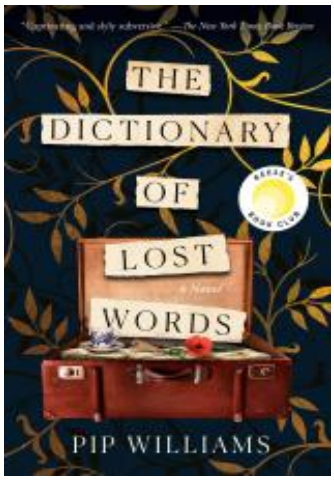
The Dictionary of Lost Words

by Pip Williams



About the Book

Esme is born into a world of words. Motherless and irrepressibly curious, she spends her childhood in the Scriptorium, a garden shed in Oxford where her father and a team of dedicated lexicographers are collecting words for the very first *Oxford English Dictionary*. Young Esme?s place is beneath the sorting table, unseen and unheard. One day a slip of paper containing the word *bondmaid* flutters beneath the table. She rescues the slip, and when she learns that the word means ?slave girl,? she begins to collect other words that have been discarded or neglected by the dictionary men.

As she grows up, Esme realizes that words and meanings relating to women?s and common folks? experiences often go unrecorded. And so she begins in earnest to search out words for her own dictionary: the Dictionary of Lost Words. To do so, she must leave the sheltered world of the university and venture out to meet the people whose words will fill those pages.

Set during the height of the women?s suffrage movement and with the Great War looming, THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS reveals a lost narrative, hidden between the lines of a history written by men. Inspired by actual events, author Pip Williams has delved into the archives of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to tell this highly original story. THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS is a delightful, lyrical and deeply thought-provoking celebration of words and the power of language to shape the world.

Discussion Guide

1. What does THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS tell us about power?

2. How do you think not having a mother influenced the trajectory of Esme?s life and her character?

3. While this book is based on the true events surrounding the publication of the first *Oxford English Dictionary*, Esme

herself is a fictional character. Why do you think Williams chose to have Esme grow up on the precise timeline she did?

4. Is the ending of the book just? Do the characters get what they deserve?

5. Do you think this is a hopeful story? Consider arguments for and against.

6. Consider Esme and Lizzie?s relationship. In what ways are the women similar? How are they different? Consider the extent to which nature/nurture shapes their expectations and behaviors.

7. Pip Williams is a celebrated author because of her ability to establish a compelling sense of time and place. How do the changing settings influence the tone of the narrative?

8. Why do you think Esperanto comes to play such an important role in Esme?s life, given she grew up with a love of the English language?

9. THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS explores linguistic inequality --- the idea that not all words are equal. To what extent do you think this phenomenon exists in modern English? Consider the word *like* and its place in modern speech. Who uses it? How is it used? How has its use changed?

10. Can the evolution of language ever be a bad thing?

11. Williams depicts the lexicographers at the Scriptorium as the gatekeepers to the English language. Should the English language have gatekeepers? Should the dictionaries we use today help us to define our language, or should they reflect it back at us?

Author Bio

Pip Williams was born in London, grew up in Sydney, and now lives in South Australia?s Adelaide Hills. Her debut novel, THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS, was a *New York Times* bestseller and a Reese?s Book Club pick. THE BOOKBINDER is her second novel.

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