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Billie's Kiss

by Elizabeth Knox



About the Book

In the spring of 1903, a ship explodes as it docks on a remote Scottish island, drowning many of the passengers and crew in the icy waters of the harbor. Young, pink-haired Billie Paxton is among the only survivors. Clumsy, illiterate, and suddenly alone, she will not say why, moments before the explosion, she leapt from ship to shore?and so she falls under the immediate suspicion of her fellow passenger Murdo Hesketh, who is determined to discover the truth behind the ship's fate.

As Billie attempts to come to terms with an uncertain future, she acquaints herself with the eccentric inhabitants of Kiss Castle: the enigmatic Lord Hallowhulme, who owns the island; his beautiful wife and worldly children; Geordie Betler, a spinsterish gentleman's gentleman; and the fierce, fair-haired Murdo Hesketh, who inspires in Billie equal amounts of rage and passion.

Discussion Guide

1. Could the story of Billie and Murdo have happened anytime, anywhere? What aspects of it depend on the fact that it is set in the Western Isles of Scotland in 1903?

2. **Billie's Kiss** begins with the explosion of a ship that might be an accident, an act of sabotage, or murder. Why do you think Murdo jumps at the idea of blaming Billie for the crime? Though we know Billie is innocent, she feels culpable because the kiss she and her brother-in-law exchanged seemed to bring on the tragedy, "as if their kiss was a match to a fuse." Explore the ways in which Murdo and Billie both carry guilt for the deaths of others: the two Ingrids, Karl, Ian, and Edith.

3. What feelings did Billie's dyslexia and clumsiness arouse in you--sympathy, exasperation, admiration, disgust? "She was born knowing," Murdo says, "in compensation for her incapacity." Consider the points at which she overcomes her

old habits or reveals new strength. Do other characters, too, have weaknesses to match their powers?

4. We think of eugenics as a sinister, proto-Nazi idea of the early twentieth century. But it could be argued that modern biogenetic research, with its potential to be used to "weed out" traits that are perceived as undesirable (from Down's Syndrome to homosexuality, bipolar illness to breast cancer), amounts to the same thing. What aspects of the eugenics debate are explored in **Billie's Kiss**? Have you read any novels set nowadays that take up this issue?

5. At first, Murdo hounds Billie, determined to prove his suspect guilty of mass murder. At what point, and how, does this hounding begin to turn into love? Later in the book, when Rory is walking along beside Murdo and planning to kill him, Murdo becomes aware that "Rory coveted something about him, as Ian had coveted the air between them." Discuss the idea of hate and desire as two sides of the same coin.

6. On one level, this is a mystery novel. As you were drawn into the world of Kissach and Skilling, how preoccupied did you find yourself with the puzzle of the ship's explosion? Did you guess the identity of the killer, or even try? Lord Hallowhulme presents himself as an enlightened,benevolent, visionary landlord. How does Elizabeth Knox gradually strip away his masks? Consider how she has intertwined the characters' emotional journeys with the story of the crime investigation.

7. At one point Georgie decides "he was going to save Murdo's miserable life." The novel is full of moments at which people save each other's lives--or think that is what they are doing, as when Murdo hauls Billie out of the sea. "Debts are damnation," says Murdo, with reference to the money he owes his cousin Lord Hallowhulme. What does Murdo owe Ian, Geordie, and Clara? What about Billie--what does she owe her sister, and Henry? Talk about these different forms of debt and generosity.

8. What divides Murdo and Billie, apart from the fifteen years between them? What qualities do they have in common? One experience they share is that of bereavement and lasting sorrow. "This was a sadness that sang along with hers," Knox writes, "another soul with perfect pitch." What are the effects of bereavement--both traumatic and liberating--on Murdo, and on Billie?

9. Dead people (especially Edith and Ian) have a particularly strong role in this novel. How do they seem changed after their deaths? In what ways do those who love them come to reinterpret the stories and characters of the dead?

10. **Billie's Kiss** turns out to be full of triangles, and some of them are literally as well as metaphorically incestuous. Consider the relations between Billie, Edith, and Henry; James, Clara, and Murdo; Ingrid, Karl, and Murdo; Murdo and Ingrid Hallow. How does this theme of forbidden desire between near relations (sister-in-law and brother-in-law, father and daughter, first cousins) link to the hidden intensity of gay desire felt by Ian and other men on the island?

11. Though the book is set mostly on an island, the characters are not confined to one spot; they seem to travel constantly by boat, horse, train, or foot. They also send telegrams and read newspapers. How do these technologies of the early twentieth century offset the less modern, elemental, even Gothic aspects of the story?

12. "She'd finally found her way through the tricky currents of their mismatched tides," we are told of Billie and Murdo near the end of the book. In this novel set on an island, water is an omnipresent metaphor as well as a literal reality. Billie loves to swim, and as a child she learns to fake drowning for money. By contrast, sailors don't learn to swim, as it

only prolongs the agony of drowning in cold seas. Compare
the various scenes of swimming and of drowning in this novel. Notice how Knox uses the imagery of water, ice, and polar bears in describing Murdo in particular.

13. Whose story is **Billie's Kiss**? The sections from Billie's point of view alternate with those set in Murdo's head, and also (from the fourth chapter on) with pieces from Geordie's perspective. What does Geordie add to the mix? How would the novel be different if it had only one point-of-view character, or ten?

14. The heroine of this novel has a name that sounds like a boy's. What playful or ironic associations can be attached to other names in the book: Murdo? Clara? Hallow? Minnie? Kiss Castle?

15. All the characters have to puzzle over the details they recall of the shipwreck, in order to solve the crime. Ironically, Henry is partially amnesiac after his near-drowning, so for him, it is as if the fatal kiss never happened. Similarly, Murdo was too drunk to remember sleeping with Clara and fathering Ingrid. Geordie struggles to remember what his dead brother and he were really like, and he relies on rereading their letters. By contrast, Billie cannot read, but her powerful memory compensates for it. Why do you think memory is one of Elizabeth Knox's recurring themes?

16. **Billie's Kiss** seems to refer to the kiss between her and Henry that starts the story. By the end, what does the phrase conjure up for you? What does it mean for Billie to, as she says, "choose who to kiss"? "I hope you'll never be civilized," Murdo tells Billie toward the end of the book. What do you think he means? As a wife, a mother, and a cinema pianist, has Billie become civilized or not?

17. Do you think historical fiction has to have close contemporary parallels to be relevant, or is it enough for it to be about things in the past which still matter?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Knox is the author of 17 books, including the award-winning novels THE VINTNER?S LUCK, DREAMHUNTER and DREAMQUAKE, which received awards from the ALA, CCBC, *Booklist* and The New York Public Library. An Arts Foundation Laureate, an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit, and the recipient of the Prime Minister?s Award for Fiction, she lives with her husband and son in Wellington, New Zealand, where she teaches a course on world building at Victoria University.

Critical Praise

"Knox's narrative style draws much from the 19th century romance, with its lush writing and darkly wild settings. Yet Knox brings her own slant to the genre, allowing some of her characters to find solid placement in their frighteningly changing world."

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