Women's Prize for Fiction 2023

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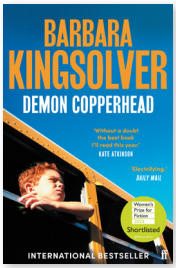
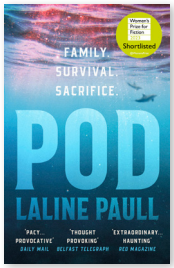
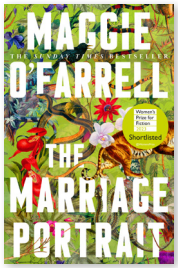
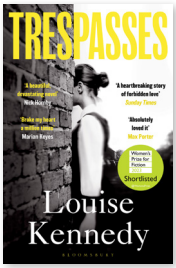
SHORTLIST READING GUIDES









Women's Prize for Fiction 2023

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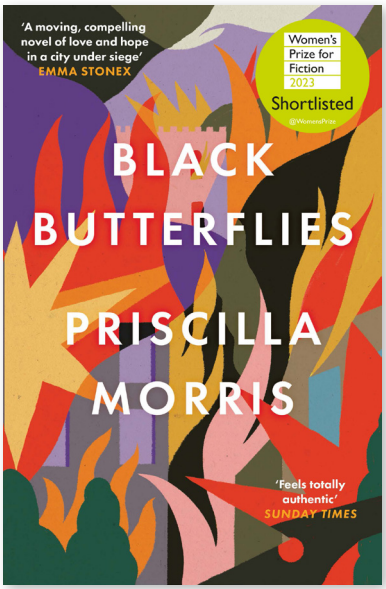
2023 SHORTLIST

READING GUIDE

BLACK BUTTERFLIES
BY PRISCILLA MORRIS



PLOT SUMMARY

Sarajevo, Spring 1992. Each night, nationalist gangs erect barricades, splitting the diverse city into ethnic enclaves; each morning, the weary residents – whether Muslim, Croat or Serb – push the makeshift barriers aside. Threat hangs heavy in the air.

Zora, an artist and teacher, is focused on the day-to-day: her family, her students, her studio in the old town. But when violence finally spills over, she sees that she must send her husband and her elderly mother to safety with her daughter in England. Reluctant to believe that hostilities will last longer than a handful of weeks, she stays behind. As the city falls under siege and everything they love is laid to waste, black ashes floating over the rooftops, Zora and her friends are forced to rebuild themselves, over and over. Theirs is a breathtaking story of disintegration, resilience and hope.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Black Butterflies,* Morris weaves a story of the power of art in shaping human resilience. Zora, an artist and teacher, is obsessed with painting bridges and has made her name in the art world with her paintings of them.

As the siege of Sarajevo develops, Zora tunes out the rising conflict by concentrating on her painting. Her students find her passion inspiring and her painting an act of resistance. The students, on their part, are committed to turning up to class even when they are so hungry that they have to lie down from exhaustion on arrival. Art, and the resistance it represents, is that important.

Even after she has run out of paint and the shelves in the shops are bare, Zora makes her own multimedia "fire paintings" using whatever she can find to make marks – "pigeon feather, spent bullets, shattered glass" (p171). When painting with her neighbour's little girl, Una, they experiment with grinding rubble from the broken walls into powder and make a coloured paste with old food colouring. The need to create surpasses the need for proper materials.

Books also become a refuge in Sarajevo, especially Mirsad's bookshop. As well as staying open well past the time most businesses have been forced to close, Mirsad's shop – which turns into more of a library when he starts lending out the books – becomes a haven for those who have been in hiding, those who are hungry and anyone who craves human contact. As well as being a place where people can connect to stories and culture, the shop becomes a hub for UN relief food packages. Later in the siege, when Zora and Mirsad become lovers, Mirsad reads to her and the others from old folk tales, providing distraction in the very darkest of times.

DISCUSSION POINTS

When the Vijećnica burns, Mirsad tells Zora that: "They say almost two million documents burnt in there. First editions, rare manuscripts, land records, newspaper archives. Our national heritage destroyed in a night." (p148)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Priscilla Morris is the daughter of a Yugoslav mother and a Cornish father. She grew up in London, spending summers in Sarajevo, and studied at Cambridge University and the University of East Anglia, where she gained her PhD in Creative Writing. She teaches Creative Writing at University College Dublin and lives in County Monaghan, Ireland. *Black Butterflies* is her first book.

