

A town is shaped, in large measure, by the people who live there. Los Altos Hills is home to innovators and pioneers in the area of politics, technology, business, medicine, philanthropy, the arts, and environment, among others. The profile page of *Our Town* will feature some of these residents who, through their unique talents, spirit, and efforts, make Los Altos Hills a vibrant and fascinating community.

ELLEN SUSSMAN

Ellen Sussman is a bestselling-writer who has lived in Los Altos Hills with her husband and two daughters for more than 15 years. She is the author of three novels and two anthologies.

You were born in New Jersey. You have lived in many major cities in America, and have lived abroad. How did you come to live in Los Altos Hills?
When we moved back to the States from Paris, we wanted to move someplace new and beautiful. We knew it would be hard to leave Paris, so we were hoping that our new home would offer something different. The first time I went hiking in the Santa Cruz Mountains, just ten minutes from our house, I knew that I'd love living in Los Altos Hills.

What do you love about the town?
The mountains. The proximity to the beach and the city. The fact that we feel as if we're living in the country even though we're so close to everything.

Tell us about your education and early mentors.
I went to Tufts University for my undergraduate degree and Johns Hopkins University for a graduate degree in creative writing. Jonathan Strong was my teacher and mentor during college (and for many years after); he was a wonderful writer. He taught me that the most important thing is to write; not to publish or promote or sell — it's to write.

Many writers like the high energy of big city life, and the instant access to culture and the arts. How do you deal with that chasm between small, rural town life and a cosmopolitan life?
I'm a funny mix of introvert and extrovert. I love my quiet life at home and yet I crave the big city. My husband and I go into San Francisco a couple of nights a week for plays and lectures and dinners with friends.

What aspects of town life inspire you as a writer?
I hike in the hills a couple of days a week. And I walk my dog in the neighborhood every day. That's my best inspiration. I often work through writing problems while hiking.



All of my good teachers stand behind me when I teach. I've learned from so many of them — elementary school teachers, high school teachers, college and grad school.

Teaching has been a thread woven throughout your professional career. Was there a specific teacher that inspired you?

All of my good teachers stand behind me when I teach. I've learned from so many of them — elementary school teachers, high school teachers, college and grad school. I take teaching very seriously and I try to make my classes very dynamic.

Tell us about the classes you teach.

I teach private classes out of my house and I also teach through Stanford Continuing Studies. One of my favorite private classes is called Novel in a Year. Students commit to writing a novel in a year and I work with them to get that done, then I critique the novel at the end of the year.

In an interview you called yourself "a very social animal." Is teaching small seminars and supporting writers a way to balance solitude and community?

Yes, writing is a lonely job! And publishing is a crazy-making business! So I like to create

support systems so that we writers don't feel so alone in the process.

Some writers live very solitary, introspective lives, but you have been very involved in the writing community. Is this an important part of your legacy?

I'm a writer first and foremost. But yes, I do love building community. When I first started writing in the Bay Area, I didn't know any writers. I started an organization called Word of Mouth, Bay Area (WOMBA) for published women writers. We now have over 80 women in the organization! And I'm very involved with Litquake, a fabulous organization that brings writers and readers together.

Is there a theme that runs through your novels/work?

I now see that there is one theme that runs through my work — it's loss. I lost my father when I was 15 and my mother when I was in my early 30s. It's something that has shaped me. And I suppose I keep working it out on the page. I also write about the power of love to transform us.

You just published a new novel, *The Paradise Guest House*. Tell us a little about what inspired the story and what issues you wanted to explore.

My husband and I traveled to Bali a few weeks after the terrorist attacks there. The country is spectacularly beautiful and the Balinese people are lovely. But they were struggling to understand what had happened to them. By the end of the trip I had an idea for a novel: a young American woman returns to Bali a year after she was caught in the terrorist attacks. She tries to find the man who saved her. The novel gave me a chance to tell a dramatic story while learning about Bali and the people.

Any advice for young writers?

Get a day job — and then write, write, write! Take writing classes. Find a writing community. Most importantly, put your butt in the chair and write.

