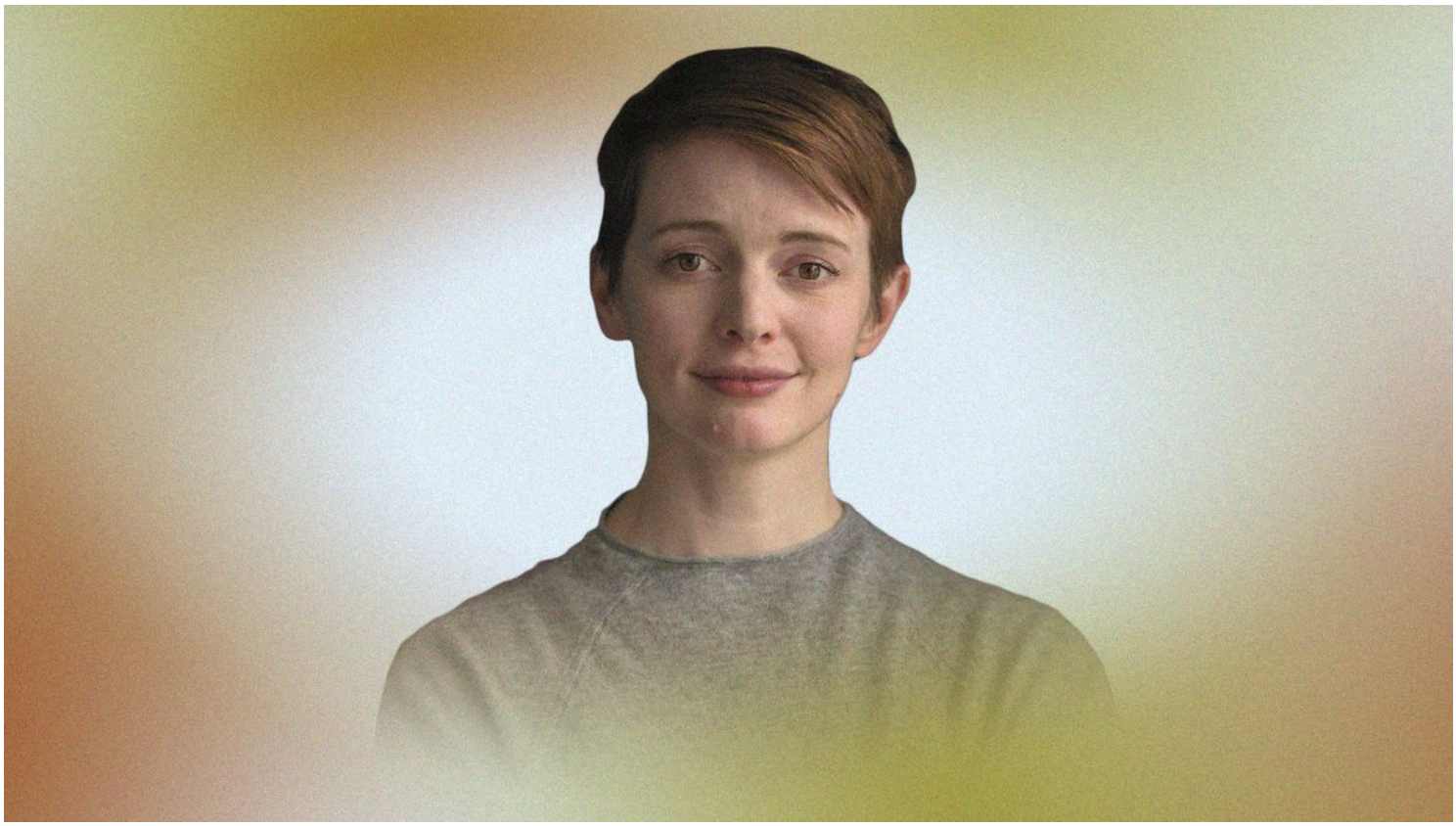
Don’t Call Emily St. John Mandel a Pandemic Prophet

The author of “Station Eleven,” now an HBO miniseries, talks to Shondaland about her rise in new, intense readership and why she believes in joy after chaos.

BY MADELEINE DELIEE PUBLISHED: DEC 17, 2021



SHONDALAND STAFF

Emily St. John Mandel wants to set the record straight: She is not a 21st-century version of Greek mythology’s cursed prophet Cassandra, with divine pandemic-predicting abilities. Yes, Mandel wrote *Station Eleven*, and, yes, the popular novel is about a pandemic — or, more accurately, about the ghosts of the world before and the shape of the world after the Georgian Flu wipes out 99 percent of the world’s population. This is, as Mandel ruefully now recognizes, somewhat prescient. Still, it’s such that some readers insist that Mandel foretold our current pandemic. But she points out that epidemiologists long maintained the inevitability of this happening; the passage of time just made us complacent. Our situation is “shocking to us because there hasn’t been a pandemic on this continent for over a hundred years,”

Mandel tells Shondaland, “but, yeah, there was always going to be another one. I feel like I predicted nothing where that’s concerned.”

