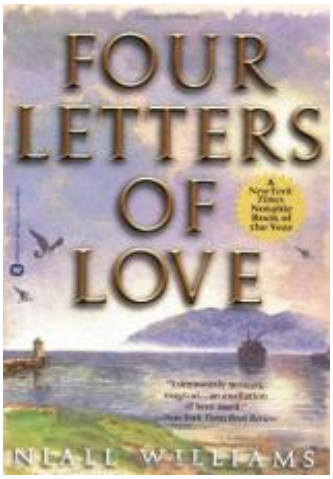
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Four Letters of Love

by Niall Williams



About the Book

In a literary debut of breathtaking acclaim, Niall Williams has crafted a stunning novel of love and loss, madness and miracles, magic and reality. Hauntingly told and beautifully wrought, it is the story of Nicholas and Isabel, whose hearts were drawn by the winds of destiny. There was, after all, no reason for them to have met. He came from Dublin; she from a wild isle off the West Irish coast. Both, however, knew how lives could be shattered by the dawn of one day. In search of his artist father's lost masterwork, Nicholas would come to Isabel's door, and would find that passion had unexpectedly ignited his life...and hers. Blessed by fate, Nicholas and Isabel would learn that nothing in the world is random, that every step is measured, that every moment counts...and that time and envy are forces to be reckoned with.

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Discussion Guide

1. Several love stories unfold in the course of the novel. Compare Nicholas and Isabel's story with the courtships of Muiris and Margaret, William and Bette, and Isabel and Peader. Do you think this kind of fated love occurs in real life?

2. What purpose do the love letters from Nicholas to Isabel serve? Compare those letters with the love letters between other characters. Have you written or received love letters? How did they affect the relationship?

3. How do Nicholas's and Isabel's relationships with their parents affect their relationship? How do the parents' relationships affect their relationships with their children and their reactions to their children's love relationships? Is one kind of love-romantic or familial-more powerful than the other?

4. It is not until Part VI, page 217, that Nicholas discusses meeting Isabel. Why did the author choose to bring the two together when he did? Why does he choose not to describe their actual meeting-just the aftermath?

5. When I was twelve years old God spoke to my father for the first time. God didn't say much. He told my father to be a painter, and left it at that, returning to a seat amongst the angels and watching through the clouds over the grey city to see what would happen next. What do these opening lines say about the role of God and religion in the characters' lives? Are the characters in control of their own destinies, or are they subject to larger forces?

6. Compare that view with this passage from the last chapter: There was in the air that moment a rare feeling of healing, of things lifting and coming together, of the story being carried suddenly forwards, the great whoosh on which everything suddenly rises and flows, and you know a great spirit somewhere is watching down. The final line of the book states that "the plots of God and Love came together and were the same thing." Has the author's view of the influence of God changed through the course of the novel? Have the characters'? Has yours?

7. The book opens with William leaving his family, following, he believes, a command from God. But the pain this brings to his wife and son is immeasurable. How is it possible to balance responsibilities of family and home with your own, more personal, desire for fulfillment? Are you forced to give that up when you marry? When you become a parent?

8. William believes he is called by God to paint. Do you believe he was really called by God? If he was called by God, what was the point of his destroying his life's work along with himself?

9. All the love relationships (parent and child, brother and sister, husband and wife) in this book bring an incredible amount of pain into the characters' lives. Do you think this pain is necessary in order for them to experience joy?

10. Were you surprised by Sean's miraculous recovery? How does it connect with Nicholas's arrival on the island in search of his father's painting? How does it connect with bringing Nicholas and Isabel together? What brought on Sean's illness? What brought him out of it?

11. Nature, and in particular the weather, plays a key role in this book. How does the weather affect the characters? The plot?

12. In this book the creation of art is a powerful motivator-and a force of destruction. Do creation and destruction necessarily go hand in hand? Does the creation of art require suffering and sacrifice? What does it mean to have the artist ultimately destroy the creations he has suffered (and made others suffer) so much for?

13. William's paintings tear his family apart. But one of his paintings also ultimately brings Nicholas and Isabel together. Discuss this dual role in the novel.

14. The author condenses the happy ending into one paragraph at the end of the novel. What purpose do you think that serves?

15. Much of what the author describes in this book is tragic. But it is also a sweeping love story. What was your emotional response to the book? Did you find it depressing? Uplifting?

Author Bio

Niall Williams was born in Dublin in 1958. His critically acclaimed and bestselling fiction has been shortlisted for the *Irish Times* Literature Prize and longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the IMPAC Award. Williams? debut novel FOUR LETTERS OF LOVE, an international bestseller, was adapted by the author for screen and starred Helena Bonham-Carter, Pierce Brosnan and Gabriel Byrne. His previous novel, TIME OF THE CHILD, was an instant *Irish Times* bestseller and was awarded the Kerry Group Novel of the Year Award. He lives in Kiltumper in County Clare, with his wife, Christine.

Critical Praise

"Magical...inspired.... "

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