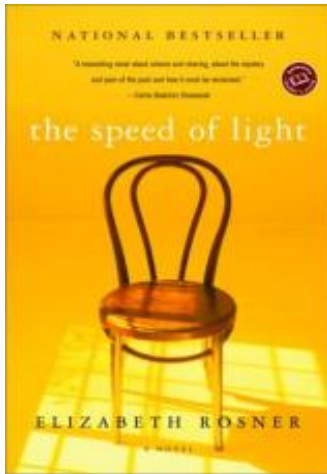


# The Speed of Light

by Elizabeth Rosner

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## About the Book

**Every family has a story. Every story, eventually, must be told.**

For most of their lives, Julian Perel and his sister, Paula, lived in a house cast in silence, witnesses to a father struggling with a devastating secret too painful to share. Though their father took his demons to the grave, his past refuses to rest.

As adults, brother and sister struggle to find their voices. A scientist governed by numbers and logic, Julian now lives an ordered life of routine and seclusion. *My father gave up his language and his homeland. But he carried his sadness with him, under his skin. It was mine now.* In contrast, Paula has entered the world as eagerly as Julian retracts from it. An aspiring opera singer, she is always moving, buoyant with sound. *Singing was the only gift I could offer to my father. I filled the house with music. I tried to give him joy. . . .*

Yet both their lives begin to change on a *Wednesday, miercoles, the day that sounds like miracles*. Before embarking on a European opera tour, Paula asks her housekeeper, Sola, to stay at her place--and to look after Julian in the apartment above. Yet Sola, too, has a story. *I want to clean myself like the window of a house, make myself clear for things to pass through. Flat and quiet.*

As Paula uncovers pieces of her father's early life in Budapest and the horrifying truth of his past, Julian bears witness to Sola's story--revelations that help all three learn how to both surrender and revere the shadows that have followed them for so long.

**The Speed of Light** is a powerful debut about three unforgettable souls who overcome the tragedies of the past to reconnect with one another and the world around them. In an extraordinary accomplishment, Elizabeth Rosner has created a novel of love and redemption that proves the pain of the untold story is far greater than even the most difficult truth.

## Discussion Guide

1. **The Speed of Light** features three very distinctive characters and their struggles to overcome the difficulties of their past. Which character did you relate to the most, and why?
2. The novel ends with each character on the brink of a new discovery. What do you imagine happens after the end of the book? What do you think the future holds for Sola, Julian, and Paula?
3. Compare and contrast how the presence of color, scent, and sound informs the lives of Julian, Paula, and Sola.
4. In the novel, bearing witness to tragedy implies a responsibility held by both the person telling the story and the person listening. How do you think these responsibilities differ? Do you agree with Sola that each role is important in the healing process? Do you think this idea is applicable to the world today?
5. Did any of the characters or scenes from **The Speed of Light** stay with you after you finished reading the book? If so, which ones and why?
6. The bonds of family are a central theme in the novel-both the secrets and silences that arise, as well as the close relationships formed between parent and child, brother and sister. Are there any feelings in the book that resonate with your own family experiences? Do you think this kind of complexity is common to the American family today?

## Author Bio

Elizabeth Rosner grew up in Schenectady, New York as a daughter of Jewish holocaust survivors. Her father, who was born in Hamburg, Germany, was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp, while her mother survived the war by hiding in the Polish countryside. Ms. Rosner's writing reflects her efforts to come to terms with the impact of her parents' experiences on her own life, the indelible imprints of their history on her language, her identity, and her imagination.

Now living in Berkeley, California, Ms. Rosner is a full-time writer, having been an instructor of creative writing and composition at the college level for eighteen years. She is a graduate of Stanford University, the MFA Program at U.C. Irvine, and the University of Queensland in Australia. She has traveled extensively throughout the world, including long-term stays in the Philippines, Israel, Australia, Sweden, and Mexico.

Elizabeth Rosner's first novel, **THE SPEED OF LIGHT**, was published in hardcover by Ballantine Books in September 2001. The novel was included in *Book Sense* 76 twice, and was selected as one of *Borders Original Voices*. Its central theme addresses the effects of the holocaust on the descendants of survivors; it is a story of loss and the redemptive power of storytelling and love. The novel has been translated into nine languages, and has been optioned by actress Gillian Anderson, who plans to make the film her directorial debut. The paperback edition of **THE SPEED OF LIGHT**

came out in April 2003 and has remained a popular pick among book groups nationwide.