What Mandel also couldn’t predict is the wave of social-media vitriol that boiled up in response to the 2014 book in the early days of 2020. Sure, a book about a pandemic was potentially triggering. But still. “At the very beginning of the pandemic, I was getting a lot of angry tweets from people who had somehow picked up *Station Eleven* without knowing that it was a pandemic book and were mad,” she says. “And, you know, I appreciate everybody reading my book, but I think it does say it’s a pandemic on the dust jacket, so, you know, I had limited sympathy.” After all, the book had been on book lists and library shelves for six years at that point. What’s more, *Station Eleven* is now an HBO Max original miniseries starring Mackenzie Davis and Himesh Patel, further augmenting Mandel’s “foresight” into an already Covid-fatigued culture.



While not Mandel’s first book, *Station Eleven* was her first massive success. Long before “pandemic” was a word in daily use, the elegant, interwoven story and intense humanity of her characters existing in the world as we know it and the world that comes after resonated deeply with readers. The book draws on influences as

diverse as *King Lear* and *Calvin and Hobbes* to tell what it's like to see everything come to a halt and then, somehow, begin again.

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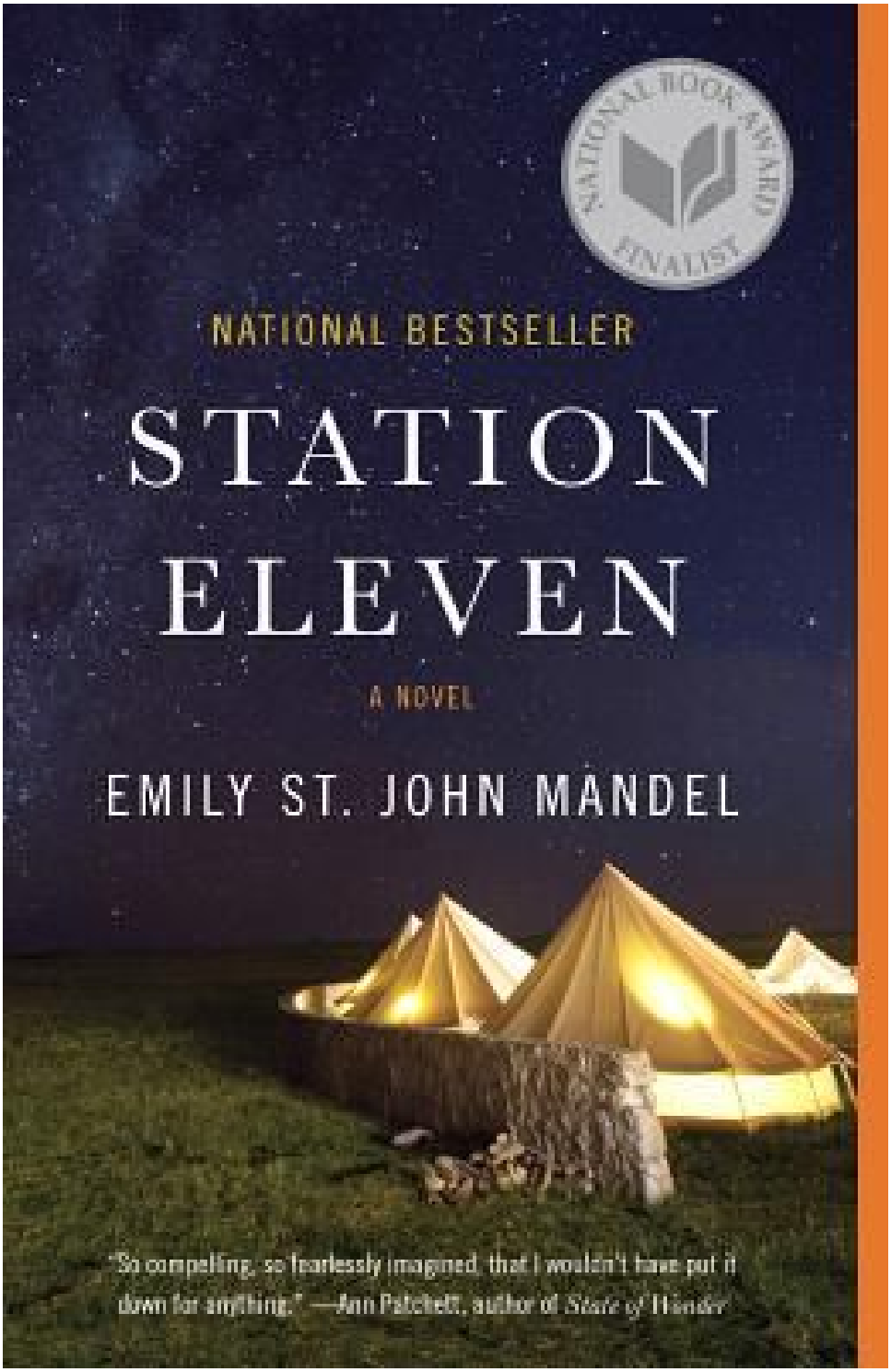
Early on, a chapter lists what vanished in the viral apocalypse: "No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. ... No more cities. ... No more pharmaceuticals. No more certainty of surviving a scratch on one's hand, a cut on a finger while chopping vegetables for dinner, a dog bite. No more flight." Like many who found almost all travel restricted, that last loss was the hardest for Mandel personally. Canadian-born, she now lives in New York City but was accustomed to returning home a few times a year. "We gave up travel," she says, explaining that her now-5-year-old was recently vaccinated, allowing that renewed possibility. The pandemic, though, cost her too. Mandel's father passed away in the months before travel was safer.

