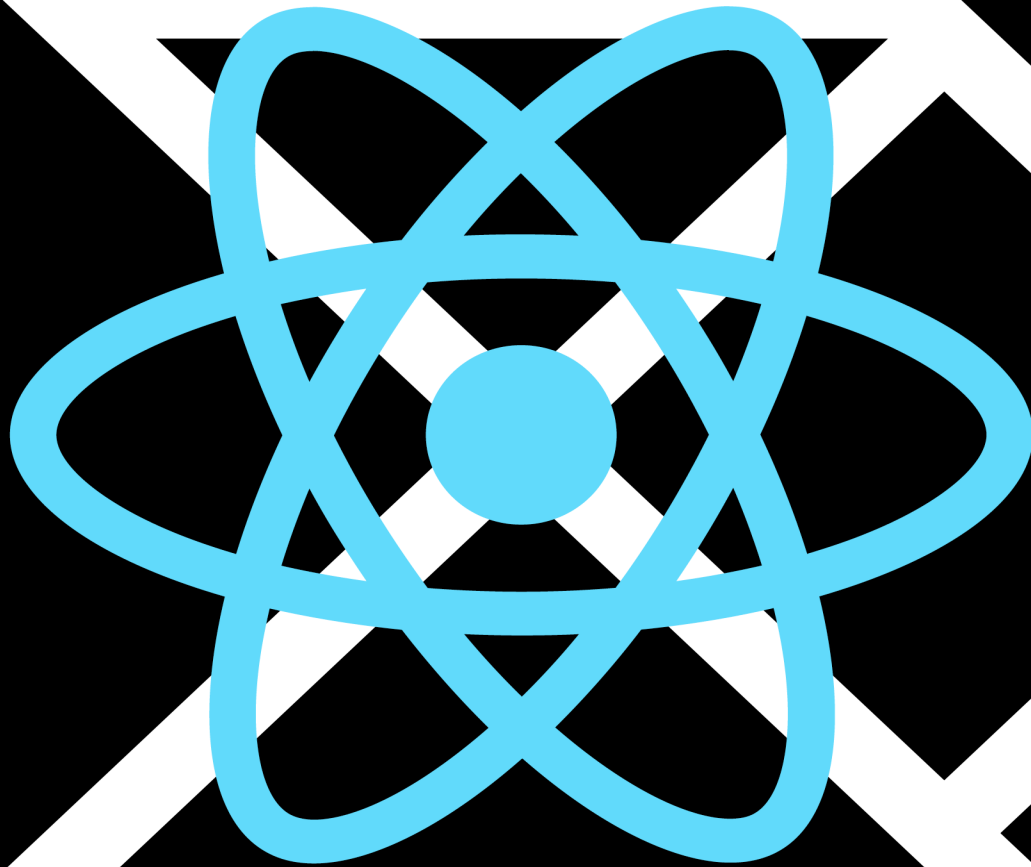


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Christian Ekrem

An Elm Primer for React Developers

The Best Way to Learn
Real Functional Programming

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The Best Way to Learn Real Functional Programming

Christian Ekrem

This book is available at <https://leanpub.com/elm-for-react-devs>

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Contents

Praise for An Elm Primer for React Developers	i
Foreword	ii
Introduction	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Part I: From React to Elm: Getting Started	1
Chapter 1: Elm: Constraints That Free You	2
React Recommends, Elm <i>Requires</i> and Enables	2
When Constraints Give Freedom	3
Debugging Gets Boring (In a Good Way)	4
Refactoring with Confidence	4
Architecture You Don't Have to Enforce	5
What This Costs You	5
What Elm Teaches You	6
Chapter 2: The Elm Architecture – A Recipe for Reliable Apps	8
The Recipe: Four Simple Ingredients	8
Ingredient 1: Model - Your State Shape	8
Ingredient 2: Msg - Things That Can Happen	8
Ingredient 3: update - How State Changes	8
Ingredient 4: view - Rendering Your State	8
Putting It All Together: Counter with Undo	8
The Elm Runtime Loop	9
What React Developers Already Know	9
What Makes TEA Different	9
The Price of Explicitness	9
What You Just Learned (The FP Hiding in Plain Sight)	9
What's Next	10
Chapter 3: Your First Elm App	11

