

# The Midnight Bookshop

A story about the lives we almost lived, the choices we made, and why it is never too late to begin again.

**B2 Level**

**Adults (17+)**

**Story**

**14 Pages**

**40 min**

Elena Marchetti, a thirty-two-year-old accountant, discovers a mysterious bookshop that appears on a familiar street corner at midnight. Inside, the enigmatic shopkeeper Aurelio presents her with a book bearing her name — a book that tells the story of what would have happened if she had pursued her dream of becoming an actress. A moving exploration of regret, identity, sacrifice, and second chances.

## Learning Objectives

- ✓ Read and comprehend a literary short story at B2 level
- ✓ Learn 16 advanced vocabulary items in context
- ✓ Practise reading for detail, inference, and theme
- ✓ Analyse character motivation and narrative structure
- ✓ Answer comprehension questions to demonstrate understanding
- ✓ Use flashcards to reinforce new vocabulary

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## 1

## Read the Story

### Chapter 1: The Disappearing Shop

Elena Marchetti had walked past the corner of Via delle Rose and Piazza Fontana a thousand times. She knew every crack in the pavement, every faded awning, every reluctant pigeon that refused to move out of her way. She had lived in this neighbourhood for thirty-two years — her entire life — and she could have drawn a map of it from memory, down to the last lamppost. That is why, when a bookshop appeared on the corner one Tuesday evening, she was certain she was losing her mind.

The shop had a narrow black facade with gold lettering above the door that read: LIBRERIA DELLA MEZZANOTTE. The Midnight Bookshop. A warm amber glow spilled through the window, illuminating rows of leather-bound books. Elena stood on the pavement, her grocery bags growing heavy in her hands, and stared.

She had passed this exact spot that morning on her way to work. There had been nothing there — just the blank grey wall of the apartment building next door, decorated with a faded poster advertising a circus that had left town three years ago. And yet here it was: a perfectly ordinary-looking bookshop, complete with a hand-painted sign and a tabby cat sleeping in the window.

She reached for the door handle, but hesitated. It was nearly midnight. What kind of bookshop opens at midnight? The sensible part of her brain — the part that had earned a degree in accounting and never missed a tax deadline — told her to pick up her groceries and go home. But another part, a quieter and more persistent part that she had been ignoring for years, whispered: Go inside.

### Chapter 2: The Shopkeeper

The bell above the door chimed softly as Elena stepped inside. The air smelled of old paper, leather, and something else — something sweet and unfamiliar, like dried flowers from a garden she had never visited. The tabby cat opened one eye, assessed her with mild disinterest, and went back to sleep.

Behind the counter, which Elena could have sworn was empty a moment ago, stood a man. He was tall and thin, with close-cropped grey hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He wore a dark green waistcoat over a white shirt, and he was reading a book so intently that he didn't look up when she entered.

"Good evening," Elena said, because she was the kind of person who always spoke first. The man raised his eyes slowly. They were an unusual shade of grey-green, and

they studied her with an expression that was not quite curiosity and not quite recognition, but something in between.

"Ah," he said, as though she had just confirmed something he had been expecting. "You've come." "I was just passing by," Elena said, slightly unsettled by his tone. "I've never noticed this shop before." "Most people don't," the man replied. He closed his book and placed it on the counter. "My name is Aurelio. Welcome to the Midnight Bookshop. We specialise in a very particular kind of literature."

"What kind?" Elena asked, running her fingers along the spine of a nearby book. The leather was warm to the touch. "Stories about the lives people almost lived," Aurelio said calmly. "The choices they nearly made. The roads they considered but never took." He paused. "Every person who walks through that door finds a book with their name on it. Yours is already waiting."

### Chapter 3: The Book with Her Name

Elena wanted to laugh. She wanted to say something dismissive and rational, something an accountant would say — perhaps a comment about inventory management or the impracticality of personalised stock. But the words dried up in her throat when Aurelio reached beneath the counter and produced a book bound in deep burgundy leather.

On the cover, embossed in gold, were two words: Elena Marchetti.

She took the book with trembling hands. It was heavier than it looked, and the leather was impossibly soft, as though it had been handled by a thousand careful readers before her. She opened it to the first page and read: Chapter One: The Audition.

Elena felt the blood drain from her face. She hadn't thought about the audition in years. She had buried it so deeply in her memory that she had almost convinced herself it had never happened.

When she was eighteen, Elena had been offered an audition at a prestigious drama school in London. She had been performing in amateur theatre since she was fourteen — Shakespeare, Chekhov, Pirandello — and her director had told her she had genuine talent. "You could make a career of this," he had said. "But you need proper training. London is where it happens."

Elena had filled out the application, prepared her monologue, and even bought a plane ticket. But two weeks before the audition, her father had suffered a heart attack. He survived, but the recovery was long and uncertain. Elena's mother, overwhelmed and frightened, had begged her to stay. "There will be other chances," her mother had said. "Family comes first." Elena had unpacked her suitcase, cancelled the ticket, and enrolled in the local university to study accounting. There were no other chances. She never

performed again.