Station Eleven



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Mandel is aware that her own daughter is a product of the post-Covid perspective. "My child asked me about six months into the pandemic, was there a world before quarantine?" she says. "And, you know, in the moment, it felt a little bit heartbreaking. But then, just a beat later, I found myself thinking, what a great thing

that she doesn't really remember what it was like before all of this." *Station Eleven* describes that division of before and after, of memory versus ignorance, as older characters recall what air conditioning felt like and younger characters can't imagine such a thing. "On the one hand, I think it's really important to know where we've been," Mandel says. "On the other hand, if we didn't miss the lost paradise of 2019, then perhaps the current moment would be a little bit easier — you know, just this world of masks and constant testing and precautions, and every few months there's a new variant that changes all the rules. So, yeah, I can really argue either position on that one."

Working on her upcoming release, *Sea of Tranquility* — which time jumps between 1912 and a moon colony two hundred years in the future, all the while exploring the convergence of time, art, love, and, yes, a plague — under quarantine in New York City gave Mandel plenty of time to reflect on the influences that translate into art. "That book is so much a product of that time, just the constant ambulance sirens and an atmosphere of death," she recalls. "Not to be too maudlin about it, but just the awareness that so many people were dying every day, that was an atmosphere one had to work in at that time." Though she couldn't have foreseen it at the time, *Station Eleven* coincidentally leans into parallels with English history and the pandemic that influenced Shakespeare. "The plague affected his life individually but also affected the entire milieu in which he lived, the way it just swept over Elizabethan England again and again and again. The more I read that history, the more it seemed to me that it made sense for [*Station Eleven*'s Traveling Symphony] to be a Shakespearean theater company."

The Georgia Flu in the book wreaks devastation far beyond what we've seen (and if you're worried about losing sleep over that scenario after reading it, Mandel admits that she took some literary license: A virus that intense would be unlikely to sustain long enough for those results), but that does prompt the question "what do we preserve?" Maybe that's the works of Shakespeare, although Mandel readily acknowledges that "we tend to place this really intense sort of aesthetic value on [him], you know; you have to like Shakespeare if you are a cultured person." But

that's opinion, and she also considered whether David Mamet or episodes of *Seinfeld* should make the cut. Tabloid magazines also figure prominently throughout the book as fragments of a world gone, ones which characters seek out as a way of holding on to the past. "If there is some cataclysmic event, you like to think that the things you personally value might survive, which for me would be Beethoven's symphonies and Shakespeare. But what if it's also a self-published comic book and all of the tabloids at the supermarket?"

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Ultimately, she sees that partly coming down to chance but also to what transcends mere survival and becomes happiness. The creator and showrunner of HBO Max's *Station Eleven*, Patrick Somerville, told Indiewire, "We always wanted to make a post-apocalyptic show about joy." Mandel, likewise, says that the book's refrain that "survival is insufficient" originated from an episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* and that the idea resonated for years before fitting into her creation of *Station Eleven* because, ultimately, she knew that she didn't want to write a story like Cormac McCarthy's bleak dystopian novel, *The Road*. "Most of the post-apocalyptic novels I've read and films I've watched are set in that immediate aftermath of total societal breakdown, you know, this territory of mayhem and chaos and horror. And it's not that I don't think that would happen; it's just that it's not plausible to me that that would last forever. ... It's not sustainable over years and decades and generations. It seemed to me that there was something more interesting about thinking in terms of what comes next, what's the new world that begins to emerge 15 or 20 years later?"

That new world, in her vision, is one in which it's understood that life is more than what she calls "the absolute basics. It's never quite enough for us to just have food, water, and shelter, and that's why we have books, and why we watch TV and play sports and, you know, find other ways of telling each other stories through theater or music or dance or whatever it is," Mandel says. "I do think those are all activities that encourage joy, maybe if we're thinking about joy as just a moment of transcendence of the everyday." Rising above simple existence was a focus for the adaptation as well. "I think that that's something the show really does beautifully, you know — it captures this sense of joy," she says. "I think Patrick and his colleagues really understood that it wasn't a horror story, which is something you can fall into really easily with a post-apocalyptic story. But, yeah, there's so much joy in the adaptation, and it makes it a pleasure to watch."

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, *and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.*

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