

Author Q&A

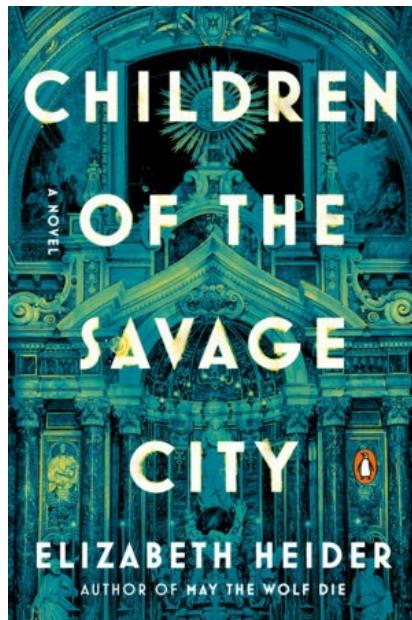
CHILDREN OF THE SAVAGE CITY

A novel by Elizabeth Heider

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Genre: Crime / Literary Thriller

Setting: Contemporary Naples



Book at a Glance

During evening mass at the historic Neapolitan cathedral, Chiesa del Gesù Nuovo, a young au pair is murdered in one of the silent side chapels. Investigators Nikki Serafino and Valerio Alfieri trace the killing into a hidden world where elite men, organized crime, and foreign military communities intersect.

Children of the Savage City is a literary thriller about power, secrecy, and the moral courage required to confront systems that protect the privileged.

Short Description

Modern Naples is a city where beauty and corruption live side by side. When a young nanny is murdered in the Gesù Nuovo, Nikki Serafino and Valerio Alfieri begin an investigation that reaches far beyond a single crime. Their search exposes a system shaped by influence, silence, and exploitation. The novel explores trauma, friendship, moral responsibility, and the emotional cost of institutional failure. Nikki and Valerio's partnership brings emotional depth and procedural clarity to the story, supported by a Naples rendered with honesty, precision, and lived experience.

CHILDREN OF THE SAVAGE CITY picks up a few months after the events of *May the Wolf Die*. Where do we find Nikki at the beginning of this novel? (A refresher on MTWD plot)

Nikki Serafino is a woman who can never really go home.

This seems counterintuitive - she was born in Naples, her family is here, and she's rooted in the city, working as a liaison between the U.S. military and local law enforcement, and living in the flat she inherited from her mother. But Nikki lives in a perpetual sense of exile – after sudden losses propelled her to leave the city for nearly a decade. In the years since her return, her relationship with the city is uneasy, and she's made psychological adaptations to survive the danger.

At the beginning of *May the Wolf Die*, she believed that vigilance and discipline could avert catastrophe. A highly skilled professional, Nikki supported the American Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) and the Naples police to investigate the murders of two American naval officers. But by the end of that book, the system she had carefully constructed to maintain control had unraveled and Nikki faced the murderer alone. When we meet her in *Children of the Savage City*, Nikki has taken refuge in invisibility. Self-erasure has become her armor against an unbearable truth: that people she loved (and maybe still loves) did real, permanent harm.

At the core of this harm is her former friend, Durant - one of the few people who saw her, and made her feel safe. His betrayal broke not only Nikki's trust in him, but also her faith in her own instinct to distinguish love from danger.

Unfortunately, that wound wasn't an isolated event. It was presaged by the violence of her boyfriend Enzo and, before that, Tito's betrayal. It was also amplified by an emotional disconnection from her mother, Beatrice, who seemed forever unknowable, and from a father who never seemed able to see her. And in the systematic devaluation of institutions built by and for men.

Nikki's response to these betrayals is to disappear. Not literally – but a psychological retreat from the grief she can't yet bear.

At the start of *Children of the Savage City*, her theory of survival is simple: *If I make myself invisible - if I erase myself from the story and the emotional ledger – then what happened wasn't betrayal. It just happened.*

Her journey through the novel is a transformation from distance and detachment into grief. This happens through action: witnessing, remembering, and choosing to engage. Even as the danger and stakes intensify.

May the Wolf Die was told mainly from Nikki's perspective, with a handful of chapters dedicated to Valerio, Nikki's friend on the Naples police force. But CHILDREN OF THE SAVAGE CITY features a more even split between Nikki and Valerio's intertwined stories. What inspired that shift? Did it change how you approached structuring and writing this book?

I've always viewed Nikki and Valerio as co-protagonists. So, it wasn't so much of a shift as an expansion of the structure I already had in place. The storytelling balance may alternate between the two characters – but their friendship serves as the backbone of the story.