## Chapter 4: The Life She Almost Lived

The book told the story of what would have happened if Elena had gone to London. She read it standing at the counter, unable to put it down, while Aurelio made tea in a small back room and the cat purred on a stack of encyclopaedias.

In the book, Elena moved to a tiny flat in Camden with two other drama students. She struggled at first — the training was gruelling, the competition fierce, and the English weather thoroughly depressing. She waited tables to pay her rent and cried into her pillow most nights during the first term. But she persisted. By the second year, she had landed a small role in a fringe production that received a glowing review in a national newspaper. By twenty-five, she was performing at the National Theatre. By thirty, she had been cast in a film that premiered at the Venice Film Festival.

But the book did not paint an entirely rosy picture. In this alternative life, Elena missed her father's birthday every year for a decade. She was not there when her grandmother passed away. Her relationship with her mother became strained and distant, reduced to brief phone calls and awkward holiday visits. She fell in love with a fellow actor who was charming but unreliable, and they separated after three turbulent years.

She achieved professional success, yes, but at a significant personal cost.

Elena closed the book slowly and set it on the counter. Her tea had gone cold. "It's not a fairy tale," she said quietly. "No," Aurelio agreed, settling into an armchair across from her. "The books never are. They show what might have been — honestly, with all the joy and all the pain. The purpose is not to make you regret your choices. It is to help you understand them."

## Chapter 5: The Question

"Do many people come here?" Elena asked. Aurelio considered the question. "Enough," he said. "The shop appears when someone needs it. Not everyone sees it. Not everyone who sees it comes inside. And not everyone who comes inside has the courage to read their book."

"What happens after they read it?" "That depends entirely on the person. Some leave feeling grateful for the life they have. Others leave feeling heartbroken for the life they lost. And a few — a very few — leave with the understanding that it is not too late to change."

Elena looked down at the burgundy book. "I'm thirty-two," she said. "I haven't acted in fourteen years. It is too late." Aurelio removed his glasses and cleaned them with a cloth from his waistcoat pocket — a gesture that struck Elena as deliberately unhurried.

"When I was your age," he said, "I was a civil servant in a government office in Rome. I processed permit applications. I was efficient, punctual, and profoundly miserable. I had always wanted to be surrounded by books, by stories, by the kind of silence you can only find between pages. But I told myself the same thing you just told me — that it was too late." He put his glasses back on. "I was wrong. I opened this shop when I was forty-seven. And I can tell you, Elena, that the only moment it is truly too late is the moment you stop believing it is possible."

The clock on the wall — an ornate brass thing with Roman numerals — struck one in the morning. Elena realised she had been in the shop for over an hour.

## Chapter 6: The Morning After

Elena did not sleep that night. She lay in bed staring at the ceiling, replaying scenes from the book in her mind — the tiny Camden flat, the standing ovations, the Venice premiere, the phone calls she never made home.

At six in the morning, she got up, made a strong coffee, and sat at her kitchen table with her laptop. She searched for amateur theatre groups in the city. There were seven. Three were currently holding auditions for their autumn productions.

She stared at the screen for a long time. Then she opened a new email, typed out a brief introduction, attached an old photograph of herself performing Juliet at nineteen, and pressed send before she could change her mind.

By lunchtime, she had received two replies. Both invited her to audition.

## Chapter 7: The Return

That evening, Elena walked back to the corner of Via delle Rose and Piazza Fontana. The bookshop was gone. In its place was the blank grey wall she had known her entire life, still decorated with the faded circus poster.

She stood there for several minutes, waiting, but nothing changed. The wall remained a wall. She was not surprised. She had half-expected this. But she felt a pang of disappointment nonetheless — she had wanted to return the book.

She reached into her bag to check, but the burgundy volume was gone too. In its place was a single sheet of paper, folded in half. She opened it. In neat, old-fashioned

handwriting, it read:

The book was never about the life you didn't live. It was about the life you still can. —  
A.

Elena folded the note carefully, slipped it into her wallet, and walked home.

Three months later, Elena performed on stage for the first time in fourteen years. It was a small production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in a converted warehouse on the outskirts of the city. The audience was modest — perhaps eighty people — and the set was made of recycled materials and borrowed furniture.

But when Elena stepped into the spotlight and delivered her first line, something inside her that had been dormant for a very long time woke up. She was not the young woman who had almost gone to London. She was someone different now — older, steadier, shaped by the choices she had made and the life she had lived. And she was, at last, exactly where she needed to be.

Sometimes, late at night, she walks past the corner of Via delle Rose and Piazza Fontana. The bookshop has never reappeared. But occasionally, when the light is just right and the street is very quiet, she thinks she can see the faint outline of gold lettering on the wall. And she smiles.

## 2 Key Vocabulary

These words from the story will help you expand your English vocabulary.

