

# THE WHOLE WORLD

## The Story Behind the Story

*"It happened just around what would have been Thanksgiving. Home was, no doubt, drenched in crackling, flashy leaves. England does the season differently. Students at Cambridge are discouraged from having cars, so autumn comes with a flurry of bicycles. Leaves barely bother to brown before falling listlessly--the bikes make up for that in their number, variety, and motion. They swirl everywhere, as if blown into little cyclones by the wind. I used to live in New Hampshire, which is all spectacular falls and knee-high winters, and summers thick with humidity and mosquitoes. It's a parade of nature there; that's what makes it special. But here in Cambridge, instead of trees and mountains and extremes of weather, there are buildings, all these towers, like something cartoonishly Atlantean that you'd put in a fish tank for guppies to swim through. Everything is made of stone, not clapboard. This city is like people, instead of God, made the world, and turned out to be good at this creation business."*

--From **THE WHOLE WORLD** by Emily Winslow



(Photo credit: Helen Bartlett)

In 2006, I moved from the U.S. to England with my British husband and two little boys. Our dream house in Cambridge was almost complete, and we moved in while it was still technically a building site, with an office in the garage and twenty or so hard-working guys we didn't yet know wandering in and out all day. I was eager to get away from the hammering and painting to explore the city. Cambridge's architecture thrilled me. The way some people get about sunsets and mountains? That's how I get about great buildings. The University's 31 colleges aren't hidden away on a campus; they permeate the city with stone walls, towers, and gatehouses. The river esses through, crossed nine times by unique footbridges. Medieval student rooms still house students, and vast lawns, striped by vigilant mowing, fill ancient courtyards. And the people! Everyone's passionate about something. Sometimes the passions are academic and specific, about how ice forms on airplane wings or the history of punctuation; sometime the passions are intensely pursued pastimes, such as gardening or birds. I hardly feel foreign here, because Cambridge is very international. And transient, as students and scholars pass through for just a few years each. I've been here four years now, and feel like a local.

My novel began as my attempt to describe it all. I wanted to capture some of that thrill I first felt. I used two American narrators, because of the way Americans gawk at the city, and three British ones. I've worked hard to make each narrator's vocabulary and sentence structure reflect their nationality, but the options are more subjective than that. Americans here absorb British words from the conversations around them, and the Brits pick up Americanisms from the media. Each character's word choices show something about what they resist and what they cling to, and the ways they're willing to adapt. **THE WHOLE WORLD** is a mystery, kick-started by the disappearance of a graduate student, told through five characters whose assumptions and expectations limit what they're able to perceive and understand about the circumstances they share.