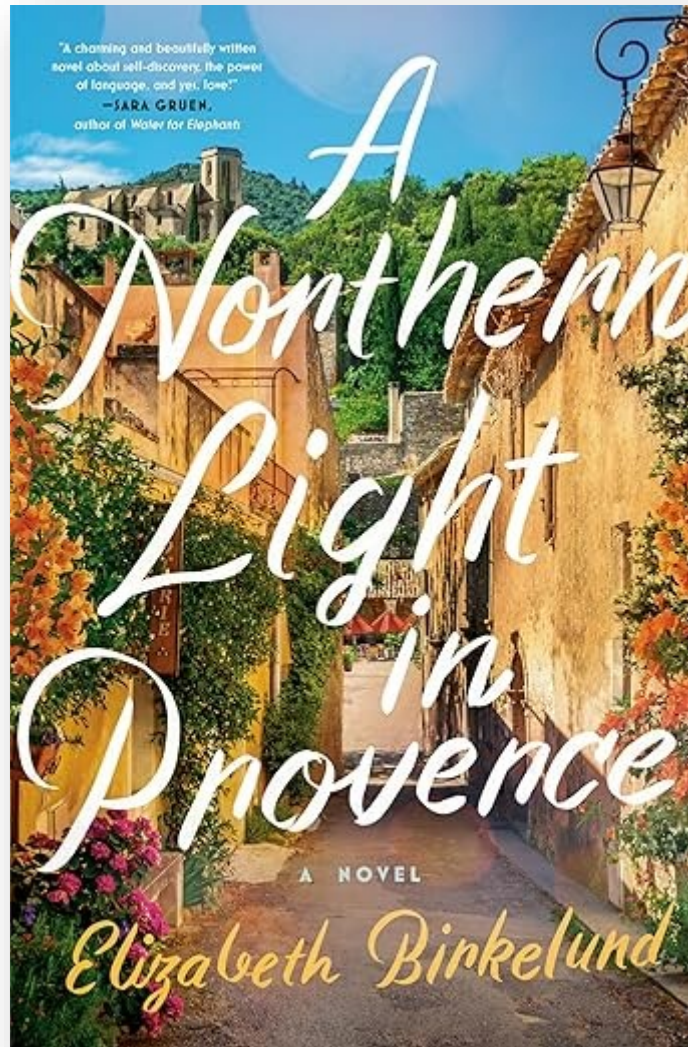


A Northern Light in Provence, Elizabeth Birkelund



Alliance Française du North Shore

Book Discussion
Led by Karen Baldwin
September 4, 2025

Setting

Ilulissat, Greenland (population 4,671): where Ilse's parents live

Oqaatsut, Greenland (population 35): where Ilse lives

Belle Rivière, France: village in Provence where Geoffrey lives

Characters

Ilse Erlund (nicknamed "Île du Nord"): 35-year-old translator

Malu and Fa: Ilse's parents

Bea Fugue: translator friend in Paris

Duggan: owner of fishery, friend of Ilse

Val: friend of Ilse, owner of Topsy's coffee shop

Max: Ilse's former boyfriend of six years

Minou: Ilse's cat

Beluga (Troy Belke): childhood friend of Ilse

Madame LaRoche: French teacher who committed suicide six years earlier

Jann: brother who died in motorcycle accident five years ago

Émile: Ilse's agent

Daphné: Émile's boss and mother of Caroline (fiancée of Frey)

Geoffrey Labaye (called "Po" by Ilse and "Ummi" by Frey): Provençal poet whose poems Ilse translates

Agnès: Geoffrey's sister

Frey: 37-year-old son of Geoffrey

Clément: local priest and friend of Geoffrey

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the stark contrast between Greenland and Provence.
2. What are the things of beauty in Greenland and in Provence? Flora and fauna? Geography? How does Ilse's life reflect where she lives?
3. Describe Ilse's life in Greenland. How did she get interested in French? What other languages does she speak?
4. What is the great tragedy in her life? What do you think she is trying to escape?
5. Describe Po.
6. What are the sights, sounds and smells that delight Ilse's senses in Provence?
7. Discuss the nickname "Île du Nord." How well does it fit Ilse? Should it have been "Lumière du Nord"?
8. Language: what are some of the Provençal expressions mentioned in the book?
9. On page 167, Ilse says, "I've begun to understand how to live again." What does she mean by that? How is she healing?
10. Contrast Agnès with Ilse's mother, Malu.
11. In one of Peter Mayle's books, he mentions a conversation from Provence comparing the English (or any foreigner) and the Parisians: "We dislike you less than we dislike the Parisians." Is there any character with this attitude?
12. Discuss the character of Frey. What causes his isolation and self-centeredness? Does his indecision frustrate you?
13. What is the mistral and how does it affect people?
14. Whom do you want Ilse to end up with?
15. What does the tragedy of Ilse's house teach her?
16. How do Beluga's (Troy's) thoughts reveal his sensibilities?