Fraternal friendship is an undervalued form of love. It rarely gets songs or poetry of its own (unless you count "bros before hoes" as poetry). Romantic love is most often elevated and revered – but it also comes loaded with cultural expectation and personal need. We expect our romantic partner to see us, to give us attention and prioritize us, to be sexually satisfying, faithful, financially supportive, emotionally tender.

Conversely, friendships allow us to show up as we are: to be loved without expectations.

I differentiate here between transactional friendships and true friendships. Real friends are the ones who witness our lives, keep our stories, hold our heartbreaks, and remember who we are when we forget ourselves.

Nikki and Valerio share similar traits: they're both highly professional, deeply ethical, and committed to their work. But they're also emotionally avoidant and, as a result, experience considerable tumult in their personal lives. They can both be worn thin by the emotional demands of others. For people like them, friendship is rare and hard-won. Their unique friendship emerged naturally from a shared task – repairing and sailing *Calypso*. Gradually, this interaction became a touchstone, providing support and respect, and an interpersonal reliance that isn't present in the other aspects of their lives. They might well be romantically compatible. But they both know what's at stake. They live in a culture where male/female relationships are weighed down with expectations, and they've chosen to define a different sort of connection. They trust and respect one another and refuse to collapse intimacy into romance. This relationship demanded a more balanced structure in *Children of the Savage City*. Their perspectives complement each other, and also hold the story in place. Nikki and Valerio have each other's backs as the night closes in.

CHILDREN OF THE SAVAGE CITY deals with organized crime and systemic corruption. What made you want to tackle these themes? Did you do any special research?

At the heart of the novel is a disturbing question: *What if abuse isn't a side effect of power, but its method of consolidation?*

This echoes a hypothesis that gained traction after Jeffrey Epstein's arrest: that exploitation was used as leverage. In this story, blackmail isn't a byproduct of abuse, it's the point. The more monstrous the secret, the greater its power.

It's more comfortable to think of organized crime and systemic corruption as distant or exotic – something that happens far away *over there*. But the potential for corruption lies just beneath the surface of our own institutions, protecting some, and silencing or discrediting others.

In early 2023, when I started writing this book, Virginia Giuffre had just brought a lawsuit against Prince Andrew. And she was talking openly about the abuse she experienced at the hands of Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell. I was deeply moved by her clarity and courage, and I've since been saddened by her death in 2025.

As inspired as I've been by the bravery of the survivors of Jeffrey Epstein's trafficking ring, I'm equally appalled by the failure of the justice system to act. There's been ample evidence of sexual abuse of children and human trafficking, but Epstein himself died in a jail cell, and the deal he made with prosecutors explicitly excuses his co-conspirators. It's telling that none of the men affiliated with his abuse have ever been prosecuted. This failure of the justice system reflects what I've observed in systems and organizations: power shields itself, corruption may be hidden inside procedure and respectability, and the vulnerable are often treated as disposable.

Children of the Savage City uses fiction to examine something nonfiction often can't: the emotional toll of systemic evil and the ways silence and willful blindness perpetuate harm. I drew on my background as an operations and systems analyst and on what I've witnessed inside large institutions. I also conducted extensive research into trauma, particularly the trauma of sexual abuse survivors, to ensure I handled the material with sensitivity.

This was in addition to the research I always conduct for my writing: reading articles and books about organized crime and intelligence work, consulting with law enforcement and military personnel to identify and verify procedure, and several visits to Naples and the surrounding area to make sure the descriptions are accurate.

Despite its dark themes, *Children of the Savage City* is ultimately a story about compassion and connection, and a rejection of transactional relationships. The novel explicitly rejects the idea that vulnerability is weakness. Instead, every real breakthrough comes through intimacy and compassion. The book proposes that compassion is the only viable antidote to institutional rot.

Even with these heavy topics, there is still a bit of humor, particularly in Nikki's interactions with her family. How do you balance those different tones?

In my writing, I'm looking for the truth. I try to describe how things are (or at least as I perceive them). And humor tends to emerge naturally from that process. Not to make the darkness palatable, or to entertain the reader, but because it grows from the same psychological terrain as trauma and grief and love and sorrow: part of the same truth of being human.

About a decade ago, I was invited to spend some time with Dutch special forces operators (known as Frogmen) in East Africa during a counterpiracy operation. On our first evening together, we had beers at a beach club — and I was struck by the mood: a compelling mix of sobriety and levity. Hours before, they'd engaged in an intense firefight with pirates and managed a tricky rescue operation under fire. It

was clear that they were processing the experience, and that both intense conversation and laughter were required.

Across my work in academia, government, industry, military organizations, research labs, and space agencies, I've noticed a recurring pattern: people in high-stakes environments often hold themselves lightly. Their work demands seriousness and attention, but ego can be a liability in high-pressure situations. The most effective operators therefore have self-awareness and clarity – and are able to make fun of themselves.