> ‘A beautifully written book set against the backdrop of the siege of Sarajevo; it’s about love and loss, and where your home truly is.’
>
> Tulip Siddiq, 2023 Judge

In war and conflict, cultural artefacts, books and documentation are lost or destroyed for a number of reasons, often purposefully. You will no doubt be able to think of many other examples of books being burnt, monuments defaced, and cultural treasures lost forever. Morris really brings home the tragic loss of Sarajevo’s cultural history in the burning of the Vijećnica, using the motif of the blackened pieces of paper – Black Butterflies – as her title for the work, and thus foregrounding the event as a key moment in the siege. The horror of the burning of the Vijećnica represents the terrifying ease with which centuries of history can be destroyed in one evening.

However, is there a difference between the “official” history of a country and the lived history of its inhabitants, particularly women? There is so much in Zora’s life and in the lives of the other women in the book that will be forever undocumented – the daily tasks, devotions and caring duties that don’t result in art or literature, but yet enable its creation. Do we tend to focus on the creation of art – particularly when it comes to the works of Great Men – and forget what has happened in the background to allow it to happen?

How important are books, paintings, sculptures and other artworks, and how tragic is it when they are destroyed in war? How does that destruction compare to the loss of human life and the other horrors Zora later realises have happened during the war in Sarajevo?

QUESTIONS

How does Morris use the symbol of the bridge to represent the once-glorious diversity of Sarajevo?

On p.1, Zora describes her day-to-day work and caring activities, which are representative of the responsibilities of many middle-aged women. With her mother and husband in England, does Zora find any positives in her new-found independence?

How does the dinner party scene (pp 39-45) illustrate the different political views in Sarajevo at the time of the siege?

Can you understand why Samir may have finally decided to join the fighting after resisting it for so long?

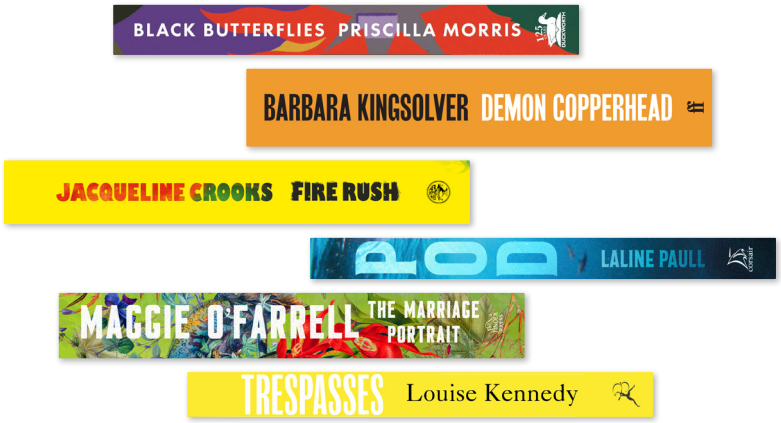
NEXT STEPS

Inspired by Zora, draw or paint some local bridges and see what the experience makes you think about. Meditate on the nature of bridges and the way that they connect opposing sides as you draw and paint. Do you find it a calming activity? You could experiment with different styles, detail, broad strokes, angles and perspectives.

You might also write a story using the title “Burning Bridges”. Rather than thinking about how bridges connect opposing sides, think about what this phrase inspires in your mind. You could think about a situation where someone “burns bridges” in a relationship or at work – maybe it’s a story about throwing caution to the wind, ending a toxic relationship, or doing something you later regret.

If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

A moving drama set against the backdrop of the crisis that rocked the Balkans in the 1990s, ***Rose of Sarajevo*** by Ayşe Kulin reveals the tremendous lengths people will go to in the name of love. In ***The Island of Missing Trees***, Elif Shafak tells the story of the Turkish-Cypriot conflict in Cyprus, and of lovers caught on either side of the divide.



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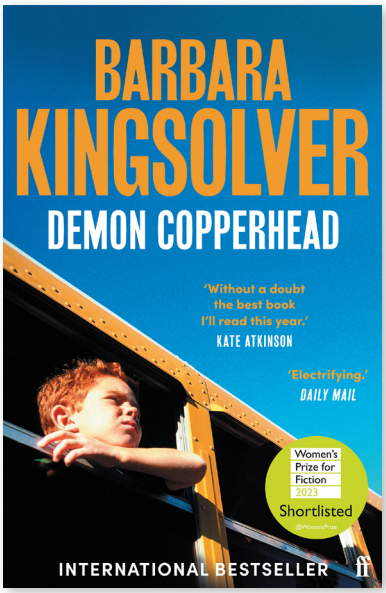
2023 SHORTLIST

READING GUIDE

DEMON COPPERHEAD
BARBARA KINGSOLVER



PLOT SUMMARY

Demon's story begins with his traumatic birth to a single mother in a trailer, looking "like a little blue prizefighter". For the life ahead of him he will need all of that fighting spirit, along with buckets of charm, a quick wit and some unexpected talents.

