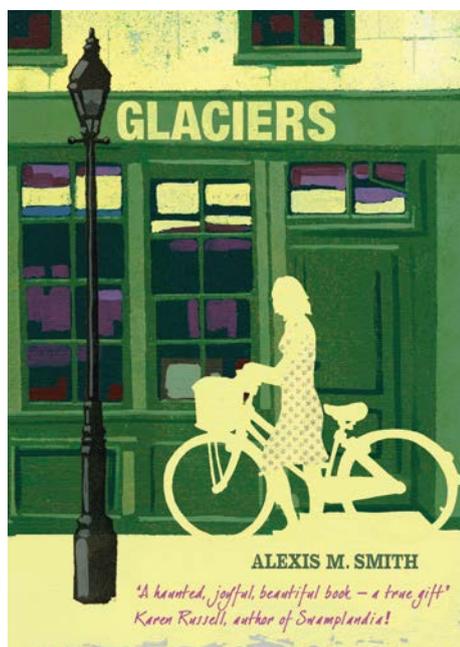




# Oneworld Readers' Guide

## Glaciers



## Glaciers

Alexis M. Smith

A lyrical novel following Isabel through a day in her life - her work with damaged books in the basement of a library, her unrequited love for the former soldier who fixes her computer, and her dreams of the perfect vintage dress.

Isabel resides in Portland, Oregon, where she works in the library restoring and preserving old books. She was born in Seattle but when she was still very young her parents moved back to Alaska, where they had grown up, to find work. She loves 'junking'; going to thrift shops and junk stores where she buys old postcards from cities around the world. The novel opens as she finds a postcard sent from Amsterdam in the 1960s, she buys it and imagines what Amsterdam would be like.

Isabel often dreams of thrift stores; of finding a stash of clothes once belonging to a stylish long-dead dame. She loves vintage and antique items, 'she feels a need to care for them... she loves them like adopted children.' Her father first took her junking when she was four years old, to a Salvation Army Thrift Store in Alaska. She finds three old photographs there and carries them with her through the years, from house to house, the faces becoming as familiar to her as those of her own family. Her parents divorced when she was ten and a year later her mother moved to New Mexico with her new man. She moved with her father and older sister Agnes to Portland.

Working at the library Isabel is drawn to Spoke, a colleague and former soldier in Iraq. She remembers first talking to him at a colleague's barbecue when they discussed his time in Iraq and how he came to have the nickname Spoke. During her lunch hour Isabel goes to a thrift store where she buys a new dress for a party she is going to that evening. She wants to invite Spoke to go with her. The shop owner tells her the dress is probably from the 1960s. Isabel imagines the woman who wore the dress all those years ago. She goes for lunch at a vegetarian Chinese restaurant and bumps into Spoke there. They eat together and he tells her about his grandparents' farm and his grandfather, who was a veterinarian.

That afternoon, back at work, Isabel overhears Spoke talking to their boss about being called back to the army. Isabel releases Spoke is leaving and is both angry and sad. The library holds a short farewell party for Spoke and everyone is stunned that he is leaving; Isabel struggles to hold back tears. At the end of the day, she waits for everyone else to leave until it is only her and Spoke left. They walk to his



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## *Glaciers*

house together and he tells her more about his grandparents; about their love for one another, their deaths, and his enlisting in the army after the sale of their farm. She asks him not to go and they kiss. That evening Isabel attends the party as Spoke sits in an airport terminal waiting for his flight. She enjoys the party, dancing and drinking with friends. The night ends as the remaining party-goers gather in a circle to each tell a story. Isabel is last; she must tell a story about longing. She starts her story and the novel ends as it begins, with Amsterdam.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The book is called *Glaciers*, which in part refers to Isabel's upbringing in Alaska. But do you find the word significant to the rest of the novel?
2. Isabel often refers to herself as living in the past. How does her narrative affirm this view? For example, how important do you think 'memory' is to the story?
3. Certain places are mentioned frequently; Amsterdam, Alaska, Portland, Iraq. How does the author's descriptions of these places colour the telling of the story?
4. Which character did you feel you could relate to the most? Why?
5. The author, like Isabel, grew up in Alaska and now resides in Portland. Did you feel that any parts of the novel were autobiographical and, if so, did this affect how you read the novel? How do you feel about authors drawing from their direct experiences?
6. Consider the secondary characters in the book. Were they important to the overall story? Who stood out most for you?
7. At the end of the novel, the people at the party each tell a story. How significant is storytelling as an act and as a theme in the novel? Perhaps start by considering Isabel's decision to tell a story about longing.
8. Sum up your experience of the book in one word. Explain your choice.

### Further Reading

*Girl Meets Boy* by Ali Smith

*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

*A Million Heavens* by John Brandon



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*The Book of Jonas* by Stephen Dau

*The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Aimee Bender

*Crapalachia: A Biography of Place* by Scott McClanahan

*Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* by Jamie Ford

*Mink River* by Brian Doyle

## About the Author

Alexis M. Smith grew up in Soldotna, Alaska. She attended Portland State University and Goddard College, where she earned an MFA in Creative Writing. Her writing has appeared in *Tarpaulin Sky* and on Powells.com. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her son and two cats.

Find out more at [www.alexismsmith.com](http://www.alexismsmith.com) and follow her on Twitter [@AMargaretSmith](https://twitter.com/AMargaretSmith).