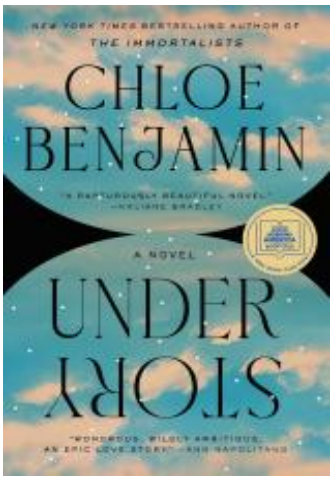
Under Story

by Chloe Benjamin



About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of THE IMMORTALISTS returns with an intimate yet epic love story --- and a sweeping odyssey of scientific discovery. UNDER STORY invites us to consider the promise of this life, what might lie beyond it, and how far we would go for more time with the people we love, cementing Chloe Benjamin?s place among our best, and most lasting, storytellers.

?We wake up to tomorrow, never yesterday.?

At the edge of the world, biologist Laurel Salter is hiding from everything she?s ever known. For 10 hours a day, six days per week, she works as a dishwasher at McMurdo Station, an isolated research base in Antarctica. She tells no one that before she arrived, she was a renowned young scientist with a promising career and a family.

But even in this remote outpost, Laurel can?t escape her past. When a strange light appears across the ice --- and draws a group of physicists to McMurdo --- her former husband, Eli, won't be far behind. Laurel is captivated by the Arc: its surreal glow; the way it seems almost alive. And though Eli is reluctant to test her wildest theory, Laurel is convinced that the Arc leads down a rabbit hole and into a world they can barely imagine. Can she persuade him to risk everything to fix the burden that hangs between them --- to turn back the clock and live their story a second time?

A breathless page-turner and a love letter to our planet, UNDER STORY grapples with the great questions of our time: human hubris, the precarity of the natural world, and the mysterious webs of consciousness that bind us. A modern epic of science and soul, of bravery and redemption, it offers a vision of the future that demands we reckon with what we owe to one another, and to the earth itself.

Discussion Guide

1. Which scene or image from UNDER STORY was still with you when you closed the book, and where in the novel did you first realize what sort of story you were reading?

2. The novel opens with Laurel as a small child weeding beside her mother, realizing that the tree she has just drawn at school is only half a tree. ?What she saw above ground was one part of the story. The second was below.? Where did you see that motif return as you read?

3. Eli is Laurel?s first love, her husband, the father with whom she shares her grief, and, eventually, the man who crosses over with her into the antiuniverse. What did you make of Eli, both as a partner and as a grieving father?

4. The Arc appears on the ice as a ?self-made, inner glow akin to bioluminescence.? It is mysterious and beautiful long before it is revealed to be the seam between two universes. Years earlier, Eli had sketched the same idea on a paper napkin over dinner in San Francisco. As Chloe Benjamin takes us from this theory to an actual atmospheric anomaly to the literal portal, what does the novel suggest about the distance, or lack of distance, between an idea and real life?

5. On the day of Silas? death, Laurel leaves him sleeping briefly to investigate Armillaria in a cave. How did you read her culpability in that moment? Did Eli?s later admission, that he had forgiven her but could not absolve her, change how you understood the original choice and his own role in it?

6. The antiuniverse is built on inversions: fungi compose rather than decompose, overtakers replace undertakers, parents arrive as elderly newborns to their adult children, coal is a new fuel, and monotheistic religions exist before their prophets. Which inversion most disoriented you, and what did the author gain by literalizing the reverse arrow of time?

7. Nonhuman intelligence is a crucial part of this book: the slime mold finding its food, the fungi solving Laurel?s maze, the octopus with its ?infinite degrees of freedom.? Gloria once remarks while lecturing that ?it is classic human error to disregard what we cannot see.? What do you make of this preoccupation with other forms of life as it?s juxtaposed with the grief plot?

8. Gloria is both the mentor whose lab gives Laurel her vocation in the first universe, and the brilliant teenage ward of Sunrise whom Laurel takes on in the second. What does it mean that Laurel becomes Gloria?s Gloria?

9. Silas Two surfaces from Lake Michigan at the moment Silas One drowns, as an infant in the body of an eight-year-old. As you watched him age downward across the second half of the novel, did it feel like a second chance, borrowed time or something else?

10. On Macquarie Island, Laurel watches a pair of albatrosses tenderly press paste around their dying chick, sealing it back into an egg. The parents trade places with the chick. What did you make of this tableau, arriving when it does in the novel?

11. Gloria tells Laurel that self-compassion can be harder than penance. How did you read Laurel?s long resistance to her own forgiveness?

12. By the end, Laurel and Eli do return, on the day they first crossed. The novel ends not with the surrender to *Dayenu* (enough) that Olive once urged on Laurel, but with possibility. ?There could be another child, half of Laurel and Eli

each: a wavy-haired daughter who will ask them to tell her the story, from the beginning.? What did you make of that choice to leave the door open rather than closed? After everything Laurel and Eli have lost, learned and reabsorbed, what did you understand the book to be saying about return?

Author Bio

Chloe Benjamin is the bestselling author of THE ANATOMY OF DREAMS, THE IMMORTALISTS and UNDER STORY.

A Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, LibraryReads favorite and #1 Indie Next pick, THE IMMORTALISTS was named a best book of 2018 by NPR, *The Washington Post*, *Entertainment Weekly* and others. THE ANATOMY OF DREAMS received the Edna Ferber Fiction Book Award and was longlisted for the 2014 Center for Fiction First Novel Prize.

Originally from San Francisco, CA, Chloe is a graduate of Vassar College and the M.F.A. in fiction at the University of Wisconsin. Her work has been translated into over 30 languages. She lives with her husband in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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