

READER'S GUIDE

2015 - 2016

MICHIGAN
HUMANITIES
COUNCIL

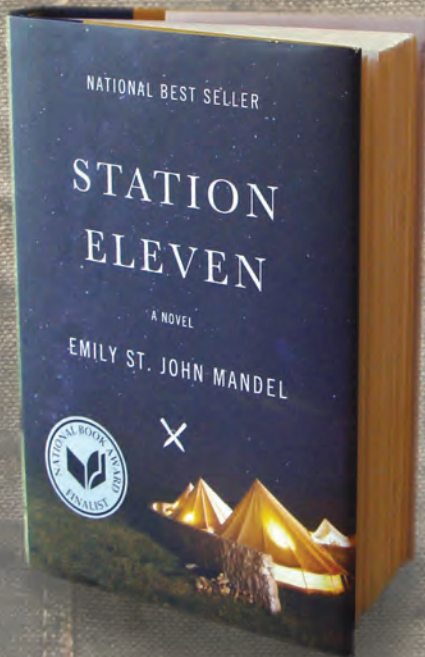
GREAT
MICHIGAN
READ



Station Eleven

Emily St. John Mandel

SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT



WHAT IS THE GREAT MICHIGAN READ?



Great Michigan Read: One title, one state, and thousands engaged in literary discussion

WHAT IS THE GREAT MICHIGAN READ?

The Michigan Humanities Council's Great Michigan Read is a book club for the entire state with a focus on a single book - *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel. The program is intended for young adults to senior citizens with broad goals of making literature more accessible and appealing while also encouraging residents to learn more about our state and individual identities.

WHY STATION ELEVEN?

Station Eleven is the story of the Traveling Symphony, a troupe of Shakespearean actors and orchestral musicians traveling the shores of the Great Lakes in a post-apocalyptic Michigan. Striving to maintain their humanity in the altered landscape of a world where 99% of the population has been wiped out by a flu pandemic, the Traveling Symphony operates under one credo: "Survival is Insufficient."

Station Eleven is set in a world turned upside down, but is ultimately an exploration of people surviving and remaking their lives by preserving the qualities that make us human: culture, art, and the humanities. From the fear and terror of a flu pandemic, to rebirth and rebuilding through Shakespeare, music, newspapers, museums, and the forging of communities, *Station Eleven* is both a memory of a world lost and the chronicle of a new society.

HOW CAN I PARTICIPATE?

Pick up a copy of *Station Eleven* and supporting materials at your local library, your favorite local bookstore, or download the e-book. Read the book, share and discuss it with your friends, and participate in Great Michigan Read events in your community and online.

Register your library, school, company, or book club and receive copies of reader's guides, teacher's guides, bookmarks, and other informational materials at no cost. Nonprofit organizations-including schools and libraries-may apply for discussion kits, which include free copies of *Station Eleven*.

For more details, including a calendar of events, additional resources, and to register your organization, visit www.michiganhumanities.org.

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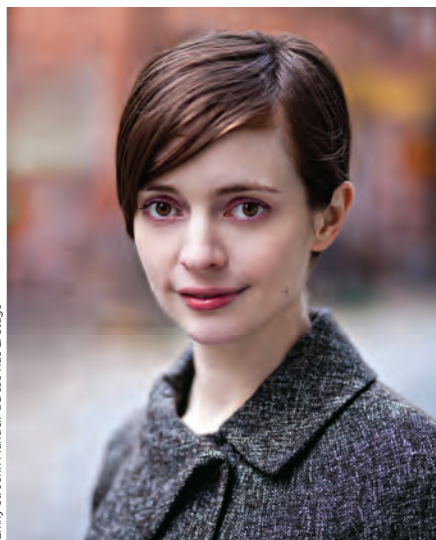
Join the Michigan Humanities Council Facebook group, or follow @mihumanities (#greatMlread) on Twitter.



A SPECIAL THANKS: The Michigan Humanities Council would like to give a special thanks to Jennifer Rosseter (Image Creative Group), Bill Castanier, and all of our program Partners and Sponsors who make the Great Michigan Read possible.

