



The novelist and screenwriter Gabrielle Zevin in Los Angeles, March 14, 2023. Her latest novel, “Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow,” which follows two video game developers who endure creative highs and lows that parallel Zevin’s own meandering path as a novelist, became a blockbuster with staying power. (Michael Schmelling/The New York Times)

by Alexandra Alter

NEW YORK, NY.- Five and a half years ago, Gabrielle Zevin was in a slump. She had recently published her ninth novel, and sales were sluggish.

She needed a distraction, so she turned, as she often does, to video games. But when she tried to play the adventure game Gold Rush, she discovered that the version she had played obsessively as a kid no longer existed. It felt like a chapter of her childhood had been erased. “This part of my life was gone,” she said.

The feeling of loss yielded a kernel of an idea, which Zevin jotted in a notebook: “Story of two game designers. The games they make are their lives.”

Those two sentences eventually grew into her latest novel, “Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow,” which follows two video game developers who endure creative highs and lows that parallel Zevin’s own meandering path as a novelist.

Zevin had initially figured that there wouldn’t be much of an audience for a literary novel set in the world of game development. So she was elated last summer when the novel became a word-of-mouth phenomenon, fueled by passionate independent booksellers, book clubs and zealous fans posting on social media.

Even more surprising than the novel’s breakout success is its staying power. “Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow,” which came out in July, has remained on the New York Times bestseller list for 33 weeks and sold more than 1 million copies globally. So far this year, it has sold some 575,000 copies in the United States, outpacing last year’s sales of 300,000. It has racked up around 175,000 five-star ratings on Goodreads and roughly 28,000 on Amazon. It is currently the No. 3 bestselling adult hardcover fiction title of 2023, according to Circana BookScan.

The relentless buzz has put Zevin in an odd position as a midcareer novelist. Even though “Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow” is not her first book, or even her first to be a bestseller, many readers are coming to her work for the first time. (Oprah Daily mistakenly called it “one of the year’s most ingenious debuts.”)

“When someone has a breakout moment like this, people are always like, ‘Oh, you appeared out of nowhere,’” said novelist Celeste Ng, who praised the book as “a page turner but also, really, this technical marvel.”

“She didn’t come out of nowhere,” Ng said.

Zevin has been publishing at a frenetic pace for nearly two decades, and yet she has rarely repeated herself. Since her debut in 2005, she has written a family drama about war and capitalism, a futuristic dystopian series for young adults, a fablelike YA novel about the afterlife, a quirky novel about a cranky bookseller who unexpectedly finds love and a biting funny one about politics, sexism and the double standards women face for sexual indiscretions.

“She has had it all in her career, she’s had a global smash, but she’s also had books that absolutely failed to connect for whatever reason,” said Emma Straub, a novelist and an owner of the independent New York City store Books Are Magic, where “Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and

Tomorrow” has been the top-selling title this year. “For those of us on the backside of 40 who have half a dozen books under our belts, this is so beautiful to watch. She is operating at the height of her powers, and people are noticing.”

Growing up in Boca Raton, Florida, where both of her parents worked for IBM, Zevin was lonely most of the time. The only child of a Korean American mother and a Jewish father, she often felt culturally adrift and out of place. One day, her father, a programmer, brought home a computer loaded with games, including Alley Cat, in which the player is a mischievous cat who jumps through windows into different apartments. “I remember thinking that the game solved a very particular problem for me, which was the problem of solitude,” she said. “It became like an instant friend.”

From there, she discovered games such as King’s Quest IV and Oregon Trail, which felt like immersive worlds she could disappear into. “These were really formative stories for me,” she said.

She majored in English at Harvard University, where she met her partner, director Hans Canosa. After graduating, they moved to New York. Zevin worked furiously on film scripts and plays. One day, she had an idea that didn’t seem right for any of those formats. It became her novel “Elsewhere,” about a teenage girl who dies in a bike accident and wakes up in an afterlife where people age backward until they are reborn. Around the same time, she had the idea for “Margarettown,” a surreal novel about a young man whose love for a woman named Margaret draws him into an alternate world.

Both novels were published in 2005, when Zevin was 27, but they had wildly different trajectories. Critics praised “Margarettown,” which Miramax Books published as an adult novel, but it failed commercially, selling around 4,200 print copies, according to Circana BookScan. “Elsewhere,” a young adult novel that Farrar, Straus and Giroux released several months later, went on to sell more than 350,000 copies.

Over the next eight years, Zevin wrote at a frenetic pace. She published another young-adult novel and a futuristic YA trilogy, and she spent years working on another literary novel, “The Hole We’re In,” about a family struggling with financial debt. But nothing matched the commercial success of “Elsewhere.”

Then, in 2014, Zevin released “The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry,” a love letter to literary culture that centers on an ornery bookstore owner with narrow taste whose horizons are expanded when he falls in love. For reasons that still mystify Zevin, it became a global blockbuster, selling more than 850,000 copies in the United States and more than 4 million worldwide. It was adapted into a feature film in 2022 that was based on a screenplay Zevin wrote, with Canosa, her partner, as the director.

Again, it seemed like Zevin’s breakout moment, and again, success proved fleeting. Three years later, when she published “Young Jane Young,” about a congressional intern who is publicly shamed for having an affair with her boss, it drew strong reviews but sold fewer than 10,000 hardcover

copies.

Zevin wallowed for a bit, unsure of what to do next. When she had the idea for a novel about game designers in late 2017, she worried that she wouldn't be able to pull it off. Even though she had played video games all her life, she knew next to nothing about how they were made.

“It seemed that the subject was so vast, and I knew that if it were to work, it would have to be probably better than anything I had done before,” she said.

She spent years researching the novel, which spans some three decades in the lives of Sam and Sadie. They bond over video games as children and then build a successful company together, making increasingly sophisticated games as technology improves.

Zevin read books about gaming culture and design and watched gamers on YouTube and the livestreaming service Twitch. She played old video games like the original Super Mario Bros. and newer ones that she wouldn't normally be drawn to, like first-person shooter games, and immersed herself in cinematic-quality ones like *The Last of Us*. During the hours she spent playing, she was often struck by the games' narrative complexity and ability to conjure empathy.

A few times, Zevin almost abandoned the book, worried that the subject wouldn't resonate with a wide audience.

When her literary agent, Douglas Stewart, sent out the manuscript in January 2021, he felt in some ways as if he were introducing her for the first time. “Despite the fact that Gabrielle had several big successes before, there are people who had never heard of her before this,” he said.

A frenzied bidding war with 10 publishers broke out, and Knopf won, paying a seven-figure advance. Shortly after, an auction for screen rights drew 25 bidders, and Paramount Pictures bought them for \$2 million. Foreign rights sold in 37 territories. Zevin went on “*The Tonight Show*” with Jimmy Fallon.

The novel landed on the New York Times bestseller list at No. 3 in July and stayed for eight weeks before dropping off. Then, in December, critics' best-of-2022 lists gave the novel a second life, and it sailed back onto the bestseller lists. Knopf, which initially printed 60,000 copies, has reprinted the book 21 times to keep up with runaway sales. This spring, big stores like Walmart and Target, as well as some grocery chains, started carrying it for the first time.

Zevin, who lives in Los Angeles with Canosa and their dogs, Frank, a pug mix, and Leia, a dachshund mix, is writing the screenplay for “*Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*,” a project that presents new narrative challenges.

Looking back, Zevin said she felt fortunate that she was able to carve such an eclectic path, without confining herself to a particular niche.

“I’ve had enough successes,” she said, “to balance out the failures over the years.”

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