We all have flaws and blind spots. There's often a chasm between our own self-perception and the truth of who we are. Without active curiosity and self-awareness, this gap can make us either tragic or comedic. Tragedy and comedy share the same foundation: unwarranted self-regard combined with a lack of self-awareness. The differentiator is stakes. High stakes, and you get *King Lear* or *Oedipus*. Low stakes, *Nacho Libre*.

“Children of the Savage City” is an evocative title. Is there a story behind it?

“*You are a child of Napoli*,” Senora Dorotea tells Nikki. “*Full of light and darkness . . . the divine and infernal wrestling . . .*”

The title *Children of the Savage City* refers to the emotional and moral terrain of the novel – to the literal young people caught in the story’s violent machinery, and also to those who have been shaped, wounded, and transformed by a place that demands compromise for survival. The word “savage” means ruthless, not primitive. The city is both Naples, in all its contradiction and corruption, and a stand-in for any place where unchecked power is masked by privilege and respectability, and is fed by complicity.

You’ve lived all over Europe, but what draws you to writing about Naples in particular?

I first visited Naples in 2008 and fell madly in love with the city. That love deepened when I lived and worked there from 2010-2013. It’s an overwhelming place – gorgeous and radiant, the beauty almost too much to take in - and it’s also utterly chaotic and feral, and also warm and intimate. That strange combination has often served as an antidote to pain. I tried to capture this in *May the Wolf Die* and *Children of the Savage City*.

The characters of Nikki and Valerio are also inspired from two real-life Neapolitan heroes – and of course I want to keep them on their home-turf. And, from a story-telling perspective, Naples is a gift. It’s a large and vibrant city, but there’s something very intimate, too. It offers the types of personal relationships you might find in a small town.

What are you working on next? Can we expect another Nikki Serafino mystery?

I’m currently writing Book 3 in the Nikki Serafino series. I’m also mapping out the major muscle movements for a seven-book arc. I already know most of the primary plotlines – including the story for book 4 which sometimes calls to me, wanting me to skip steps and write that next.

Besides this, there are a half-dozen books demanding my attention at any given moment. There's a very strange piece of speculative fiction that I haven't shown my agent or editor yet. And I'm putting together a book proposal for a nonfiction piece, too.

You're now a full-time writer, but you have previously worked at Microsoft, the European Space Agency, and as a civilian analyst with the US Navy. What inspired you to start writing fiction? How have those experiences influenced your writing?

I grew up in a conservative and religious household in Utah. I love my family. My parents and siblings are deeply principled people. But the heavy religious culture imparted strict gender roles and power hierarchies that have been difficult to remove from my psyche. I also metabolized the idea that there were good feelings and bad feelings. I avoided the "bad" parts of me, editing my thoughts, and suppressing ideas I knew would be condemned.

Yet, even early on, there was a resistance inside – a secret "no" to the life-path intended for me. And I very much wanted to see and experience the world.

I left home in my early twenties to study physics at Tufts University, and conducted high-energy particle physics research at Fermilab National Laboratory. It was around this time that I felt a compulsion to write – and started writing novels to process experiences that I couldn't look at directly.

Those early manuscripts frustrated me. I was haunted by the sense that there were things about the world I didn't see or fully understand. And I felt the inauthenticity - the internal blocks and prohibitions. Without meaning or wanting to, I was still subconsciously editing myself. Of course, I was in an environment that didn't encourage sharing. I already felt unwelcome and strange as a woman in physics, and I'd internalized misogyny. I didn't want to call attention to the already obvious differences, so I learned to hide my emotions and self-expression.

I finished my physics PhD in 2007 and, the following year, moved to Washington DC to begin work at The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) – a federally funded Research and Development Corporation. CNA provides PhD brains to the U.S. military and government (think: Charlie in *Top Gun*). I helped write and run wargames, I conducted analysis, and deployed aboard Navy ships. My first deployment was aboard an Aircraft Carrier, the U.S.S. John C. Stennis. I also worked on a project that brought me to Naples for the first time - to the headquarters of U.S. Naval Forces for Europe and Africa.

In 2009, I served as an embedded analyst for twelve weeks aboard the antiquated USS Nashville on its pre-retirement voyage – as it shambled down the West African coast from Senegal to Gabon, training and working alongside local navies in a mission called *Africa Partnership Station*, or APS. This was a pivotal experience. I became committed to the work and to the people with whom I served. After that deployment, the Navy hired me to manage programmatic assessments for APS, and brought me to Naples from 2010 until 2013. APS was a unique mission with rare opportunities. I rode a fast-boat under a Liberian moon. I overnighted on the metal deck of a docked Landing Craft Unit, sleeping on collapsed cardboard boxes – and the next morning ran with the local troops and U.S. Marines through the jungles of Limbe. I scuba dived to the ocean shelf in Mauritius. I trained with Dutch special forces in Tanzania. I

deployed aboard U.S. and European ships, and worked for weeks at a time in military bases in the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, Senegal, Gabon, and Cameroon.