STATION ELEVEN

AND AUTHOR EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL



Emily St. John Mandel. ©Dese'Fae L. Stage

EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL was born and raised on the west coast of British Columbia, Canada. She studied contemporary dance at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre and lived briefly in Montreal before relocating to New York.

Her fourth novel, *Station Eleven*, was a 2014 National Book Award Finalist, a 2015 Michigan Notable Book, and winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award. All four of her novels were Indie Next Picks, and *The Singer's Gun* was the 2014 winner of the Prix Mystere de la Critique in France. Her short fiction and essays have been anthologized in numerous collections, including Best American Mystery Stories 2013. She is a staff writer for *The Millions*, and she lives in New York City with her husband.

STATION ELEVEN

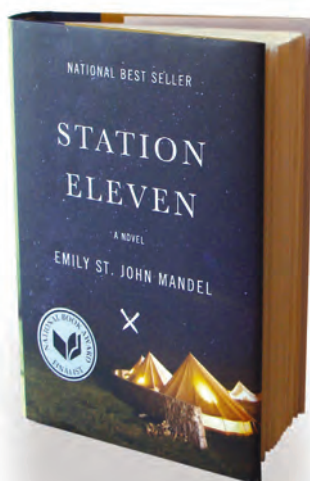
My fourth novel is about a traveling Shakespearean theatre company in a post-apocalyptic North America. It's also about friendship, memory, love, celebrity, our obsession with objects, oppressive dinner parties, comic books, and knife-throwing.

Emily St. John Mandel

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL PLEASE VISIT:
www.prhspeakers.com
www.emilymandel.com

Also by Emily St. John Mandel

The Lola Quartet (2012)
The Singer's Gun (2010)
Last Night in Montreal (2009)



Q&A

WITH EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

How did you approach writing *Station Eleven*?

I started with the idea of an actor dying of a heart attack during the mad scene in *King Lear*, in more or less the present day. At the same time, I realized early on that I wanted to write about a traveling company of musicians and actors moving over a post-apocalyptic landscape. So from the beginning, I had the idea of writing a novel with two narrative strands, one set in the present and one in a post-apocalyptic future, and constructing a book where the action would move back and forth between them. After that, as with any book, it's just a question of relentless hard work. I wrote and revised the novel over a period of two and a half years or so.

Why a post-apocalyptic novel?

I wanted to write about the modern world, about this extraordinary time in which we find ourselves and all of these spectacular things that we take for granted—the supercomputers in our pockets that send signals to the satellites, the airplanes, the way hot water comes out of faucets, and rooms light up when you flick a switch on the wall. There are obviously a

great many things about our world that are completely awful, but we are surrounded by a level of technology and infrastructure that at any other point in human history would have seemed miraculous. One way to write about something, of course, is to write about its absence, so I thought that an interesting way to write about the modern world would be to write about a time when the modern world has fallen away. This novel is often marketed and described as being post-apocalyptic, and that's not inaccurate, but about half of it is set in the present day, and I think of the book as a love letter to the modern world.

What is story's most compelling lesson for today?

I didn't write the book with the intention of conveying any specific message or lesson to readers. My goal was just to write the best novel that I possibly could. The writer and critic Edmund Wilson once wrote that no two people read the same book, and I think he was right about that. Different people can often come away from the same book with very different impressions. I think it's not the author's place to try to impose a single meaning or lesson on readers.

“There are obviously a great many things about our world that are completely awful, but we are surrounded by a level of technology and infrastructure that at any other point in human history would have seemed miraculous.”

EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

PANDEMICS AND THE AURA OF FEAR



After all, the history of humanity is also a history of pandemics, and we're taught to fear and respect diseases from a young age. We're inoculated before we can speak and taught germ theory in pre-school."

Emily St. John Mandel



PANDEMICS AND THE AURA OF FEAR

In *Station Eleven*, the fictional Georgia Flu all but eradicates the world's population. The flu pandemic represents one of humankind's most deep-seeded fears, what Emily St. John Mandel describes as the "invisible menace traveling toward us." That fear was evidenced as recently as the 2014 reemergence of Ebola in West Africa, an outbreak which quickly became the deadliest in the disease's history.

