spirit of DC. And in the case of Liz's continuing absorption in questions of infidelity, the Clintons' marriage was also on her mind.

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49th Shelf: *My favourite thing about Liz, your protagonist, is that she's already imperfect, and then throughout the course of the novel seems to evolve into a human wrecking ball. She makes so many mistakes and bad calls, and she knows what she's done wrong, but there are also a few key points where she stands up for herself in spite of all that. There's no gratuitous guilt or self-pity, and that was refreshing. Was it important to you that she wouldn't have to grovel? And was it tough to strike that balance?*

KA: I love the idea of Liz as a human wrecking ball! Definitely, when her ex-husband's current wife submits an essay to Liz, not knowing she is entrusting it to her predecessor, Liz's tidy life goes off the rails. She makes rash and sometimes inappropriate decisions in work and personal life, while at the same time she begins to grapple seriously with the questions of forgiveness and responsibility. So, in answer to your question, she doesn't feel self-pity, perhaps because she did that ten years ago when her divorce happened. I would say that she does begin to accept responsibility for her own current affair and her part in the end of her marriage, but you're right, she doesn't grovel. Maybe I should be telling you how I struck that balance, but I think it just arose naturally from my concept of Liz's character. It seems that when I write a character, at a certain point I have an instinct for how they would behave. So it seemed credible to me that Liz would move haltingly and sometimes erratically toward an understanding of what was keeping her stalled emotionally, and at the end to accept responsibility for her part in it. But grovelling didn't feel like Liz's style.

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49th Shelf: *What does it mean to you to be writing a novel set at a newspaper in the 21st century?*

KA: It was a lot of fun to relive my years at the *Globe*. A newsroom is filled with so many driven, obsessive characters that it helped the comic aspect of the book (and most novels set in newspapers are comic). But it also felt elegiac, even melancholy to write about a newspaper when the industry was and is clearly in decline.

49th Shelf: *What part of *Our Turn* (and scene, or character, or both?) are you most absolutely delighted by?*

KA: For some reason that it would probably be wise not to analyze too much, I enjoy the relationship between Liz and her university-age son Peter. He's a voice of reason in the novel, as he astutely and none too kindly points out the flaws in his mother's thinking and behaviour. He can be harsh, in the way of over-confident young men, but Liz can give as well as she gets. Few things are off-limits in their conversation, and I have to admit that their dialogue often amuses me.

Author Interview with Cece Scott

<https://www.cecescott.com/index.php/author-spotlights/item/125-cece-chats-with-katherine-ashenburg-author-of-her-turn>

CECE CHATS WITH KATHERINE ASHENBURG AUTHOR OF HER TURN
Written by Cece Scott

Cece chats with Katherine Ashenburg, whose newest book **HER TURN** is On Sale July 27th

"I do some of my best thinking on trains. I really need to get on more trains."

"Because I love reading so much it never occurred to me that I could actually write a book. I thought that process involved some kind of magical thing," says Katherine Ashenburg, whose newest book **Her Turn** comes out today. (Tuesday, July 27; Penguin Random House Canada).

In fact, Katherine's interview with cecescott.com was her first interview for **Her Turn**— which proves to you, Dear Readers, that you can always find out about the Hottest new book releases and the most exciting **breaking book news** by reading this blog!

An author, newspaper journalist, and an academic specializing in Dickens, Katherine's career has been a collection of ten-year tenures.

She was also a CBC radio producer for ten years and then the Globe and Mail books editor for – you guessed it - ten years.

"Until recently, I had a ten-year attention span as far as jobs go," Katherine says laughingly. "But what I loved about being the books editor was having a chance to have the couch in my office covered in books, along with the opportunity to make so many wonderful choices around the books that would be reviewed. We had so many more [newspaper] pages in those days which allowed us to review a greater number of books. That was a wonderful job."

Since leaving the Globe and Mail to freelance 20 years ago, and before the writing of her first book of fiction – **Sofie & Cecilia** - Katherine wrote four books of non-fiction, covering a gamut of topics from travel to mourning customs to architecture.

Her skills of observation and the valuable experience of having written over 100 articles for the preeminent **New York Times**, trained Katherine to not only look at things more closely, but also to describe them in lively and robust detail.