CONTENTS

Installing Elm	11
Editor Setup	11
Setting Up Your Project	11
The obligatory “Hello, world!”	11
Two Flavors of main	11
The LGTM Generator: Building It Step by Step	12
Building Your First Elm App	12
Compiler-Driven Development in Action	12
What You Just Built	13
Chapter 4: Starting Small: Elm in Your React Codebase	14
Widget-by-widget Incremental Adoption Strategy	14
Integrating One Elm Component into React	14
Build Systems and Toolchain Integration	14
Scaling This Approach	14
Part II: The Outside World: Randomness, APIs, and JavaScript	16
Chapter 5: Commands and Randomness	17
Upgrading from Browser.sandbox to Browser.element	17
The Cmd Type and How It Works	17
Adding Randomness to the LGTM Generator	17
What You Just Learned	18
Chapter 6: HTTP and Remote Data	19
From Random.generate to Http.get	19
Setting Up the Server	19
Installing elm/http	19
The Shape of HTTP in Elm	19
Success Loading Error	19
Creating the HTTP Request	19
Updating init	19
Refactoring the GotPhrase Message	20
Handling Results in update	20
Rendering Different States	20
The Complete Code	20
Commands Are Just Commands	20
What You Just Learned	20
Chapter 7: JSON Decoders and Type Safety	21
Why JSON Needs Decoding in Elm	21
Supporting JSON in Our LGTM Generator	21

CONTENTS

What About Sending JSON?	22
What You Just Learned	22
Further Reading	22
Chapter 8: JavaScript Interop: Ports and Flags	23
JavaScript as Infrastructure	23
Upgrading Our Build for Manual Bootstrapping	23
Flags as Program Input	23
Ports for Communicating with JavaScript	23
Adding Clipboard Support to the LGTM Generator	24
What You Just Learned	24
Part III: Building Real Applications	25
Chapter 9: Organizing Files and Modules	26
Moving Beyond the Single-File Approach?	26
Elm is Different	26
Let's Build an Advent Calendar App	26
Basic Advent Calendar Spec	26
Starting Simple: The Mock Date Version	26
Getting the Real Date: Enter Tasks	27
When to Split: Modules for Data Structures	27
The Freedom of Safe Refactoring	28
What We've Learned	28
Chapter 10: Modules Around Data Structures	29
Opaque Types: Hiding What Shouldn't Be Seen	29
Going Further: Phantom Types	29
The Complete Calendar Module	30
Using the Calendar Module	30
What We Gained	30
The Broader Pattern: State Machines in Types	30
When to Use Each Pattern	30
The Freedom to Reorganize	30
What We've Learned	31
Chapter 11: Forms and Validation	32
A Simple Contact Form	32
When Validation Enters the Picture	32
Finding the Right Abstraction	33
What We Learned	34
Chapter 12: Building a Feedback Wizard	35

CONTENTS

The Problem: A Feedback Widget	35
Modeling the Top-Level State	35
The OutMsg Pattern	35
Why OutMsg Works	35
Native Dialogs and Ports	35
The Complete Main Module	36
The Api Module	36
Patterns Worth Noting	36
What We Learned	36
Chapter 13: Routing and Navigation	38
From Element to Application	38
Modeling Routes as Types	38
Parsing URLs	38
Building URLs	38
The Application Structure	38
Handling Navigation	38
A Page Module	38
Comparing to React Router	39
The Complete Example	39
Wrapping up	39
Chapter 14: State Patterns at Scale	40
From Booleans to State Machines	40
Reversible State Machines	40
A Second State Machine: Form Lifecycle	40
From Type to Module	40
Composing Models	40
Shared State	40
The Underlying Principle	40
Wrapping Up	41
Chapter 15: Testing Strategies	42
From Jest to elm-test	42
TDD Where It Shines	42
Fuzz Testing: Let the Framework Think	43
What You Don't Need to Test	43
The Complete Code	43
Wrapping Up	43
Chapter 16: The Elm Ecosystem for React Developers	44
The Part Where npm Lies to You (And Elm Doesn't)	44
Popular Packages and Community Patterns	44
When the Ecosystem Doesn't Have What You Need	45

