



One Great Book: Volume 1, Episode 1
The Lola Quintet by Emily St. John Mandel

[Show Notes](#)

The Lola Quartet

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume 1, Book 1: *The Lola Quartet*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to One Great Book, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it.

[MUSIC]

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[1:08]

Readers, the story behind today's book—actually, the story behind this new podcast—starts almost a year ago, at the beach. I was on vacation with my family, and something I love about our regular beach week is that I always get a TON of reading in. I shoot for a book a day and sometimes finish more than that. Early in our trip I shared an Instagram story about what I was reading that day: it was a novel called *The Lola Quartet* by *Station Eleven* author Emily St John Mandel. I shared a photo of the book cover, and I talked about how even though my paperback copy was brand new it was looking a little dingy because I was reading it at the pool, and it had gotten a little damp, and I asked if you all thought I was doing my book grievous harm by reading it by the water.

I expected you to have strong opinions, but I was REALLY surprised by the responses I got to that Instagram story. Literally dozens of readers messaged me and said some version of the following: I'm so excited that Emily St John Mandel has a new book coming out. I loved her first book *Station Eleven*. How long do I have to wait to read the new one?

Now, these assumptions are not unreasonable. Mandel does have a new book in the works: *The Glass Hotel* is expected later this year. And yes I am one of the readers who cannot wait for it. And back then as is my habit, I *did* take a stack of advanced review copies—that means, books that haven't actually been published yet—to the beach. So you knew I was reading things that hadn't been published yet. But *The Lola Quartet* wasn't one of them. It came out in May 2012. It was Emily St John Mandel's third book, following her first two, *The Singers Gun* and



Last Night in Montreal. But your responses made me realize that not enough readers—even readers who LOVED her fourth novel, *Station Eleven*—know about *The Lola Quartet*.

That experience planted the seed of the idea for One Great Book. I wanted a way to highlight books I love that you may have missed or forgotten about, but that you'll be glad to discover—again, or for the first time.

So today we're beginning, fittingly enough, with *The Lola Quartet*.

[MUSIC]

[3:17]

Like her blockbuster hit *Station Eleven*, in this novel Emily St John Mandel fuses a careful, literary writing style with a mystery. This book grabs your attention right from the start, and by that I mean I read the opener out loud to my husband at the pool because I was so impressed. In the opening line we meet a 17-year-old girl who's living in hiding with her infant daughter. Two paragraphs later we get this zinger: "there was a plastic shopping bag duct-taped to the underside of the stroller. It held a little under one hundred eighteen thousand dollars in cash."

I mean, WHAT is happening here? At this point we're still on the first page. And of course I wanted to know, What. Happens. Next?

Well, what happens next is we meet the members of *The Lola Quartet*, one by one, first, in flashback. They met as high school students in Florida: Gavin played trumpet, Jack played sax, Daniel played bass, Sasha played drums. If you're thinking, hmmm, this setup sounds a lot like last summer's smash debut *The Ensemble*, you're not wrong. The books are far from readalikes—one is essentially a dysfunctional family story, the other a literary mystery—but if you enjoy one, you're likely to enjoy the other, so jot that down in your reading journal. But for



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The Lola Quartet—these kids are linked, by music—even though, ten years later, their lives have gone in different—and disappointing—directions.

Ten years later, here's where we are. Gavin's sister encounters a girl who bears an uncanny resemblance to Gavin, and whose last name is the same as his old girlfriend's from high school. His sister is convinced that this child *must* be her niece—her brother's daughter—and so she sneaks a photo and sends it to her brother so he can see for himself. But someone else sees her take that photo, and the ramifications of that single photograph... they are impressive, and terrible.

Later in the story, one character asks another, “how far would you go for someone you love?” These characters are pushed to the brink BECAUSE of that photograph, and I was so impressed by the way Mandel unfolded the story piece by piece.

[MUSIC]

[5:29]

I need to stop and tell you how much I loved Gavin as a character. He feels like he was born in the wrong decade, is obsessed with film noir, and works as a reporter for the New York Star. Mandel stylishly plays off these traits; one of my favorite lines in the whole book is when his reporter colleague says to him, “Look at you, the fedora, the trench coat. You want to run around the city with a flashbulb camera and a press card in your hat band,” and Gavin says, “How is that a problem?” friend says, “Your problem is that you don't really want to work at a newspaper, per se. You want to work in 1925.”

And Gavin says, “*I don't disagree,*” and I love him for that.



[6:06]

Those exchange are FUN, and highlight Mandel's graceful style. Her prose here is tight, and smart. This story is dripping in atmosphere, whether she takes you to muggy suburban Florida or smoke-filled jazz clubs in New York City. And the novel really does have a noir feel to it. In fact, you could make a really excellent book flight by reading this book in conjunction with Judy Blundell's *What I Saw and How I Lied* and last summer's *Sunburn* from Laura Lippman, because all three books have a distinctively noir vibe.

I LOVED Mandel's most recent novel, *Station Eleven*, and I've read it multiple times. The style is similar, but the story is sooo different, and as a reader, that made *The Lola Quartet* a whole lot of fun.

In short, if you like the sound of a carefully-crafted, literary detective novel, *The Lola Quartet* may be the NEXT GREAT BOOK you're looking for.

[6:58]

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Readers thanks so much for listening this week. I'm excited about this new project and a chance to tell you more about the Great Books I'm reading. Subscribe now to catch each new installment of One Great Book right here in your favorite podcast player. We'll have a new title for you every Friday. Again, thanks for listening and thanks for subscribing. We'll see you on Friday.



[7:52]

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And check out our sister show WSIRN, our long format show dedicated to answering the question that plagues every reader, "What should I read next?"

Readers, That's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading." Happy reading, everyone.