





## DEAR READERS,

Thanks so much for choosing *The Other Me* for your book club! I've been in book groups for much of my adult life, and I love getting to read and talk about books that might not otherwise be on my radar (the snacks are pretty good, too). Some of my favorite reads have come to me through my book club, and I've made great friends there.

When I started work on *The Other Me*, I had very little idea of how to write a novel. I wasn't thinking of it as a thriller, or science fiction, or about how to fit it into any one genre at all. I was trying to write a book that I would want to read, and that meant crossing genre boundaries and skewing reality. Growing up, the stories that resonated with me the most had supernatural or fantastical elements: characters who could do magic, had psychic powers, or traveled to alternate worlds. I still love speculative fiction, so when I decided to write a book, the idea that spoke loudest to me was a premise that might not be possible in the real world, but still felt familiar.

I also knew I wanted the book to be steeped in a feminist sensibility, but with a dark twist. I've seen firsthand how the decisions we make—sometimes without thinking too much about them at the time—can affect us for the rest of our lives, and how the people we choose to spend time with can shape our personalities and determine our trajectories. So . . . what if those choices were taken away all at once? What if you chose one life, then got plucked out of it and set down in a completely different one? Would you adapt, or try to get back to your old life at all costs? And what if you found out the person closest to you, someone you were supposed to trust, might be responsible for what happened to you?

As with most authors, aspects of my personality and experiences show up in my characters. Kelly's voice took up residence in my brain very early on. I spent much of my twenties as a rock musician, slowly letting go of the dream of making a living at it, so right away I knew she'd be some kind of creative, and that she'd struggle with the tension between her calling and the realities of surviving as an artist. I knew that after years of swimming against the current, she might be tempted to resign herself to the easier—if less fulfilling—life she found herself in, and that she'd have to find a way to fight that impulse. Eric might have been in my head even earlier; for good or ill, he's like me in a lot of ways. I'm so interested to see how readers respond to him.

I hope *The Other Me* gives you plenty to talk about, and again, thank you so much for picking it up.

**SARAH**



# A Conversation With **SARAH ZACHRICH JENG**

**Tell us about *The Other Me*! What compelled you to write this novel?**

One of *The Other Me*'s early readers called it "sci-fi without science" and I think that's a great description. There's a tech-related explanation for how Kelly, my main character, suddenly finds herself living a different life. However, the actual reason behind it is character driven, which tracks with the "soft" science fiction that has always resonated the most with me. I also really like stories that upset reality for their characters and audience (I'm a big David Lynch fan). So my goal with *The Other Me* was to write a book that would mess with people's heads, but also have plenty of emotion and a satisfying character arc.

**In *The Other Me*, Kelly steps through a door on her twenty-ninth birthday and finds herself living a totally different life than the one she had built for herself. How did you come up with this idea?**

**\*\*\*HERE THERE BE SPOILERS\*\*\***

I wanted to look at a wish-fulfillment time-travel narrative (guy wants girl, guy loses girl, guy goes back in time and gets girl) from the other perspective. What would that look like for the girl? How does her life change, and is she even aware of what she's lost? (Obviously she is, or there's no story.) The more I explored that, the creepier it started to feel. Eric takes over Kelly's life and steers it in a whole different direction, without asking her how she feels about it. I wanted to take that to a conclusion that felt both logical and emotionally resonant.



**Your book touches on themes of fate and choice, as Kelly examines the life she normally leads compared with the one she finds herself living—but Kelly is also reminded that she has chosen the people who are present in her life. Do you think our choices define who we are? And do you think that we leave some people behind for a reason?**

I think our choices absolutely define who we are. Not completely, since we don't have control over all aspects of our lives, but our daily habits can either amplify or suppress core traits and encourage the development of new ones. Even if someone winds up living a lifestyle that seems at odds with how they see themselves, they're still going through those motions every day so that becomes, to some extent, who they are. That's part of what freaks Kelly out so much about suddenly morphing into a suburban work-from-home housewife—she's afraid that at some point that will be all that's left of her.