Wrapping Up	46
Chapter 17: Performance in Practice	47
React.memo, useCallback, and Reconciliation Pain Points	47
How Elm’s Virtual DOM Makes Optimization Automatic	47
Performance by Default vs Performance by Configuration	47
Bundle Sizes and Compilation Targets	47
Lazy Loading and Code Splitting	48
When and How to Optimize Elm Applications	48
elm-optimize-level-2	49
Wrapping Up	49
About the Author	50
Appendix A: Quick Reference Guide	51
React to Elm Concept Mapping	51
Common Patterns Cheat Sheet	51
Troubleshooting Guide for React Developers	52
Appendix B: The Scary Words You Already Understand	54
Why Elm Avoids This Terminology	54
Functors: Things You Can Map Over	54
Applicatives: When You Have Multiple Wrapped Values	54
Monads: Chaining Operations That Might Fail	54
The Elm to Haskell Rosetta Stone	54
Commands and Tasks: Elm’s Approach to Effects	54
Where to Go From Here	55
Appendix C: Further Reading and Resources	56
Code Examples from This Book	56
Essential Elm Learning Resources	56
A Reference Elm SPA: dwayne/elm-conduit	56
Community and Getting Help	56
Advanced Topics Beyond This Book	56

Praise for An Elm Primer for React Developers

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Foreword

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Introduction

If you've spent any time at all using React, chances are you've felt both the library's power and its complexity. Hooks are flexible, TypeScript catches many errors. But runtime surprises still slip through. `useEffect` dependencies are easy to mess up, performance bugs eventually demand strategic (and specific!) `React.memo` and `useCallback` usage, and what started out harmlessly enough easily gets out of hand. I don't think these are signs you're doing React wrong; they're the natural trade-offs of React's flexibility.

Some of my most-read posts are the deep-dive React articles (especially on `React.memo` and reconciliation). A few are used in React courses, and some have even been translated to Korean(!). This popularity reflects a truth: once you step beyond the basics, React's complexity increases dramatically and its benefits can quickly be overshadowed by significant drawbacks.

Elm takes a different approach. It's a *small functional language with one way to build applications*, designed for reliability and clarity. With Elm, you trade flexibility for focus. There's exactly one architecture (The Elm Architecture, or TEA), exactly one way to represent side effects, and a type system that works hard to prevent runtime errors. The result is a developer experience that feels, at least at first, strangely *quiet*. You don't spend hours debugging why your component didn't re-render or why state mutated unexpectedly. Instead, you spend time *modeling* your problem domain.

For React developers, the first encounter with Elm can feel almost too simple. There are no hooks to juggle, no contexts to configure, no class vs. function components. Just a `Model`, an `Update` function, and a `View`. And yet, that simplicity scales to codebases with hundreds of thousands of lines.

So why consider Elm if you already know React?

- **To catch more errors at compile time.** Many React/TypeScript errors show up only in the browser. Elm's compiler is famously strict: if it compiles, it's very likely to work.
- **To simplify mental overhead.** Fewer concepts mean fewer ways to get things wrong. Instead of choosing between a dozen state management solutions, Elm gives you one—TEA.
- **Because it's actually fun.** Elm is genuinely enjoyable to work with. The compiler points you toward fixes, the language encourages clear modeling, and your app tends to just work once it compiles.

But there's a deeper reason to learn Elm, even if you never use it professionally: **it's the fastest way to truly learn functional programming.** Real functional programming, the kind that actually changes how you think about code in any language. Haskell has too many language features and quirks, making it notoriously hard to get started with something practical. Elm, by contrast, is remarkably small and focused (the entire language fits in your head). And crucially, you're working

in a domain you already know: building web UIs. Strict FP discipline plus a domain you already know—that’s a surprisingly good combo for actually learning this stuff.

If you’ve ever wanted to grow as a developer by learning functional programming, Elm is in my honest opinion your shortest path. By far! Especially if you’re already familiar with React.

