

## A Reader's Guide



### Save Your Own

by Elisabeth Brink

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### About the Book

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"A smashing debut—hilarious, smart, and charming. Gillian Cormier-Brandenburg is one of the most original characters I've encountered in recent fiction, a winning mix of intellect, innocence, and anxiety. I fell in love with her, and I think you will, too." —Stephen McCauley, author of *Alternatives to Sex* and *The Object of My Affection*

#### A Book Sense Notable Book

Gillian Cormier-Brandenburg is a virginal, narcoleptic, atheistic Harvard Divinity School student about to complete her Ph.D. When the faculty deems her dissertation unsuitable and threatens to revoke her fellowship funding, Gillian—determined to defend her topic—sets out to gather research. She takes a job at a halfway house for recovering addicts and struggles to shed her skin as an anxious and socially inept graduate student in order to become an unlikely figure of authority. The women at Responsibility House—including the motorcycle-obsessed Janet, former prostitute Florine, and house martyr Stacy—challenge Gillian at every step, and eventually inspire her to confront her limitations and find her place in the world.

"[Elisabeth Brink is] clearly a gifted writer with a slant of mind, sense of humor, and turn of phrase all her own." —

"Gillian, like *Save Your Own*, is a keeper." —USA Today

## About the Author

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**Elisabeth Brink** grew up in Boston, graduated from Brown University, and lived for six years in the rural Midwest, where she was an editor at a children's magazine. She went on to work as a technical editor, a high-tech marketing director, a product manager, and a halfway house counselor before earning a Ph.D. in American literature from Brandeis University in 1993. Since then, she has taught writing and literature at Harvard, Tufts, and Boston College. Her fiction has garnered her fellowships in Prague and St. Petersburg, and her stories were nominated for a Pushcart Prize by the late Andre Dubus. *Save Your Own* is her first novel. She lives in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

## Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Save Your Own* for every reader.

1. Do you consider Gillian a strong character? Why or why not? How would you define strength?
2. Some of the characters in the book are former criminals and drug addicts. How—if at all—do you think this might have affected the way you viewed them as you were reading the book?
3. Which characters did you sympathize with most? Which characters did you find the least sympathetic? How did your sympathies shift over the course of the novel?
4. The comic scenes in the novel sometimes veer close to the slapstick, as when Gillian runs up the stairs yelling "A-E-I-O-U and sometimes Y!" at the top of her lungs, or when she tries to teach the women grammar by shouting out "Remember Eliza!" at the dinner table. Discuss the role humor plays in these scenes and throughout the story. How does comedy contribute to the way we experience the book?
5. Much of the conflict at Responsibility House occurs between Stacy, a rigid rule follower, and the rebellious Janet. Which

character is more responsible? More admirable?

**6.** Parts of the plot revolve around the rules laid out in Responsibility House's Handbook of Policies and Procedures. At first Gillian struggles to enforce them, but as time goes on she begins to question them. What leads to this change in her understanding?

**7.** Why is it important to Gillian to write the Pink Book, which reduces the number of rules to two? Do you see the Pink Book as an improvement over the Handbook of Policies and Procedures? Why or why not? What are the dangers inherent in each?

**8.** Gillian continues working on the subject of "secular conversion experiences" even after the committee tells her that it does not approve of her topic. Why do you think she refuses to change her topic? What does this say about her character and actions?

**9.** In your opinion, is there such a thing as a "secular conversion experience"? What are some examples of those experiences in the book? What are some of the ways "conversion" can take place? What else might it be called?

**10.** Gillian doesn't think she's capable of having a conversion experience. Do you think she is right? Why or why not?

**11.** The epilogue summarizes Gillian's life between the ages of twenty-six, when the story takes place, and forty-five, when she tells it. Why do you think the author included an epilogue? Does your perception of Gillian change after reading it? How? Discuss how her earlier experiences may have helped shape the rest of her life.

**12.** What do you think the title, *Save Your Own*, means?

## **A Conversation with Elisabeth Brink**

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**You came to fiction writing relatively late in life. Why was that, and what made you start writing?**

If you had asked me when I was twenty if I would like to be a novelist, I would have said, "Yes, of course." I had always been a voracious reader, had written fiction and poetry on my own, and half my brain lived in a perpetual daydream. But fiction writing seemed an impossible dream. I had been raised to think that being economically self-sufficient and making a useful contribution to society were the highest goals a person

could or should aspire to. Writing couldn't pay the bills, and it wasn't at all clear to me then how a novel could make the world a better place. Looking back, I can see that I was your basic second-generation American. My grandparents were poor immigrants; my parents worked hard and rose into the middle class; my siblings and I were expected to take our opportunities and go the rest of the way to the top. Making art didn't fit in to that scheme.