Our big relationships, whatever their nature, all leave their stories inside us. More than once, my life has completely changed direction because I became close with someone, and I think that's true for a lot of people. We're different from who we would be if we'd never met that person and had those experiences with them. Sometimes those relationships end, for whatever reason, but their traces remain. I'm not a big believer in the sentiment that everything happens for a reason, but I think we can take value and wisdom from negative experiences as well as positive ones.

**The novel's protagonist, Kelly, is an artist. What do you have in common? What are your hobbies?**

I'm a former rock musician so I'm well acquainted with the difficulty (my parents called it "impossibility") of making a living doing something artistic. You have to fit your creative work into whatever space is left between sleeping, eating, and the job that pays your bills. I tried to get some of that into the parts of the book that deal with Kelly's career as an artist. It's a balancing act for her, and that's the case with my writing as well. I still have a day job, family responsibilities, and all the other life stuff that hasn't gone away with a publishing contract. So writing and reading are still my main "hobbies" even though they're now my side hustle as well.

**What was the most challenging part of writing this novel?**

**\*\*\*SPOILER ALERT\*\*\***

Getting the time loops right! Not only did I need to decide how many to have and what the pivotal events of each do-over would be, but I also had to keep track of what each character knew or remembered at any given point in the story and how events in one timeline might affect either that timeline or a different one. I made a lot of diagrams and lists.

### What kind of research was required to write *The Other Me*?

I researched the art world and women artists through both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to get an idea of what qualifications and training they would need and what a woman artist just starting her career would be up against. It's demoralizing how difficult it is for someone who's not from a privileged background to even get started—Kelly's scholarship to art school was necessary to the plot and technically possible, but not terribly realistic. I thought the tension between her drive to create and the necessity of making a living was a little more true to life.

I had some background knowledge of startup culture, but things are always changing, so I read up on that. Much of what made it into the book is exaggerated, but some, unfortunately, is not.

#### \*\*\*SPOILERS SPOILERS SPOILERS\*\*\*

I did a lot of reading on the capabilities of artificial intelligence, as well as the physics of time travel and what human time travel might look like. The final book doesn't end up using much of that science, since the form of time travel that takes place in *The Other Me*—the ability for someone to send their current consciousness back to their younger body in order to live parts of their life over again—is not physically possible, as far as we know. But I was less interested in completely accurate science than exploring themes of identity and fate, so I hope any physicists or AI experts among my readers will forgive me.

I did end up including one (originally unintentional) Easter egg. I had decided on “gnii” as the name of both the time-travel app and the company that produced it in an early draft. Then, when I was doing more science research, I came across a paper cited by several armchair time-travel experts called “The Jinn of the Time Machine,” by physicists Andrei Lossev and Igor Novikov. The paper theorized the existence of objects—or information—that could pass backward in time without causing a paradox. Lossev and Novikov referred to these items as Jinn or Genii, which felt really serendipitous.

### If *The Other Me* became a movie, who would you cast as its main characters?

I'm hopelessly behind when it comes to keeping up with actors! Here's one dream cast:

Kelly: Lizzy Caplan

Eric: Ben Barnes

Linnea: Kylie Bunbury

Peter: Domhnall Gleeson

Adam: Allen Leech

And I'd die happy if Kathryn Hahn were to play Kelly's mom or an aged-down Doris (the nosy neighbor)!



### What do you hope readers will take away from *The Other Me*?

Obviously I hope they'll be entertained and taken down a fun rabbit hole thinking about what they'd do in a similar situation to Kelly's. But I'd also be happy to elicit some thoughts about how women are often expected to prioritize romantic relationships and family life over our own ambitions and desires, and also how often men vs. women are considered to be the protagonists in both real-life and made-up stories.

### What are you working on next?

I'm writing another speculative suspense novel. It's about two very different women who were close friends in college but have become estranged, and what happens when their lives intersect again.