This book is a guided tour for React developers: what Elm looks like, how it compares, and how you might start using Elm—even if only as a single widget inside a React app. By the end, you should have a feel for whether Elm can play a role in your work. Better yet: you will have learned functional programming along the way! Whether you end up actually abandoning React is beside the point (and probably not all up to you).

If React has been your main frontend toolkit, Elm shows you what frontend development feels like with different trade-offs. You get to see what it looks like to write *only functional code*, and to keep all side effects at the boundary where they belong. It may not be for every project, but once you’ve experienced Elm’s compiler, you’ll wish more of your codebases worked this way.

And learning Elm will be worthwhile whether you end up using it professionally or not. Especially in this day and age, learning something transferable (not just syntax and recipes) that helps us solve real engineering problems is very valuable.

To give you a taste of what I mean, let me show you the kind of guarantees Elm provides. Throughout this book, you’ll see what I call “Elm Hooks” in each chapter—quick previews of how Elm handles that chapter’s topic. React has hooks for state management, but Elm keeps you hooked on the language itself.

Try this one. It’ll demonstrate two of Elm’s main selling points: the friendly compiler and the strict type system (or, good cop / bad cop, if you prefer).



Elm Hook

Given the following Elm code

```

1  type Animal = Cat | Dog | Penguin
2
3
4  animalToString : Animal -> String
5  animalToString animal =
6      case animal of
7          Dog ->
8              "dog"
9
10         Cat ->
11             "cat"
12
13         -- Oops, forgot about that Penguin!
```

The compiler answers the following:

```

1  -- MISSING PATTERNS ----- /path-to-your/src/Main.elm
2  This `case` does not have branches for all possibilities:
3
4  306|>   case animal of
5  307|>       Dog ->
6  308|>         "dog"
7  309|>
8  310|>       Cat ->
9  311|>         "cat"
10
11  Missing possibilities include:
12
13      Penguin
14
15  I would have to crash if I saw one of those. Add branches for them!
16
17  Hint: If you want to write the code for each branch later, use `Debug.todo` as a
18  placeholder. Read <https://elm-lang.org/0.19.1/missing-patterns> for more
19  guidance on this workflow.
```

Sure beats all those `ensureNever` helpers¹ you've written in TypeScript, huh?

¹In TypeScript, `ensureNever` (sometimes called `assertNever` or `exhaustive`) is a helper function that takes a value of type `never` and throws if it's ever called. Developers add it as the default case in switch statements to get a compile error when a new union member is added but not handled. The fact that you need a helper function for this tells you something about the difference between opt-in and built-in exhaustiveness checking.

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Part I: From React to Elm: Getting Started

Chapter 1: Elm: Constraints That Free You

Remember that Penguin example from the introduction? That kind of exhaustive checking runs through everything Elm does. Let me show you what this means for everyday development.

Let's say you refactor a type. Say you rename a field from `status` to `orderStatus` (not an unreasonable thing to do). You update the code, run your tests, and ship it, thinking all is well and good. A week later, though, production errors start rolling in: `Cannot read property 'status' of undefined`.

You missed *one* usage. It was buried in an error handler that only runs when a specific edge case triggers. Even with `strict: true` and no any types anywhere in the project, TypeScript didn't catch it. Maybe the type was widened through a generic callback, or the old field name was still valid on the structural type. The code compiled without a single red squiggly. Your tests didn't catch it because they didn't quite cover that exact scenario. ESLint was silent because the code was syntactically fine, as far as it could tell.

I'm sure you've experienced something similar. And this is not about being a bad developer or having a sloppy team. You ran the tests, you checked and double-checked your work, and even had that one colleague who's extra strict do the code review! But TypeScript's type safety is opt-in at every layer: you choose to enable strict mode, you choose to avoid type assertions, you choose to handle every case in a switch statement. In a system where soundness requires discipline at every boundary, gaps are a matter of *when*, not *if*. You rely on tools to catch what you forget, but these tools have structural limits baked into their design.

React Recommends, Elm *Requires* and Enables

React and Elm are essentially heading in the same direction, but taking quite different paths to get there.