"I wrote a book about southern Ontario towns called **Going to Town: Architectural Walking Tours in Southern Ontario**, [which won the Ontario Historical Society's award for best regional history], and that helped me to be observant as well. I am also very fascinated by human psychology and what motivates people to do what they do," Katherine says.

Interesting observations that Katherine garnered in the research and writing of that book was the cross-stitched fealty to the English Crown that so many of Ontario's towns had in the naming of their streets: Queen Street; King Street, Princess Street. As well she found that so many of the towns were tiny little miniatures of larger societies.

"There would be Catholic sections or Presbyterian sections or Anglican sections in these small towns," Katherine says. "The country was carved out in miniature and I found that very interesting."

Another of Katherine's non-fiction books, one that will be explored in **Creative Aging Books & Ideas Free Virtual Event on Thursday, August 26th**, is **The Mourner's Dance: What We Do When People Die**. In this book, Katherine explores the traditions and rituals, the purpose and processes around the honouring and practicing of grief across a diverse spectrum of religions and cultures.

Although she had had vast experience in the newspaper world, and had written her thesis on Dickens, it had never occurred to Katherine to write a book of fiction until much later in her life. The idea for her first novel, **Sofie & Cecilia**, was a gift from her good friend, novelist Jane Urquhart. On a trip to Sweden to visit her daughter, Katherine became fascinated by Swedish painter Carl Larsson.

"When I visited Carl Larsson's house, I became enthralled not only with his work but also the work of his wife, Karin Bergöö Larsson, who became Sofie in the book," Katherine says. "The couple both attended the Royal Academy of Painting and had the same training, but when they got engaged Carl told Karin that once they were married, she wasn't allowed to paint, which spurred a whole other interest in the couple's relationship. I had never thought of writing a novel until Jane encouraged me to do so."

The embedded culture of the newsroom and Katherine's experience as the editor for the *Globe and Mail's* **Facts & Arguments** page is what inspired the narrative for Katherine's latest novel, **Her Turn**.

Set in the newsroom of a fictional Washington newspaper- one whose backdrop is modeled on Katherine's old alma mater - the main protagonist, Liz, literally has Katherine's old job.

"I would get submissions from people I knew when I was the **Facts & Arguments** editor, but they had no idea that they were sending their personal essays to me. A lot of times people sent things to me that could never be published because they were so revealing that they didn't want their name on the piece. I had to explain to them that the power of the column included having their name on the essay. As you can imagine, I got to read about all kinds of things that people were hiding. I was thinking about this whole situation when I was on a train one day and it gave me the idea for **Her Turn**. I do some of my best thinking on trains. I really need to get on more trains," Katherine says laughingly. "I used to say that the person behind columns like these could be a Carol Shield heroine because the whole country is coming to them with their problems."

Serendipitously, two ideas clicked for Katherine as she began the writing of **Her Turn**. A divorced woman comes to terms with the end of her marriage - and while doing her job as the anonymous 'Dear Editor' she receives a personal essay from her ex's new wife, (wife #2, Nicole), opining on the state of said marriage to Liz's ex.

"The newsroom is a place for so many eccentric characters; it is pretty easy to be comical about them," Katherine says.

And that is when the fun begins as things for Liz quickly devolve and she begins publishing provocative columns that are so concerning to readers that Liz is told by her boss that if she doesn't mute herself she is going to be reassigned to the religious beat, which is "akin to being sent to Siberia" within the newsroom culture.

"I thought I was writing a book about forgiveness but then my editor started talking about it as a romantic comedy and I came to like the idea," Katherine says laughingly. "There is a certain amount of comedy in the novel and I never knew there were so many sides to forgiveness."

As many of my loyal readers know, I am a huge fan of metaphors and phrases steeped in imagery and **Her Turn** does not disappoint.

“Nicole was like a dress skulking at the outmost edge of her closet. But since the arrival of Nicole’s submission, the dress was what Liz saw first thing in the morning when she opened the closet- it probably glowed in the dark.” (Page 51)

Or “Having Nicole settle down in her email was distressing but there was something illicit and exciting about it too. As if Liz wanted to know a kitten better and was bringing out a ball of yarn.” (Page 52)

Now that Katherine has broken the fear around writing in the fiction genre, she says that she can’t imagine anything more delightful.