The problem was, the various professional jobs I tried (publishing, high-tech marketing, advertising) didn't give me much satisfaction. I had a hard time caring whether a particular company made money or not. I ended up enrolling in grad school at thirty as a way, I think, of getting closer to what I loved while satisfying the family mandate to be involved in some kind of practical advancement (although American literature isn't exactly practical). But when I finally got my degree and was offered a tenure-track job at a good university, I turned it down. It's not that I didn't want to teach—I think teaching is a great art—but I couldn't stand the thought of spending all my free time writing scholarly books. I told people that I wanted to dedicate myself to freelance nonfiction writing. But a few months later I got up one morning and wrote the first draft of a short story. I guess you could say that I resisted fiction writing as long as I could. But there was something inevitable about finally arriving at that place.

### **What inspired the character of Gillian?**

Gillian is really a mixture of several people I have known, some of them only briefly. For example, I once knew a very small woman who wore pretty flowered dresses that she must have bought in the children's section of department stores. She was one of the smartest people I'd ever met and never once apologized for herself. I also knew a woman who fit the stereotype of a geek in every possible way. I stopped by her house once, and it was almost bare. There was a couch, a coffee table, and a folding chair in the living room. I had no idea what we would talk about. She ended up telling me that she had been through the foster system and had spent her childhood with her head in a book. Then she talked with passion and imagination about the work she was doing, and I saw quite clearly that her journey through life had been faithful and courageous. People like those two women have a lot to offer. They give you a sense of excitement and possibility.

Of course, not everything I write comes from observation. I

pull a lot of stuff out of nowhere, too. At its most basic level, the novel is just a playground of the imagination, an elaborate daydream floating in mid-air.

### **What's different about writing a comic novel?**

I think when you choose to write comedy, you're choosing to let your characters solve the problems in their lives that can be solved. You're interested in the often surprising ways that people wreak their moments of happiness out of life's ongoing trouble and pain. Comedy is about energy and resourcefulness. It gives a hopeful view of life that balances the heavy tragic perspective. In that sense, it's literary Prozac. Which in no way makes it a lesser form of art. In fact, I think it might belong to a higher consciousness. Statues of the Buddha always show him with that little smile, after all. He knows what's going on.

### **What are you reading?**

I read mostly nonfiction, especially science and psychology. I would love to have four or five more hours every day just for reading. I don't read a lot of fiction for some reason. And I definitely don't read fiction when I'm writing fiction. I need to get away from other voices, wipe my slate clean, and get a lot of empty space around me so I can hear my own ideas. That's why I would never have lasted in an MFA program. Maybe I'm too susceptible to influence, but I would fear being caught in the cookie cutter.

## **A Message from the Author**

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Dear Reader,

Since its publication in hardcover, I've been lucky enough to talk with many different kinds of readers, all wanting to comment on or discuss various aspects of *Save Your Own*. What's been most gratifying is the way people have connected emotionally with Gillian, despite her occasional snarliness. I was surprised when one reader chastised me for making a few of the plot twists too tough on dear Gillian—as though I'd been tormenting a real person! I've discovered that the most enjoyable aspect of publishing a novel is sharing ideas with readers.

That's why I would be happy to speak with your reading group. Perhaps your book club members are curious about the book's title or want to find out who really took the photograph

of Janet and Florine. Or maybe your group wants to have a deeper discussion about subjects like authority and finding your bliss. Wherever you live, I can easily join your group by phone to answer questions and discuss themes. Just visit my website, [www.elisabethbrink.com](http://www.elisabethbrink.com), for more details. Don't be shy about asking. I look forward to talking with your group!

Warm wishes,  
Elisabeth Brink

## For Further Reading

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The following paperbacks from Mariner Books may be of interest to readers who enjoyed Elisabeth Brink's *Save Your Own*:

[My Latest Grievance](#) by [Elinor Lipman](#)

[Tolstoy Lied](#) by [Rachel Kadish](#)

[Crackpots](#) by [Sara Pritchard](#)

[Drives Like a Dream](#) by [Porter Shreve](#)