Look at how React has evolved:

- Hooks moved us toward functional components and immutable state
- Redux brought predictable state management to the mainstream (Bonus point: Redux was actually inspired by Elm!)
- TypeScript went from optional to essential for most serious projects
- Server Components push side effects to the server

Each change pushes React toward functional programming principles. Immutability, pure functions, explicit state management—the React community now considers all of these best practices. No React developer worth their salt has side effects in their `map` or `reduce`, after all! Right?

I’ve heard more than one React developer say something like: “Good React code in 2026 looks suspiciously like Elm code from 2016.”

React recommends functional programming. Elm requires it. And the constraints that feel limiting at first? They’re what allow you to stop chasing bugs through state mutations and start solving the actual problem.

In React, you can still mutate variables, mix paradigms, create runtime errors. The community discourages it; JavaScript can’t stop you.

In Elm, these things are simply impossible¹. The language won’t compile if you try to mutate data. And there’s no such thing as throwing an exception—the compiler rejects `Debug.todo` when you build with the `--optimize` flag, so it can’t sneak into production.

React’s flexibility is a genuine strength. But it comes with a cost: you have to maintain the discipline yourself, and it gets harder as your codebase scales.

When Constraints Give Freedom

This comes up all the time when debugging:

```
1 const user = { name: "Ada", age: 29 };
2 someFunction(user);
3 console.log(user.name); // What's the name now?
```

The answer is simple, and annoying: you can’t know without reading `someFunction`. Maybe it mutates the user. Maybe it doesn’t. Maybe it mutates it conditionally. Maybe you never get to the `console.log` at all because of a runtime exception. You have to trace through the code to be sure. TypeScript’s `Readonly<T>` helps at the surface level, but deep immutability requires recursive utility types and you basically have to stay on guard all the time (and `as` casts can always punch a hole through your defenses).

I’ve spent hours debugging issues where data was mutated in unexpected places. A function I thought was safe was actually changing my state without my knowing, and the resulting bug only appeared in specific conditions (and my tests didn’t catch it).

Now look at the Elm equivalent:

¹To be 100% accurate, you *could* generate a runtime error by triggering an underlying JavaScript divide-by-zero exception. An actual division by zero in Elm is not enough, though; you’d have to do `remainderBy 0 {whateverNumber}` or `modBy 0 {whateverNumber}`. And it’s technically possible to get a Stack Overflow if you (mis-)use extreme recursion without tail call optimization.

```
1 user = { name = "Ada", age = 29 }
2
3 -- This isn't valid Elm syntax, whether inline or in a function:
4 user.name = "Grace" -- ERROR: won't compile
5
6 -- The right way:
7 updatedUser = { user | name = "Grace" } -- Creates a new record
```

The compiler makes mutation impossible. When you pass `user` to a function, you know it comes back unchanged. Not because you trust the function author (that would be too brittle) but because the language prevents it. All mutation. If you've used Rust, you know the distinction between a variable and a mutable variable matters. In Elm, they're *all* immutable.

You stop wondering “who changed this value?” because nothing can. That question simply doesn't exist in Elm.

Debugging Gets Boring (In a Good Way)

In React, when state is wrong, you trace backward: where was this set? What changed it? Did something mutate it accidentally?

In Elm, when state is wrong, you look at your update function. That's it. That's the only place state changes. If the state is wrong, the logic in `update` is wrong. No hidden mutations or stale closures. No wondering if some other component changed something, because it couldn't possibly do so.

At my client's production app (a 150k+ lines Elm codebase), we've had entire months with zero runtime exceptions originating from our Elm code².

Though the developers on my team are great, that's not the main reason. I'm quite confident this is it: *the compiler catches those errors before the code runs!*



Elm Hook

You know that moment when you refactor a type but forget to update one place that uses it? In Elm, you literally cannot compile until you fix every single usage. The compiler won't let you ship the incomplete refactor. It's impossible to “forget one spot.”

Refactoring with Confidence

All of this pays off most when you refactor.

Say you need to add a new state to your application—a `Paused` state for a game, or a `Refreshing` state for data loading. In React, you'd:

²JavaScript code communicating through ports can still throw exceptions on its side, though these won't crash the Elm runtime itself. When I say “zero runtime exceptions,” I mean zero from the Elm code.

