

Book Club Questions

The Dictionary of Lost Words by Pip Williams

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?

Book Club Questions by the publisher

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