In one sense, the Ebola outbreak embodied the longstanding paranoia and fear generated by disease. At the same time, it was a vivid example of courage and compassion as thousands of health care personnel from around the world risked their own safety to help stem the tide of the disease. Efforts of this nature are happening every day, with people sacrificing their own lives to help ensure that the nightmare scenario created in *Station Eleven* never happens.

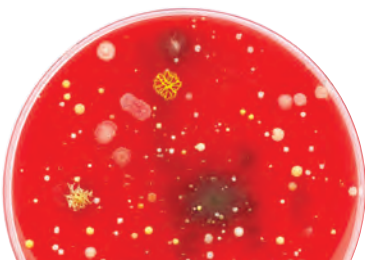
While history seems to demonstrate that pandemics and disease are not going away anytime soon, medical advances, coupled with the unflagging bravery of medical workers, indicate that we are at least getting better at fighting these unremitting outbreaks.

THE "MOTHER OF ALL PANDEMICS:" THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC OF 1918-1919

Born amidst the forced congestion and overall depredations of World War I, the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, often referred to as the "mother of all pandemics," is the largest outbreak of the flu in modern history. Worldwide, nearly 500 million people were infected, with the virus claiming the lives of an estimated 30 – 100 million people. In the United States alone, a quarter of the population was infected, some 25 million people, resulting in nearly 700,000 deaths.

Loss of life on this scale is unimaginable. The spread of the disease was unrelenting and the reach of the pandemic seemingly had no borders, as demonstrated by the experiences of Anne Colon, a registered nurse working in Michigan's Upper Peninsula during the outbreak.

As Colon describes of her remote locale, "our fresh breezes from the Great Lakes, and our isolation from the crowded districts did not save us from the deadly grip of the epidemic." Working to ease the disease in the remote Cedar Branch logging camp, Colon notes the flu "was travelling like wildfire through the little huts," with "confusion, suffering, and terror everywhere." Colon's story is just one of many but it highlights the pervasiveness of this often overlooked tragedy and places an all too realistic face on *Station Eleven's* fictional outbreak.



Bubonic Plague
killed over

**20
MILLION**

people in Europe – almost
one-third of their population.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

PLAGUE DOCTOR

14th century plague doctors wore bird-like masks and leather overcoats, breeches, boots, and gloves as protection against skin exposure to the deadly plague.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WHY? WHAT?

Why do you think Emily St. John Mandel chose a flu pandemic in *Station Eleven*? Did it seem believable?

What factors contributed to some characters surviving the Georgian Flu? Was it just random luck?



EBOLA

The 2014 reemergence of Ebola in West Africa quickly became the deadliest outbreak in the disease's history.



Michigan Humanities Council

Pandemics in Literature

- *The Last Man*
Mary Shelley (1826)
- *The Scarlet Plague*
Jack London (1912)
- *Earth Abides*
George R. Stewart (1949)
- *The Stand*
Stephen King (1978)
- *Oryx and Crake*
Margaret Atwood (2003)

FURTHER READING:

- *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013
Bistrow, Nancy
- "Experiences during the Epidemic." *The American Journal of Nursing* 19, no. 8 (1919): 605-607
Colon, Anne L.
- *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003
Crosby, Alfred
- *Pandemics: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013
Doherty, Peter
- "You'll Probably Never Catch Ebola-So Why is the Disease So Terrifying?" *New Republic*, August 12, 2014
Mandel, Emily St. John

SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT: HUMANITIES AND ART IN A NEW WORLD



I think it's fair to say that that motto is the idea around which the entire book revolves. When I heard that line, on an episode of *Star Trek* that aired in the late nineties, it struck me as a concise and utterly elegant expression of something that I believe to be true: that mere survival is never sufficient, that as a species we're inclined to look for meaning in our lives beyond the basics of food, shelter, water, and security." *Emily St. John Mandel*



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Leonardo da Vinci's
Mona Lisa was moved

6 times

in efforts to keep her
safe during the war
before she was returned
to the Louvre.