1. Add 'paused' to your TypeScript union type
2. Search the codebase for places that check the state
3. Update each one, hoping you found them all
4. Test manually, hoping you caught the edge cases
5. Ship and monitor for bugs
6. Hope and/or pray?

(To be fair: TypeScript's discriminated unions help here. But they're opt-in, and escape hatches like any and type assertions mean you can never be fully sure you caught everything.)

In Elm, you:

1. Add `Paused` to your union type
2. Try to compile
3. The compiler lists every place that needs updating
4. Fix each one until compiler gives you a green light
5. Deploy

I refactored a complex state machine recently—47 places needed updates. The compiler found all 47. I fixed them one by one. When the code compiled, I deployed it. No bugs or forgotten edge cases. The compiler had verified completeness, and that was it.

This isn't a guarantee of correctness (I can still have logic bugs!) but it *is* a guarantee that every code path handles every state. No gaps. No undefined behavior at runtime.

Architecture You Don't Have to Enforce

If you've read about Clean Architecture or SOLID principles, you know the ideas are sound. Single Responsibility, Dependency Inversion, separation of concerns. Good stuff, and I'm all for it!

But they're also *discipline*. You have to remember to follow them. Code review has to catch violations, and it's way too easy to cut corners when you're rushing.

The Elm Architecture enforces these patterns by default. Not as guidelines, but as requirements. The architecture separates View, Update, and Model—`Browser.sandbox` and `Browser.element` require them as separate functions, so Single Responsibility is just how the code works. Mutation is impossible and side effects go through `Cmd`, which means your functions stay pure whether you're thinking about it or not. And pattern matching forces you to handle every case, so exhaustive handling comes for free.

Where other languages offer SOLID (or whatever acronyms float their boat³) as “best practices” you *should* follow if you're disciplined, in Elm they're mandatory. The compiler enforces what code review can't.

³Bonus point: you might also have to argue with your peers that following SOLID in particular or being mindful of architecture in general is even worth it, especially in frontend projects. (It is, btw, but the point is not everyone agrees.)

What This Costs You

Elm's strictness has real costs.

The ecosystem is smaller. React has thousands of libraries. Elm has hundreds. You'll find yourself writing more from scratch.

The learning curve is steeper. Functional programming is different if you're coming from JavaScript, and concepts like pattern matching and union types take time to internalize.

Your team needs to learn. Hiring is harder. Onboarding takes longer. Not every developer wants to learn a niche language.

You lose flexibility. Sometimes you just want to mutate a value and move on. Elm won't let you. You have to do it the "right" way, even when the shortcut would probably work.

The language hasn't had a release since 2019. That can look alarming at first glance, but in practice it means remarkable stability. Your Elm code from five years ago still compiles and runs without changes. Whether you see this as a cost or a feature depends on your perspective, but you should know about it going in.

For some projects, these costs aren't worth it. If you're prototyping, exploring, or building something simple, React's flexibility is valuable. You want to move fast, not satisfy a strict compiler. Doubly so if React is already in your bones: when you need speed, familiar tools win. And honestly, for most projects today, React is still the pragmatic choice, and that's perfectly fine.

But for other projects (production applications where bugs are expensive, complex state machines, financial tools, healthcare systems) Elm's guarantees are worth the upfront cost.

And, to be completely honest: At this point I personally prefer Elm even for the occasional whimsical side-project that won't hurt a fly no matter how hard it crashes. As you'll hopefully discover for yourself before too long: Elm is kind of addictive, and fun to work with!

What Elm Teaches You

The best thing about learning Elm is what it does to the rest of your code.

After spending time with Elm, mutable state starts looking suspicious. You begin designing types that prevent bugs instead of just documenting intent. You write better React, better TypeScript, better everything—because the functional thinking becomes yours, not just something a linter enforces.

I genuinely think Elm is the fastest route into functional programming. Not because it teaches you monads and functors⁴, but because it makes functional programming impossible to avoid. Try to

⁴Elm never even mentions monads or functors by those names. You'll use them (Maybe, andThen is monadic bind) but the language doesn't make you learn the vocabulary to get work done.

mutate a variable? Compiler says no. Try to ignore a case? Compiler says no. Try to sneak in a side effect? Nope. You can't cheat your way around it, so you learn to think functionally.