Word	Type	Definition	Example
<b>facade</b>	<i>noun</i>	the front of a building, especially one that is attractive	<i>The old church had a beautiful stone facade.</i>
<b>illuminating</b>	<i>adj.</i>	providing light; making something clearer	<i>The streetlamp was illuminating the narrow alley.</i>
<b>leather-bound</b>	<i>adj.</i>	covered in leather, typically describing old books	<i>She inherited a collection of leather-bound first editions.</i>
<b>dismissive</b>	<i>adj.</i>	showing that you consider something unworthy of attention	<i>He gave a dismissive wave and changed the subject.</i>
<b>embossed</b>	<i>adj.</i>	decorated with a raised design pressed into the surface	<i>The invitation was embossed with gold lettering.</i>
<b>prestigious</b>	<i>adj.</i>	having a high reputation; respected and admired	<i>She was accepted into a prestigious university.</i>
<b>gruelling</b>	<i>adj.</i>	extremely tiring and demanding	<i>The marathon was a gruelling test of endurance.</i>
<b>fringe</b>	<i>noun</i>	experimental or unconventional art; the outer edge	<i>The play was performed at a fringe theatre festival.</i>
<b>strained</b>	<i>adj.</i>	showing signs of tension or difficulty; not relaxed	<i>Their relationship became strained after the argument.</i>
<b>turbulent</b>	<i>adj.</i>	full of conflict, disorder, or confusion	<i>The country went through a turbulent political period.</i>
<b>ornate</b>	<i>adj.</i>	decorated with complex and detailed patterns	<i>The ornate mirror had a carved wooden frame.</i>
<b>profoundly</b>	<i>adv.</i>	in a way that is very great or intense; deeply	<i>The experience profoundly changed her view of the world.</i>
<b>dormant</b>	<i>adj.</i>	temporarily inactive; not growing or developing	<i>The volcano had been dormant for over two centuries.</i>
<b>pang</b>	<i>noun</i>	a sudden sharp feeling of pain or strong emotion	<i>She felt a pang of guilt for not calling her mother.</i>
<b>persistent</b>	<i>adj.</i>	continuing firmly despite difficulty or opposition	<i>Her persistent efforts finally paid off.</i>
<b>conviction</b>	<i>noun</i>	a firmly held belief or opinion	<i>He spoke with absolute conviction about the project.</i>

### 3 Comprehension Quiz

Choose the best answer for each question.

**1. Why was Elena surprised to see the bookshop?**

- A) She had been looking for it for years.
- B) She had walked past that spot many times and it had never been there.
- C) She had read about it in a newspaper.
- D) A friend had recommended it to her.

**2. What kind of books did the Midnight Bookshop specialise in?**

- A) Rare first editions from the 19th century.
- B) Stories about the lives people almost lived.
- C) Self-help books about career changes.
- D) Fictional stories about time travel.

**3. Why did Elena not go to the audition in London when she was eighteen?**

- A) She failed the entrance exam.
- B) She couldn't afford the plane ticket.
- C) Her father had a heart attack and her mother begged her to stay.
- D) She decided she preferred accounting.

**4. In the alternative life, what negative consequences did Elena experience?**

- A) She never found work as an actress.
- B) She became estranged from her family and had a failed relationship.
- C) She lost all her money and had to return home.
- D) She suffered a serious injury on stage.

**5. What did Aurelio say was the purpose of the books?**

- A) To make people regret their past decisions.
- B) To predict people's future.
- C) To help people understand the choices they made.
- D) To convince people to change careers.

**6. What was Aurelio's life before opening the bookshop?**

- A) He was a librarian in Florence.
- B) He was a civil servant processing permits in Rome.
- C) He was a retired professor of literature.
- D) He was a travelling bookseller.

**7. What did Elena do the morning after visiting the bookshop?**

- A) She went back to look for the shop.
- B) She resigned from her accounting job.
- C) She searched for amateur theatre groups and applied to audition.
- D) She booked a flight to London.

**8. What happened when Elena returned to find the bookshop?**

- A) It was closed for renovation.
- B) Aurelio told her the book was a gift.
- C) The shop had disappeared and the book had been replaced by a note.
- D) She found a new book with a different story.

**9. What does the word 'dormant' mean in the context of the story?**

- A) Dead and unable to return.
- B) Temporarily inactive but capable of waking up.
- C) Weak and unimportant.
- D) Forgotten and irrelevant.

**10. What is the main theme of the story?**

- A) It is never too late to pursue something meaningful to you.
- B) Family should always come before personal ambition.
- C) Bookshops are disappearing from modern cities.
- D) Accounting is a more practical career than acting.

## 4

**Answer Key**

1. B) She had walked past that spot many times and it had never been there.
2. B) Stories about the lives people almost lived.
3. C) Her father had a heart attack and her mother begged her to stay.
4. B) She became estranged from her family and had a failed relationship.
5. C) To help people understand the choices they made.
6. B) He was a civil servant processing permits in Rome.
7. C) She searched for amateur theatre groups and applied to audition.
8. C) The shop had disappeared and the book had been replaced by a note.
9. B) Temporarily inactive but capable of waking up.
10. A) It is never too late to pursue something meaningful to you.

Thank you for reading *The Midnight Bookshop*! We hope you enjoyed the story and learned some new vocabulary. Visit [www.fleydo.com](http://www.fleydo.com) for more English learning materials.