“It took me until I was almost 73 years of age to figure that out,” she says. “No matter what a person looks like on the outside, we all have stories within us.”

Video Interviews

her turn katherine ashenburg



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Her Turn - SIGNED BOOKPLATE EDITION - TYPE Books



For fans of Nora Ephron and Jennifer Weiner, here is **Katherine Ashenburg's** witty, contemporary new novel ...

TYPE Books · Type Books · Jun 17, 2021

[www.youtube.com](#) > watch

Katherine Ashenburg: Her Turn - YouTube



Episode 185 visits with the absolutely delightful women's fiction author, **Katherine Ashenburg!** In this ...

YouTube · The Sample Chapter Podcast · Jul 20, 2021

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Book Review: Her Turn by Katherine Ashenburg - YouTube



My review of **Her Turn** by **Katherine Ashenburg**<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4040512488> ...

YouTube · Fraser Simons - Springboard Thought · Jul 27, 2021

A Kirkus Book Review

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/katherine-ashenburg/her-turn-ashenburg/>

A journalist and single mom unexpectedly connects with her ex-husband's new wife and begins a duplicitous friendship.

Liz, a journalist in her late 40s, has built a pretty amazing life out of the ashes her husband created years ago when he left her for another woman. She's moved on with her life, becoming the editor of a national newspaper column called "My Turn," in which regular people share their touching and hilarious personal stories. She has a healthy social life, goes on lots of dates, and maintains a close relationship with her college student son. On the outside, everything looks great...but secretly, Liz's life is a bit messy. She's sleeping with her married boss, Seamus, despite the fact that she still can't quite get over how her own husband betrayed her in a similar fashion. And then one day, she gets a "My Turn" submission from a familiar name—it's Nicole Szabo, otherwise known as her ex's current wife and the reason Liz's family was torn apart. Without revealing her identity, Liz corresponds with Nicole, making editorial changes while also slyly finding out details about Nicole's marriage (and even offering some advice). Liz knows that what she's doing with Nicole and Seamus is wrong, and she tries to fix things by buying tons of self-help books with titles like *Forgiveness Is a Gift You Give Yourself*. But books alone can't solve her problems, and Liz's inability to open up to the people in her life makes her push everyone away—including friends, potential romantic prospects, and her son. When Liz reaches a breaking point, can she truly put the past behind her so she can focus on the life in front of her? Ashenburg writes candidly about a complex character who's allowed to screw up in big ways. Liz is never shamed for wanting love, sex, or companionship, although she often goes about it the wrong way. None of the characters are written off as easy "bad guys," not even Liz's ex-husband or his new wife. Many of Liz's misadventures on her journey are comically cringeworthy, such as a visit to a "cuddle party" or the dates with a poet who won't stop talking about his bowels.

A look at betrayal and forgiveness that nicely balances humor and depth.

Other Reviews

<https://ashenburg.com/books/her-turn/>

Praise for Her Turn

"Hilarious, wise and humane, *Her Turn* follows one woman's twisting path through a maze of love and betrayal and forgiveness. It is infused with the joyful spirit of Nora Ephron and lit with a charm all its own." — Elizabeth Renzetti

Her Turn has received some strong advance reviews from Canada and the US, including a place in the lists of recommended books for summer reading in Maclean's (20 books you should read this summer), Chatelaine, CBC, The Globe and Mail and Reader's Digest.

A very positive review in Publisher's Weekly concludes, "Liz lands as a strong character with complex motivations and a believable personal evolution who transcends the often caricatured figure of the jilted ex-wife. With its fruitful examination of betrayal and forgiveness, Ashenburg's engrossing latest should appeal to fans of Nora Ephron."

From an equally positive review in Kirkus Reviews: "Ashenburg writes candidly about a complex character who's allowed to screw up in big ways. Liz is never shamed for wanting love, sex, or companionship, although she often goes about it the wrong way ... Many of Liz's misadventures on her journey are comically cringeworthy, such as a visit to a 'cuddle party' or the dates with a poet who won't stop talking about his bowels. A look at betrayal and forgiveness that nicely balances humor and depth."