In 2002, *THE SPEED OF LIGHT* was the recipient of the Harold U. Ribalow Prize, administered by Hadassah Magazine and judged by Elie Wiesel, N. Scott Momaday and Myla Goldberg (the previous year's winner). Hadassah additionally selected the novel for their National Book Club in spring 2003. Rosner also received the Great Lakes Colleges New Writer's Award for Fiction in 2002. That award involved a lecture tour of ten colleges in the states of Michigan, Indiana and Ohio.

In 2003, the French edition of *THE SPEED OF LIGHT* (published under the title, *DES DEMONS SUR LES EPAULES*) was a finalist for the prestigious Prix Femina. In April 2004, the French awarded the novel a newly inaugurated literary prize, called the Prix France Bleu Gironde, at an award ceremony in Bordeaux.

Also in the spring of 2004, Rosner visited five upstate New York universities as part of a lecture tour co-sponsored by the New York State Writers Institute. When *THE SPEED OF LIGHT* was selected for Peoria Reads! 2004, a one city one book project, Rosner spent several days in Peoria, visiting with schools, libraries and appearing at numerous public events to meet with readers from all over the city.

Rosner's prize-winning fiction and poetry have been published in numerous literary journals such as *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Cream City Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. Her poetry chapbook *GRAVITY*, one of the Select Poets Series published by Small Poetry Press, is currently in its fourteenth printing.

Rosner's new novel, *BLUE NUDE*, was published in hardcover by Ballantine in May 2006. The subject of the novel was originally inspired by her involvement with a project called Acts of Reconciliation, which brought together second generation Germans and Jews in order to confront their shared legacy from World War II.

*BLUE NUDE* depicts an encounter between a post-war German painter named Danzig and an Israeli artist's model named Merav. Living in Northern California and in exile by choice from their home countries, both Danzig and Merav are wrestling with their identities as artists and as ex-patriates; haunted by their experiences with war and loss, they ultimately find that even in the face of fear and despair, the act of making art can bring real possibilities for redemption and healing.

A few of the many rave reviews for *BLUE NUDE* can be found by using the links page of this website. Selected as a *Book Sense* Notable Pick upon its release in early May 2006, the novel was immediately listed on the *San Francisco Chronicle* bestseller list and recently named as one of the *Chronicle's* best books of 2006.

## Critical Praise

"**The Speed of Light** is an elegant, meticulous, and quite subtle novel about lives lived at a remove from, but forever connected to, tragedy--the camps. Ms. Rosner's imaginative aim, of course, is to show us great human importance where we might've thought it didn't reside, and to change us with this knowledge. She certainly succeeds."Richard Ford"A resonating novel about silence and sharing, about the mystery and pain of the past and how it must be reclaimed.

Beautifully written, in images that sing in our ears long after we've put the book down."Chitra Ranertee Divakaruni, author of **The Mistress of Spices** and **The Unknown Errors of Our Lives**"Rilke memorably defined art as exactness, a hatred of the vague, and by that definition **The Speed of Light** is poetry sustained. The precision of the language here, the structural arrangements and the deft evocation of character in history all herald a genuine talent--not so much emerging as achieved. Ms. Rosner's debut novel turns sorrow into song."Nicholas Delbanco, author of **What Remains**"With its symphony of voices, **The Speed of Light** tells a haunting story of loss and redemption. It is beautifully written and utterly affecting."Tova Mirvis, author of **The Ladies Auxiliary**"Elizabeth Rosner touches a chord deep down where our fears are buried, then makes that chord vibrate and hum until magic happens and it sings. I loved this book. It entered my dreams."Beverly Donofrio, author of **Riding in Cars with Boys** and **Looking For Mary**"Elizabeth Rosner has written a lyrical and absorbing novel whose power is enriched by its understatement. This uncommon story not only probes how children wrestle with the silence handed down to them by a silent father cursed with inexhaustible sorrow, but it also tells us of the healing magic of love and does so through a marvelous and unusual character--a Latino housekeeper--who will find an enduring spot in readers' hearts."Joseph Berger, author of **Displaced Persons: Growing Up American After the Holocaust**

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