FURTHER READING:

- *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*. New York: Hachette, 2009
Edsel, Robert and Bret Witter
- *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*. New York: Vintage, 1994
Nicholas, Lynn H
- "Survival Instinct." *Star Trek: Voyager*, Season 6, Episode 2, September 29, 1999

SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT: HUMANITIES AND ART IN A NEW WORLD

It is painted on the lead caravan, tattooed on Kirsten's arm, and debated by the characters, so what is the significance of "Survival is Insufficient?" Despite numerous hardships and perils, the Traveling Symphony traversed their route along the Great Lakes to spread the works of Shakespeare and the music of the lost world. As the lead character Kirsten notes, "What the Symphony was doing, what they were always doing, was trying to cast a spell."

The spell cast by the Symphony was a spell of hope, showing the residents of the new world that despite everything that was lost in the pandemic, the art and culture that defined our best human qualities would continue to persevere. So while the world presented in *Station Eleven* is often bleak, and undeniably violent, as Kirsten observes of her situation: "in what other life would I get to perform Shakespeare?"



SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT

It is painted on the lead caravan, tattooed on Kirsten's arm, and debated by the characters, so what is the significance of "Survival is Insufficient?"



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Le Musée Guggenheim



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Van Gogh's Starry Night



Monuments Men

Mere survival was also insufficient in the conflict ravaged landscape of World War II Europe. In 1943, amidst the chaos of the war, and at the behest of art and museum professionals, President Franklin Roosevelt launched the commission which created the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) program for the purpose of finding, identifying, preserving, and ultimately returning the countless cultural treasures displaced by the war. The MFAA, or "Monuments Men," was comprised of nearly 350 men and women from 13 countries and representing a variety of professional backgrounds including



museum curators, historians, architects, and professors. Facing numerous dangers, both during and after the war, the group is responsible for recovering and returning an estimated 500 million pieces of artwork from artists such as Michelangelo, Van Eyck, Vermeer, Da Vinci, and many others.

While countless treasures were saved, the scale of the looting means the work still continues to

this day. To learn more about the ongoing efforts to find and restore the still missing works of art, visit the Monuments Men Foundation for the Preservation of Art: www.monumentsmenfoundation.org

MONUMENTS MEN IN MICHIGAN

Dale V. Ford
President of Kendall College

Ralph Warner Hammett
Professor Emeritus of Architecture,
University of Michigan

Charles H. Sawyer
Director of the University of
Michigan Museum of Art

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WHAT?

In what ways do the humanities and art represent our best human qualities?

What are some examples in *Station Eleven* of characters doing more than just surviving?

SHAKESPEARE AND STATION ELEVEN



Photo: Wikimedia Commons



“

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.”

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

SHAKESPEARE AND STATION ELEVEN

The works of William Shakespeare play a significant role in *Station Eleven*. The book starts with Arthur Leander as King Lear and the actors of the Traveling Symphony perform his works exclusively, a fact explained to the reader with the statement:

“People want what was best about the world.”

In the novel, Shakespeare’s body of work represents the pinnacle of literature and theater, and for the survivors a visceral connection to the pre-pandemic world and a means to escape the all too harsh reality of the new world.

Emily St. John Mandel also notes the many parallels between Shakespeare’s time and the world of *Station Eleven*. Shakespeare’s England was full of its own gritty hardships and theater for many was often the only escape from reality. The forerunners of the Traveling Symphony, troupes of itinerant actors, were also found traveling throughout England spreading the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. And, as with *Station Eleven*, often these troupes were set to the road by the omnipresent threat of the bubonic plague.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

PLAGUE HEALTH PASS

Health pass (*fedice di sanità*) enabling the bearer to pass freely despite there being quarantines and heavy restrictions on travel due to plague.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WHAT?

Do you think Shakespeare represents the best? What other works should the Traveling Symphony perform?

What other parallels can be drawn between Shakespeare’s England and the world of *Station Eleven*?

SHAKESPEARE’S PLAGUE FILLED LIFE

Shakespeare was quite literally born into the horrors of the plague, being fortunate to survive the 1563 plague outbreak that wiped out a quarter of the population of Stratford-upon-Avon. Unfortunately, Shakespeare’s encounters with the plague did not end there, as the disease would continue to alter and shape all aspects of his life. The plague is thought to have caused the demise of four of Shakespeare’s seven siblings and is also the likely cause of death of his son Hamnet. The London theaters were shutdown at least three times during Shakespeare’s career, often for more than a year at a time. Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare’s lifelong and constant run-ins with the plague had an indelible effect on both his professional and personal life.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Plague Warning Plaque

Plague panel with the triumph of death. Panels of this kind were placed on the walls of houses to warn against the plague.