During this time, I fell in love with a brilliant submariner. We corresponded daily. He seemed to love my unfiltered thoughts, which encouraged me to share more. That relationship ended tragically, but the need to continue opening and discovering didn't stop. I persisted, writing every day, digging into the pain and ugliness, trying to capture and understand the truth. Eventually, I shared my writings with a dear friend. It was vulnerable and terrifying. But I discovered that the pieces of me of which I was the most ashamed - she loved those the best.

Being loved in my complexity and brokenness gave me courage. I saw how I'd been using words to hide. I realized that I needed to understand and reveal myself through writing: to learn how to undress completely. To be naked on the page and not worry how I'd be perceived. Vulnerability took practice. I needed to stop judging my thoughts or emotions as "bad", and get curious about them; to stay inside discomfort and shame and pain, and to ask what they could teach me.

After my work in Naples, I started a company and did some consulting work for INTERPOL. I also patented a chemistry invention. And I worked as an analyst in the U.S. Navy personnel office. Then, in 2016, I moved to the Netherlands and started working at the European Space Agency (ESA) supporting the Human Spaceflight program. Space research is fascinating, and I worked directly with other agencies and with ESA astronauts, which I enjoyed. But the job was highly demanding, with night and weekend work, meticulous attention to detail, and relentless administrative churn - and offering little space for creativity. It wasn't the best fit for me. To cope with the stress, I bicycled to and from work every day – a 40-kilometer round-trip through the dunes.

I was grateful for the bike-ride. It gave me much-needed time to think and meditate. I'd loved my work with the military, but it had left me with some profoundly traumatic experiences, and I was wrestling with grief and depression.

The long rides were essential – but they weren't enough to repair the broken pieces, so I began working with a trauma therapist. Bit-by-bit, this began to restore me – with the unexpected side-effect of reawakening my creativity.

Research has shown that trauma can shut down the brain's "default mode" network: the way that the brain talks to itself to reflect, imagine, and daydream. After a couple of years of therapy, I started to feel safe – and my brain rebooted. My imagination returned. And when it did, I suddenly, desperately needed to write fiction. I invented books during long bike rides. I wrote at night and on weekends, on train rides, and in the margins of my life. By the time I wrote my debut novel, *May the Wolf Die*, I'd written eight other books.

In 2020, I sent a book to a literary agent, Sharon Pelletier, and she offered representation. Sharon is a gifted, smart, and driven business partner with industry expertise and editorial clarity. And she's been patient and kind enough to endure some of my more experimental works (*May the Wolf Die* was the third book I gave her). In 2023, I was lucky to have *May the Wolf Die* land on the desk of a remarkable

editor at Viking/Penguin, Laura Tisdel. Laura is perceptive and intelligent and empathetic, and gives exceptional editorial guidance. Sharon and Laura have really been a dream team.

Around the same time Penguin bought *May the Wolf Die*, I was recruited as a program manager in Microsoft's AI4Science. In that job, I met some truly remarkable researchers and individuals. I also discovered the same subtle rules of power and control that I'd found in other industries. I supported a team that was conducting excellent research in modeling the Earth system (an AI weather model called *Aurora*) which we published in *Nature* in 2025.

Shortly before the launch of *May the Wolf Die*, a studio picked up the book for film and TV. This windfall gave me some financial freedom to quit my day job and write full-time. It may be a temporary reprieve, but I'm taking full advantage, and working on the next books in the Nikki Serafino series.

I've spent decades embedded in systems built to control – from early childhood, through academic research, military hierarchies, analytical and operational briefings, and the disappointingly relentless and self-serving logic of institutions and command structures. My work has given me access to power, so I've learned how power protects itself, how it feeds and hides corruption, and eats the vulnerable. In writing fiction, I began to bear witness to everything I'd seen and understood in these systems. I hunted for ethical and emotional clarity. I wanted to do more than identify the harm. I wanted to understand how it functioned and whom it protected, and to name what it cost. I wanted to understand and capture what it means to stay human and ethical inside immoral or compromised systems. I also wrote to process and understand my own survival mechanisms – the agony of staying connected to love, and the need to detach and disappear. In my writing, I also process my own feelings of exile, and find that I circle back to those places and people where I've found a sense of home. I want to tell the truth of everything I've witnessed. Both *May the Wolf Die* and *Children of the Savage City* are shaped by everything I've seen and couldn't say. The details are fictional, but the emotional landscape is real.