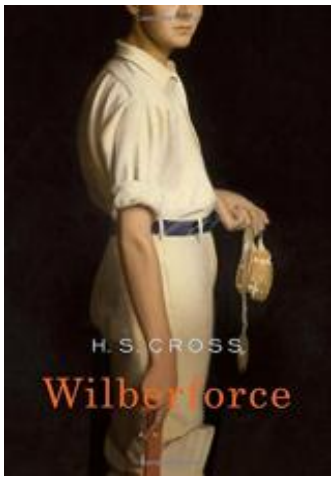
Wilberforce

by H. S. Cross



About the Book

At St. Stephen's Academy, the students are on the verge of revolt. While the younger boys plot an insurrection, the older ones are preoccupied with sneaking out-of-bounds, thrashing each other, tearing each other's clothes off-or some combination of the three. Morgan Wilberforce, for one, can't take it any longer.

Everything Wilberforce touches turns to disaster in his desperate attempts to fight off desire, boredom and angst. He knocks himself unconscious tackling the unattainable Spaulding on the rugby pitch, his headmaster detests him for crimes committed years ago, and even his closest friends are subjecting him to physical tortures normally reserved for juniors. When an accident at the boarding school leaves him with more suffering than he could have fathomed, he finds himself alone and adrift. And the workaday charms of cricket practice, Victorian pornography, canings from classmates and fumbling with the pub-keeper's daughter can only do so much to mend a broken body and a restless heart.

Stylishly inventive, H. S. Cross has crafted an imaginative, ritualistic world of men and boys narrowly confined by tradition and authority. WILBERFORCE is an indelible portrait of a young man caught between lust and cruelty, grief and God, frustrated love and abject longing --- and a tour de force that heralds the arrival of a brilliant new novelist.

Discussion Guide

1. How does the Spaulding Smashup set the tone for the novel? What does Morgan discover about his own strengths and limitations as the chapters unfold?

2. How did you react as Silk and Fletcher decide how far to take their torture of Morgan? At St. Stephen?s, is power derived solely from seniority and rituals of physical strength?

3. Morgan has many beautiful, tender memories of his mother. How are the boys affected by the absence of a constant

maternal presence? Are Matron and her male colleagues able to provide ?mothering??

4. What are the boys taught about their changing adolescent bodies? How do they use sex and sports (especially rugby and cricket) to experiment with what it means to be a man?

5. What did you believe when you read the rumors that are woven into the story line, from possible liaisons between Rees and Spaulding to the alleged inappropriate use of Gallowhill?s skull?

6. Is Morgan truly able to think of Polly as being different from the steamy fictional characters he secretly reads about? How would the story of their relationship look if described from Polly?s point of view?

7. When the lab exploded in chapter 7, what did you discover about Morgan, particularly as his attitude toward Alex shifted to worry and concern?

8. How does the storytelling in WILBERFORCE balance the perspectives of schoolboys with the perspectives of the men in charge of educating and supervising them? What are the ultimate challenges faced by S-K, Burton-Lee, John Grieves and Dr. Sebastian? Who is to blame for the shortcomings of St. Stephen?s?

9. How did you react to the Bishop?s discussion of penitence versus punishment in chapter 50? Is either approach a deterrent to teenage rebellion?

10. What motivated Morgan to refuse confirmation? How does he process the meaning of John Donne?s Holy Sonnet 14, which begins ?Batter my heart, three-person?d God?? What do his conversations with the Bishop and his reactions in the closing scenes say about his evolving understanding of the nature of life?

11. What is special about the 1920s as a backdrop for this novel? What transitions do St. Stephen?s students, as well as Britain, experience during this decade?

12. What were the hierarchies and social circles of your youth? In what ways is St. Stephen?s a microcosm of adult worlds, from professional to political realms?

13. Does knowing the gender of H. S. Cross affect your reading?

14. What do you predict for the next phase in the life of St. Stephen?s Academy?

Author Bio

H. S. Cross was born in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. She was educated at Harvard and has taught at Friends Seminary, among other schools. WILBERFORCE is her debut novel, and she is working on a second book set at St. Stephen?s Academy. She lives in New York City. For more information, visit www.hscross.com.

Critical Praise

?Cross effectively captures the debilitating confusion and angst that can attend the difficult passage to adulthood?. Readers feel viscerally the protagonist?s panic and confusion as he attempts to engage an adult world he doesn?t understand fully.?

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