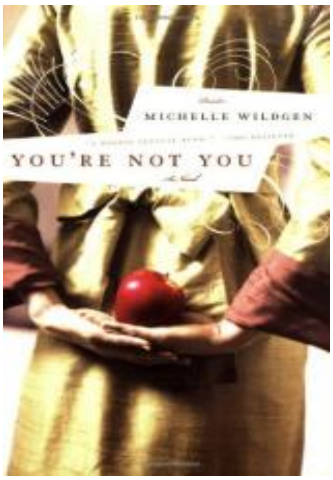
You're Not You: A Novel

by Michelle Wildgen



About the Book

Bec is adrift. It?s the summer before her junior year in college. She?s sleeping with a married professor, losing interest in her classes, and equivocating about her career. In a half-hearted bid to redeem herself, she takes a job caring for Kate, a thirty-six-year-old woman who has been immobilized by ALS.

As it turns out, before the disease Kate was a stylish and commanding woman, an advertising executive and an accomplished chef. Now, as she and Bec spend long days together, Bec begins to absorb Kate's sophistication and her sensuality, cooking for her, sharing her secrets, and gradually beginning to live her own life with a boldness informed by Kate?s influence. The more intense her commitment to Kate, the further Bec strays from the complacency of her college life. When Kate?s married life veers into dangerous territory, Bec will have to choose between the values of her old life and the allure of an entirely new one.

Michelle Wildgen's debut novel is ?a complex and satisfying dish: a story of intimate strangers and their impact on each other's lives" (*O, The Oprah Magazine*).

Discussion Guide

1. On page 117, after Bec has added her own words to a conversation when she?s supposed to be speaking only for Kate, Kate says to her, ?This is me ? You?re not you right now.? Why was this line chosen as the title? Why do you think Bec speaks up in this scene? How does Bec handle the dilemma in this novel of taking care of others versus taking care of herself?

2. On page 90, Bec, Kate and Evan are talking about religion. Bec says she was raised skeptical, whereas Kate says her family still calls her when they?re having prayer services for her, and asks if she wants to come. Do you think that religious upbringing played a role in how the two women ultimately came to think about illness and death, and the

decisions they make in the story? Did your own religious background, or lack thereof, influence your experience of Kate?s death in the novel?

3. Much of the early bonding between Kate and Bec takes place over cooking and shopping and appreciating beautiful things. What role do class and economic status play in the novel? Would the story have turned out differently if Kate had been less well-off? Would the two women still have become close if Kate hadn?t been so comfortable financially?

4. ?Sometimes I looked at my face ? and thought I was genuinely pretty. But for some reason I never did much to heighten or shape it?I found it preferable to believe I had a certain amount of raw material, if only I attended to it someday? (page 55). What does it say about Bec?s state of mind early in the story that she thinks about herself this way? By the end of the novel, she?s wearing makeup occasionally. What do you think is the significance of this change? Is it a change for the better? How does it relate to Bec?s experiences with Kate?

5. Do you think Bec?s perception of Kate and Evan?s breakup affects her own relationship with Liam? Do you see any similarities between the two relationships?

6. Do you think Kate?s reaction to Evan?s affair with Cynthia is severe enough? Too severe? On page 119, Bec tells Jill, ?I was picturing sort of a series of mature, world-weary one-nighters with divorcées ? All very-up front. And I thought that was kind of okay.? Do you agree that a series of casual affairs would be less hurtful in this situation than one sustained relationship? Are there circumstances in which the spouse of a disabled person should be allowed to have an affair, in which it would help the marriage survive?

7. Based on the events in the story, do you think it?s possible to guess the author?s position on the issues of a person?s right to die and assisted suicide? Do you agree with Bec?s decision to let Kate die?

8. How do Kate and Bec use humor to deal with a difficult situation? Were you ever surprised or troubled by the ways in which they make light of Kate?s illness?

9. Compare Bec?s two romantic relationships in the book, with Liam and with Mark. What do the differences between them say about how she?s changed while working with Kate? How do you think being with Kate, and observing Kate?s relationships, influenced Bec?s decisions in the novel?

10. Look at the episode with the flower girl on pp. 211-214. Rather than adoring her or enjoying her company, Kate and Bec are both made uncomfortable by the little girl?s blind affection. Why do you think the author included this scene? What do you think it says about how these two women approach the world, and how does it relate to the way Kate conducts her other relationships?

11. One review of the novel described the author?s style as ?deeply sensual.? The writing is full of descriptions of smells, tastes and physical sensation, and the emphasis on cooking and eating is unmistakable. How does this sensuality help the author to tell her story? What does it say about her approach to the emotional and ethical questions that underlie Kate and Bec?s relationship?

12. When Bec goes to visit Evan (pages 261-264) the two of them argue over their respective roles in Kate?s life, each seeming to resent the other for the roles they played in the end of Kate?s life. Do you think Bec is right to lash out at

Evan? Based on his remarks, do you think she has misunderstood some aspects of his relationship to Kate?

Author Bio

Michelle Wildgen is the author of the novels WINE PEOPLE, YOU'RE NOT YOU, BUT NOT FOR LONG and BREAD AND BUTTER, and the editor of the food writing anthology FOOD & BOOZE. A former executive editor with the award-winning literary journal *Tin House*, she is a freelance editor and creative writing teacher in Madison, Wis. Since 2013 she and novelist Susanna Daniel have run the Madison Writers? Studio, offering a variety of creative writing workshops and classes.

Critical Praise

"A fresh, accomplished first novel . . . tackles challenging material with honesty and a clear eye."

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