



# As Close to Us as Breathing: A Novel

By Elizabeth Poliner

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**As Close to Us as Breathing: A Novel** By Elizabeth Poliner

**An Amazon Best Book of the Year** A multigenerational family saga about the long-lasting reverberations of one tragic summer by "a wonderful talent [who] should be read widely" (Edward P. Jones).

In 1948, a small stretch of the Woodmont, Connecticut shoreline, affectionately named "Bagel Beach," has long been a summer destination for Jewish families. Here sisters Ada, Vivie, and Bec assemble at their beloved family cottage, with children in tow and weekend-only husbands who arrive each Friday in time for the Sabbath meal.

During the weekdays, freedom reigns. Ada, the family beauty, relaxes and grows more playful, unimpeded by her rule-driven, religious husband. Vivie, once terribly wronged by her sister, is now the family diplomat and an increasingly inventive chef. Unmarried Bec finds herself forced to choose between the family-centric life she's always known and a passion-filled life with the married man with whom she's had a secret years-long affair.

But when a terrible accident occurs on the sisters' watch, a summer of hope and self-discovery transforms into a lifetime of atonement and loss for members of this close-knit clan. Seen through the eyes of Molly, who was twelve years old when she witnessed the accident, this is the story of a tragedy and its aftermath, of expanding lives painfully collapsed. Can Molly, decades after the event, draw from her aunt Bec's hard-won wisdom and free herself from the burden that destroyed so many others?

Elizabeth Poliner is a masterful storyteller, a brilliant observer of human nature, and in *As Close to Us as Breathing* she has created an unforgettable meditation on grief, guilt, and the boundaries of identity and love.

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## **As Close to Us as Breathing: A Novel By Elizabeth Poliner Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

**An Amazon Best Book of March 2016:** Reviewers of this wonderful, moving novel will surely compare it to the works of Allegra Goodman, whose *Kaaterskill Falls*, in particular, introduced many readers to the world of ultra-observant Jewish families, their traditions and their guarded relationship with the secular, non-Jewish society. And this book does follow some of the same themes. But as I read it (in two obsessive sessions--remember binge-reading?), the book it more readily brought to mind was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like the late Harper Lee's masterpiece, *As Close To Us as Breathing*, revolves around the events of one summer, is told from the point of view of a pre-adolescent girl, and shows how a single terrible event forever changes her, her family and her community. "The summer of 1948 my brother Davy was killed in an accident," 12 year old Molly says on page 1-- and so I was hooked. Yes, of course, I wanted to know the hows and whens and wheres of what happened to this little boy, whom we come to know as a beloved annoyance to his siblings--they actually call him "squirt" sometimes. But what held my attention as much as the wondering about Davy was the unfurling of the back story of this matriarchal family. Set on a strip of Connecticut beach that welcomed Jews at a time when most did not--it was affectionately known as Bagel Beach--Davy's mother and her two adult sisters share a cottage with their children for the summer. (The men, involved in a family business in New Haven, only come on weekends.) And what wonderful, proud, competitive, loving and demanding women these sisters are! One of them is married to another's old boyfriend, one is having a love affair with a goy (non-Jew), all are trying to preserve their traditions and still live their lives. Occasionally, readers may be confused about exactly what is happening when--Molly is narrating as a modern adult, the story goes back and forth over several decades-- but that's a minor quibble in a novel this layered and deep. *As Close to Us as Breathing* is full of characters who are at once typical and original and whose story of faith, guilt and family is timeless. --Sara Nelson

### Review

"Vivid, complex, and beautifully written, Elizabeth Poliner's novel, *As Close to Us as Breathing*, brims with characters who leave an indelible impression on the mind and heart. This moving story of the way one unforgettable family struggles with love and loss shows an uncommon depth of human understanding. Elizabeth Poliner is a wonderful talent and she should be read widely, and again and again." ?**Edward P. Jones, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Known World***

"What a lovely, lovely book." ?**Elizabeth Strout, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Olive Kitteridge***

"Poliner depicts each character with sensitivity and insight...Beautifully written, stringently unsentimental, and yet tender in its empathy for the perennial human conflict between service and self." ?**Kirkus (Starred Review)**

"Poliner's novel is an exquisitely written investigation of grief and atonement, and an elegy for a Jewish family bound together by tradition and tribe." ?**Publishers Weekly**

"Beautiful.... A nuanced, intricate family drama that explores their tight culture at a turning point.... [It's] the kind of novel you sink into blissfully. It casts a spell.... [Poliner's] characters seem so real, so multi-dimensional, so sympathetic even when they mess up that you have to shake yourself back to the present each time you put down the book.... *As Close to Us As Breathing* is a marvel of artful storytelling." ?**NPR.org**

"Resonant, sensitively observed...Poliner has a keen eye for the awkwardness and sudden leaping insights of adolescents on the brink of adulthood....Poliner also deserves kudos for the warm, particularized light in which she dresses her many characters. *As Close to Us as Breathing* is a big-hearted roundelay of a novel that, among other things, performs the invaluable service of recovering a lost world." ***New York Times Book Review***

"If summer, for you, recalls days spent by the seashore, Poliner's saga of three Jewish sisters and the beachfront cottage they share with their families--until life-altering tragedy strikes--will enthrall you." ***O, the Oprah Magazine***

"An instant classic.... Poliner handles the texture of Jewish family life with brilliance, authenticity, and a touch of wistfulness." ***Jewish Book Council***

"Superb...As *Close to Us as Breathing* is a beautiful, complex, character-driven novel. In the author's capable hands, every one of Poliner's characters feels real. And, just as in reality, some of them succumb to life's challenging circumstances. And, just as in reality, some of them succumb to life's challenging circumstances. And some of them ultimately soar." ***Jerusalem Post***

#### About the Author

Elizabeth Poliner is the author of *Mutual Life & Casualty*, a novel-in-stories, and the forthcoming collection of poems, *What You Know in Your Hands*. Her stories and poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Colorado Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and many other journals. A recipient of seven individual artist grants from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, she has also been awarded fiction scholarships to the Bread Loaf and Sewanee writers' conferences. She teaches creative writing at Hollins University.

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