CHRONOLOGY



1563

Plague outbreak in England



1564

Shakespeare baptised in Stratford-upon-Avon



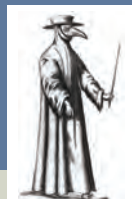
1593

Plague outbreak closes the London theaters



ca. 1595

Shakespeare completes *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*



1603

Major plague outbreak once again closes the London theaters



ca. 1605

Shakespeare writes *King Lear*



ca. 1608

Fear of Plague once again closes theaters



1616

Shakespeare dies of unknown causes in Stratford



2016

Shakespeare’s “First Folio” exhibition to tour throughout the United States.

CAPTURING HISTORY

PRESERVING THE PAST

“

No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below...No more flight...No more Internet...No more countries, all borders unmanned.”

Emily St. John Mandel



CAPTURING HISTORY

Station Eleven illustrates the many tangible and intangible items lost in the collapse of society. Character recollections range from the memory of eating their last orange and the wonderment of traveling in airplanes, to the lessons learned from their favorite episode of *Star Trek*. The book also demonstrates the human penchant for capturing history by collecting the stories and artifacts of the past.

In “New” Petoskey, the town librarian resurrects newspapers to reconnect the current world and “to create an oral history of the collapse” by capturing the stories of the town, the Traveling Symphony, and everyone else passing through.

In Severn City, Clark’s Museum of Civilization displays an assortment of seemingly everyday items ranging from laptops, cell phones, and credit cards to shoes, motorcycles, and snow globes. Clark describes his collection as, “taken-for-granted miracles that had persisted all around them.” For the new generations,

born after the pandemic, the objects provided insight into the past, a way to understand what was lost, and to know what was possible.

Clark describes being, “moved by every object he saw there, by the human enterprise each object had required.”



FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Located in Chicago, Illinois, the Field Museum of Natural History is one of the largest natural history museums in the world and houses extensive scientific specimen and artifact collections. Attracting up to 2 million visitors annually, the museum’s popularity illustrates our fascination with the past.

PRESERVING THE PAST: CREATING A TIME CAPSULE

Creating a time capsule is a fun, educational, and easy way to preserve a moment in history for yourself or for future generations. Making a time capsule is only a matter of a few simple steps:

- Identify the right container
- Select a location
- Choose the objects for your capsule
- Establish the amount of time your capsule will remain sealed

STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS:

For step-by-step instructions and additional resources visit the Library of Congress at: www.loc.gov/preservation/family/timecap.html

“I stood looking
over my damaged
home
and tried to forget
the sweetness of life
on Earth.”

Station Eleven, Vol. 1, No. 1

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WHAT?

What items would you keep to remember the world?

What items would you add to the Museum of Civilization?

In *Station Eleven*, not everyone wanted to remember the old world. What are the advantages and disadvantages of not remembering?

FORGING NEW COMMUNITIES



“

Sartre: Hell is other ^{FLUTES} people.”



FORGING NEW COMMUNITIES

The idea of community is a difficult concept to define. Basic definitions state that communities are simply made up of groups of people living together in the same locale. Other communities consist of people with shared values and interests.

In *Station Eleven*, communities come in a variety of formats: the close-knit family of the nomadic Traveling Symphony, the sporadic towns along the shores of the Great Lakes, the sprawling airport community of Severn City, and even the fear suppressed followers of the Prophet. One of the catastrophic outcomes of the flu pandemic was a complete shattering of society and the upheaval of communities on all levels. Consequently, *Station Eleven* provides the opportunity to view the formation of new communities.



Detroit Resurgent

Detroit offers a prime example of community, in all senses of the word. Constantly reinventing itself, both historically and currently, Detroit has been home to an ever-shifting variety of communities.