### What inspires you to write?

Almost anything! Surreal dreams, other books and shows, articles about futuristic technology that will affect people's lives in unforeseen ways, my desire to stick it to everyone who has ever wronged or doubted me . . . (Just kidding about that last one. Sort of.)

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## ABOUT SARAH ZACHRICH JENG

Sarah Zachrich Jeng grew up in Michigan and always had a flair for the morbid and mysterious (for her dad's thirty-fifth birthday, she wrote a story entitled "The Man Who Died at 35"). She had a brief career as an aspiring rock star before she came to her senses and went back to school to become a web developer. Sarah lives in Florida with her family and an extremely hyper rescue dog. *The Other Me* is her first novel.

**SarahZJ.com**  **SarahZJ**  **SarahZachrichJengAuthor**  **Sarah\_EZJ**



## THE OTHER ME PLAYLIST

**“Once in a Lifetime”**

by Talking Heads

**“You’re So Cool”**

by Jonathan Bree

**“No Scrubs”**

by TLC

**“Contract”**

by Gang of Four

**“Nobody”**

by Drama & Gorgon City

**“You Don’t Own Me”**

by Polića

**“Emerald Star”**

by Lord Huron

**“Sinner”**

by Hannah Williams & the Affirmations

**“I’m Lost Without You”**

by Marlon Williams

**“Toxic”**

by Britney Spears

**“Woman Alone”**

by Nots

**“Night Vision”**

by Fever Queen

**“Time”**

by Los Yesterdays

## SARAH’S PERENNIAL REREADS LIST

***The Sun Down Motel***

Simone St. James

***The Inheritance Trilogy***

N.K. Jemisin

***The Murderbot Diaries***

Martha Wells

***Claire DeWitt Mysteries***

Sara Gran

***Firestarter***

Stephen King

***Alias Grace***

Margaret Atwood

***Kindred***

Octavia E. Butler

***Jamaica Inn***

Daphne du Maurier

***Stories of Your Life and Others***

Ted Chiang

***Get in Trouble***

Kelly Link

***The Idiot***

Elif Batuman

***Pale Horse, Pale Rider***

Katherine Anne Porter

***The Kiss Quotient***

Helen Hoang

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1.

The book has two epigraphs, one a quotation from *The Second Sex* and the other from the Underground Man in *Notes from the Underground*. How do you think they relate to the novel? Why do you think the author chose them?

2.

The two versions of Kelly's life at twenty-nine look very different based on choices she made as a teenager. What do you think your life would look like if you had made different decisions when you were younger? What events or choices have been the main crossroads of your life?

3.

Why do you think Kelly tried to distance herself from her roots when she lived in Chicago?

4.

Why do you think Kelly doesn't try to tell anyone about the double memories she is experiencing? What does that say about how isolated she feels in her new life, and how reliable she thinks her memories of her old life are?

5.

There are several examples of female friendship in the novel. How is Kelly's friendship with Linnea different from her relationship with her high school friend Katie? How do Linnea and Katie represent the changes that have taken place in Kelly's life?

6.

How does Eric's behavior serve as an example of toxic masculinity? Do you think his treatment of Kelly was abusive? Why or why not?

7.

Except for Eric's session reports, the story is told from Kelly's point of view. Do you feel the present tense, first-person narration enhanced or diminished your enjoyment of the book? Why do you think the author chose this way of telling the story?

8.

Several passages in the book touch upon the impossibility of truly knowing another person. What erroneous beliefs do you think Eric holds about Kelly? What inaccurate beliefs does she have about him?



**9.**

The novel's characters travel back in time using technology. What problems might a widely available "time machine" cause—or solve? Would you use such a device if it existed? Do you think people you know would use it?

**10.**

What are your thoughts about the measure of redemption Eric gets at the end of the novel? Do you think he earned it?

**11.**

At the end of the book, Kelly has attained professional success but is not in a relationship. In what ways are women told they cannot be fulfilled without a partner? Do men get the same message? How can this focus on romantic love impede women's career advancement?

**12.**

Were you satisfied with the book's ending? Why do you think the author chose to leave some things unresolved?