Compare this to learning FP through Haskell or OCaml. Those languages are powerful, but they're also large and complex. Haskell has lazy evaluation, type classes, monad transformers, dozens of language extensions. By the time you understand enough to build something useful, months have passed.

Elm's syntax fits in your head in a weekend. No classes. No inheritance. No async/await, no promises, no null, no undefined. Just functions, types, and one architecture pattern. That smallness is exactly why you pick it up fast.

And you're building in a domain you already know. If you're coming from React, you understand components, events, state updates, and you're familiar with the DOM. Elm uses different mechanics, but the same concepts. The output is still web, so you can focus on learning functional programming instead of a whole new platform.

Even if you never use Elm professionally, the habits stick. Modeling with types, making illegal states unrepresentable, treating data as immutable—you carry these with you into any language. And if you eventually pick up Haskell, F#, or OCaml, you'll find you already understand the core concepts.

Enough philosophy. Next chapter, we write the same app in React and Elm, side by side.

Chapter 2: The Elm Architecture – A Recipe for Reliable Apps

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Putting It All Together: Counter with Undo

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Messages Describe All Possible Actions

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Update Handles Each Case Explicitly

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View Renders Based on Model

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Chapter 16: The Elm Ecosystem for React Developers

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The Part Where npm Lies to You (And Elm Doesn't)

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Core Packages (elm/*)

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When the Ecosystem Doesn't Have What You Need

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Step 1: Profile, Don't Guess

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About the Author

I'm a Staff Engineer with over 12 years of experience building production systems. My recommendations in this book are battle-tested in one of the world's largest Elm codebases—over 150,000 lines of production code at Lovdata, Norway's leading legal information provider.

Before Lovdata, I spent six years at Vipps MobilePay (Norway's leading mobile payment platform) working across backend development in Go, frontend development in React, Android development in Kotlin, and eventually becoming the first engineer to work across both simultaneously. That range of experience shapes my sense of what actually makes code maintainable.

I've also taught at a special-needs high school and worked as a film director. Both of those taught me how to explain things clearly and meet people where they are—which is exactly what this book aims to do for React developers learning Elm.

Why this book exists: I believe Elm is the fastest way for developers to truly learn functional programming. Whether you adopt Elm professionally or not, learning it will make you a better developer in any language. This book puts that experience to work for React developers.

I write about technology and functional programming at cekrem.github.io¹.

“Architecture!” the man said, and you'll be glad he did.

Christian Ekrem has worked with Lovdata from March 2025 until May 29, 2026, and in that time he has made a strong and lasting impression as a highly experienced full-stack developer. He combines deep technical knowledge with a genuine passion for clean code, thoughtful architecture, and building systems that are robust, maintainable, and easy for others to understand.

Just as importantly, he is an excellent communicator and teacher. He has a rare ability to explain complex technical ideas clearly, bring people along in architectural discussions, and raise the quality of the whole team through patient guidance and constructive feedback. I would warmly recommend him to any organization looking for a skilled, principled, and collaborative developer.

— **Simon Skrede**, Head of Development at [Lovdata](https://lovdata.no)², home to one of the world's largest Elm codebases

¹<https://cekrem.github.io>

²<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lovdata>

Appendix A: Quick Reference Guide

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React to Elm Concept Mapping

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Common Patterns Cheat Sheet

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JSON Decoder Patterns

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Maybe and Result

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Troubleshooting Guide for React Developers

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“Why can’t I just mutate the model?”

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Missing a Msg variant in update

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Forgetting to wire subscriptions

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JSON decoder failures

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Type annotation confusion

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“Why can’t I just call a function with side effects?”

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Common compiler error messages

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Appendix B: The Scary Words You Already Understand

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Functors: Things You Can Map Over

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Applicatives: When You Have Multiple Wrapped Values

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Monads: Chaining Operations That Might Fail

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Commands and Tasks: Elm's Approach to Effects

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Appendix C: Further Reading and Resources

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Code Examples from This Book

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Essential Elm Learning Resources

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A Reference Elm SPA: dwayne/elm-conduit

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What to Look For

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Community and Getting Help

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