

Book Review: The Things We Never Say
By Elizabeth Strout

It's not often that a novel fills me with a wide range of mixed emotions. But "The Things We Never Say" by Elizabeth Strout is one of the exceptions.

First, let's set the stage.

Artie Dam is a 57-year-old high school history teacher. He lives with Evie, his wife of 34 years, on the Massachusetts coast where he frequently enjoys getting his sailboat out on the water. He's genuinely liked by students and peers, and previously received a Teacher of the Year Award.

Life is pretty good, right?

Then why is Artie shadowed by such a dark cloud?

For the past two months he has harbored thoughts on how to kill himself. He's also obsessed with whether people have free will. Neither of these subjects are ever discussed with his wife, with whom his conversations are very superficial.

The story is set in 2024 immediately following the Covid pandemic and the buildup to the November presidential election. Both of those events seem to have a profound negative impact on Artie's outlook on life personally, and tangentially the world his students will be inheriting. Subsequent personal reveals (which I won't share here) seem to further derail him.

But is life really that bad? It is for Artie Dam who, despite being surrounded by people who clearly like him, doesn't seem to like himself. Or the person he has become. At least that's part of what I take from the narrative.

But what's *not* clear is *why* he feels this way.

The story prompted me to wonder whether there are things I have left unsaid to those I care about, while simultaneously leaving me emotionally depressed. It's hard for me to identify

with Artie, but that's just me, personally. Because he is, or has become, a glass-is-half-empty person who will find the dark cloud in every silver lining. And his constant brooding was a little hard for me to overcome.

I'm certain there are people (many?) in this country who, like Artie, came out of the pandemic with a changed outlook on life. Combine that with his distraught reaction to the results of the 2024 presidential election and he's left completely dispirited.

I understand those feelings. It was just a little depressing to read about, which I guess means the writing was pretty good. Nevertheless, just three stars for "The Things We Never Say." The negative heaviness of the narrative was just too much for me.