From Booklist: "This portrait of a contemporary woman (set firmly in 2015) is a striking analysis of journalism, adultery, divorce, parenting teenagers, and caring for elderly parents; perfect for fans of Emma Straub."

Deborah Dundas, Books Editor of the Toronto Star, wrote "It's a book with something to say that's also a joy to read."

Brett Josef Grubisic praised *Her Turn* in the Toronto Star for its "accomplished breeziness" and Katherine's ability to "ratchet up the novel's farcical elements while simultaneously meditating on forgiveness and moral growth."

Author and journalist David Hayes wrote a nice, short rave: "I recently finished Katherine Ashenburg's novel, *Her Turn*, & highly recommend it. It has the breezy tone of chick lit but there the comparison ends. It's beautifully crafted & much deeper & more nuanced...."

Discussion Questions

(none published yet - please see generic Fiction questions below)

Fiction Discussion Questions

<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/when-no-discussion-guide-is-available-fiction>

These questions are meant to be used with works of fiction. It is likely that you won't get to all of them during your meeting. Choose the questions that you think are most appropriate to your group and the book you've read, and feel free to modify them any way you need to.

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not? Are you sorry/glad that you suggested it to the group (ask again after the discussion)?
2. Did you think the characters and their problems/decisions/relationships were believable or realistic? If not, was the author trying to make them realistic, and why did he or she fail? Did the male/female author draw realistic male and female characters? Which character could you relate to best and why? Talk about the secondary characters. Were they important to the story? Did any stand out for you?
3. How was the book structured? Did the author use any structural or narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? Whose voice was the story told in (from whose point of view is the story told)? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
4. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read their favorite couple of passages out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) Was the language appropriate to the story? Was it more poetic or vernacular? Did it stand in the way of your appreciation of the story, or enhance your enjoyment of the book? If poetic, did the characters speak in vernacular language, or in the poetic language of the author? Was the dialogue realistic sounding? Was there a rhythm to the authors style, or anything else that might be considered unique about it?
5. Was the author fairly descriptive? Was he or she better at describing the concrete or the abstract? Was the author clear about what he or she was trying to say, or were you confused by some of what you read? How did this affect your reading of the book?
6. Talk about the plot. What was more important, the characters or the plot? Was the plot moved forward by decisions of the characters, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot? Was the action believable? What events in the story stand out for you as memorable? Was the story chronological? Was there foreshadowing and suspense or did the author give things away at the beginning of the book? Was this effective? How did it affect your enjoyment of the book?
7. What were some of the major themes of the book? Are they relevant in your life? Did the author effectively develop these themes? If so, how? If not, why not? Was there redemption in the book? For any of the characters? Is this important to you when reading a book? Did you think the story was funny, sad, touching, disturbing, moving? Why or why not?
8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or

will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be? Or will you not think of it at all in a year's time?

9. Talk about the location. Was it important to the story? Was the author's description of the landscape/community a good one? Talk about the time period of the story (if appropriate). Was it important to the story? Did the author convey the era well? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story? Why or why not for all of the above? Was pertinent information lumped altogether, or integrated into the story? How did this affect your appreciation of the book?
10. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more work by this author?

If you need further assistance in leading your discussions, keep the following in mind:

Questions that allow your members to express their opinions work better than those that simply have them pull answers from the book (like a high school exam). Ask your group to back up their comments with specific examples from the book. Sometimes it might even help to play devil's advocate with the group. Take a stance that's different from the consensus of the group (if there is one) and force the members of your group to defend their opinions of the book.

Another option is to go through the book, chapter by chapter, pointing out scenes or passages that were especially touching/memorable/interesting to you, and then asking the group what their reaction to these selections are. And don't be afraid to let the discussion go where it will --- if one particular aspect of the book really captures your group member's attention, allow them to stay on this theme, rather than rushing them through all the questions you have prepared.

Finally, if all else fails, you may want to ask each member to bring a couple of questions of their own to the discussion.

Questions developed by Liz Keuffer.