Nowhere is this exploration of community better expressed than with the Traveling Symphony. The foundation of their community is based around their mutual love of theater and music. Moreover, they were bonded around a desire to travel to the outposts of the new world, sharing their art in a world that was in desperate need of their talent. *Station Eleven* also portrays the complex nuances of community by highlighting the rivalries, petty differences, and overall dislike that can develop over time. In the end, however, the true meaning of community is best expressed when the group loses one of its own.

CONCLUSION:

“Hell is the
absence of the
people
you long for.”

Emily St. John Mandel



COMMUNITIES

In Station Eleven, communities come in a variety of formats: the close-knit family of the nomadic Traveling Symphony, the sporadic towns along the shores of the Great Lakes, the sprawling airport community of Severn City, and even the fear suppressed followers of the Prophet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WHAT? WHICH?

What kind of community would you want to be a part of?

What elements do you feel define a community?

***Station Eleven* explores many different types of relationships through the novel. Which characters do you think had the most interesting relationships?**



THE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL IN *STATION ELEVEN*



She saw the look on August's face just afterward and realized that the gunman had been his first—he'd had the colossal good fortune to have made it to Year Twenty without killing anyone—and if she weren't so tired... she could have told him what she knew: it is possible to survive this but not unaltered, and you will carry these men with you through all the nights of your life."

Emily St. John Mandel

THE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL IN *STATION ELEVEN*

By year 20, in the post-apocalyptic world of *Station Eleven*, someone was considered lucky to have survived without having to take the life of another human being. Throughout the novel, the years directly after the pandemic are depicted as cruel and chaotic with the Traveling Symphony always on guard against roaming bands of brigands and armed militias.

Protagonist Kirsten's own survival involved her making inconceivably difficult and violent choices, split-second decisions to kill or be killed. Despite knowing that her own survival was at risk, being forced to take the lives of others made a powerful impression on Kirsten. In an interview, when asked to think about how the world has changed in her lifetime, she responds definitively: "I think about killing."



KNIFE TATTOOS

The impact of Kirsten's decisions and her ethical dilemma are memorialized by the knife tattoos on her arm.

The impact of Kirsten's decisions and her ethical dilemma are memorialized by the knife tattoos on her arm. While killing to survive was the reality of the new world, Kirsten's internal struggle shows that she never let it become acceptable.

HUMANITIES FOCUS: ETHICS

Ethics, also known as moral philosophy, is a branch of the humanities that provides a systematic viewpoint for defending, discussing, and dealing with what is morally right or wrong. The concept of ethics dates back to the dawn of civilization and the introduction of moral codes into societies. Ethics provides the means to analyze the ideals of good and evil in our own world as well as the fictional world of *Station Eleven*.

In *Station Eleven*, the characters face many difficult ethical dilemmas. Killing to survive, looting for subsistence, and being forced to watch the Air Gradia flight helplessly as the passengers succumbed to the Georgia Flu. Ethics, as with the humanities in general, helps foster discussion on challenging topics, allowing people to work through and identify the answers to what they believe is right or wrong.



Ethics provides the means to analyze the ideals of good and evil in our own world as well as the fictional world of *Station Eleven*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

HOW? WHAT?

How do you think the knife tattoos helped Kirsten cope with the lives she had to take?

What ethical dilemmas do the characters in *Station Eleven* face?

"When you think of how the world's changed in your lifetime, what do you think about?"

(François Diallo)

"I think of killing."

(Kirsten)

FOLLOW THE TRAVELING SYMPHONY



THE JOURNEY

Kincardine to Severn City

Kincardine: Eastern terminus of the Traveling Symphony's route.

New Petoskey: Site of the New Petoskey News

Traverse City: Work underway to restore the Internet

St. Deborah by the Water*: Home base of the Prophet

Severn City* Airport: Home of the Museum of Civilization

* Fictional



Michigan Humanities Council

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THE MICHIGAN HUMANITIES COUNCIL

The Michigan Humanities Council connects people and communities by fostering and creating quality cultural programs. It is Michigan's nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 1974, the Michigan Humanities Council has supported communities through family literacy programs, special cultural and historical exhibits, book discussions, author tours, scholarly lectures and mentors, films, cultural celebrations, and school programs and performances that have reached millions of Michiganders.

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