In the southern Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, poverty isn't an idea, it's as natural as the grass grows. For a generation growing up in this world, at the heart of the modern opioid crisis, addiction isn't an abstraction, it's neighbours, parents and friends. "Family" could mean love – or reluctant foster care. For Demon, born on the wrong side of luck, the affection and safety he craves is as remote as the ocean he dreams of seeing one day. The wonder is in how far he's willing to travel to try and get there.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

A modern reimagining of Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* asks how well society cares for its most vulnerable.

Demon's experiences in the care system are shocking, but sadly not unusual, either in the USA or in other countries including the UK. Vulnerable children are often hungry, cold and uncared for, or worse, which is as heart-breaking today as it was in Dickens' time. This is not a universal experience, and many children in the care system thrive and succeed. However, for Demon, being a foster child means he is at the liberty of the feckless McCobbs, or hired help for Creaky on the farm. Kingsolver refuses to spare the reader descriptions of Demon with holes in his clothes, hunting for leftover food at school, and the awful stigma that comes with being a poor, neglected child.

This is a society that cares little for its other vulnerable members: women suffering domestic abuse such as Demon's mother or Mariah Peggott are not listened to or helped, even when, in the case of Demon's mother, she's also a drug addict.

And, when Demon himself becomes addicted to opioids, the story reflects the reality of modern-day America, where so many are readily prescribed opioid painkillers and become vulnerable as a result. June tells Demon that she knows drug companies specifically target Lee County and see it as a "gold mine" (p416) for the high numbers of pain patients who have no choice but to continue working in order to receive disability cover.

Ultimately, Demon's battle is to achieve sobriety and to transcend the limitations he was born under. Fortunately, he has some guiding lights along the way – Angus and June, his grandmother and Mr Dick and the Peggott family, who probably make the difference between life and death in his early years. But the fact that Demon succeeds by the end of the book is testament to his own hard work and strength of character, despite the many restrictions of an uncaring society.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Kingsolver is the prize-winning and bestselling author of ten novels including *Unsheltered, The Lacuna* and *The Poisonwood Bible*, as well as books of poetry, essays and creative non-fiction. Her work of narrative non-fiction is the bestseller *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. Kingsolver's work has been translated into more than twenty languages and she has both won and been shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction. She lives with her family on a farm in southern Appalachia.

DISCUSSION POINTS

There are a number of mother figures in Demon's life – his own mother, Mrs Peggott, Aunt June (who Demon calls his "Wonder Nurse"), Mrs McCobb, Miss Barks the social worker, Demon's grandmother – all of whom represent different kinds of mothers, providing different levels of nurture to Demon and to others.

Like Peggotty, David's gentle and caring housekeeper in Dickens' original *David Copperfield*, Mrs Peggott is somewhat of an adoptive mother figure for Demon, often looking after him when his own mother can't, and letting Demon and his mother live in one of the Peggott family trailers. Demon's grandmother, an update to Dickens' Betsey Trotwood, is kind in her own way, but, though she is the blood relation he has been looking for, she isn't motherly in the traditional sense. Mrs McCobb is negligent though not overtly abusive, and Miss Barks is caring, but distant and largely unavailable to Demon.

We also see the challenges of motherhood in *Demon Copperhead*. Motherhood is difficult, almost impossible, when you are also the victim of domestic abuse, as in the horrifying story of Mariah Peggott, and of Demon's mother's relationship with Stoner.

Which character do you think is the best and worst mother-figure, and why? Or is it not that straightforward to identify a "good" mother and a "bad" one? Who do you have sympathy for and who do you not, and why? Do we blame mothers more than (often absent) fathers for neglectful behaviour?

QUESTIONS

If you're familiar with *David Copperfield*, how does *Demon Copperhead* compare? How well do you think Kingsolver has rewritten Dickens' story for the modern age?

Was Demon destined to become an addict from birth? Why, or why not?

How do the characters of Angus and Emmy compare? What do you think saves Angus from following a similar fate to Emmy?

How well has Kingsolver created the voice of a poor boy living in the Appalachian Mountains? Is Demon's voice convincing? What helps it come across on the page?

NEXT STEPS

Demon becomes a successful comic artist. Investigate comics and graphic novels perhaps starting with classics such as Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and moving onto more recent female-centred hits like *Paper Girls* by Brian K Vaughan and Cliff Chiang (now a Netflix series) or *Monstress* by Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda. If you live near a bookshop with a graphic novel section, go in and have a browse. See which types of artwork and story attract your attention – and have a go at creating your own comic strip if inspired.

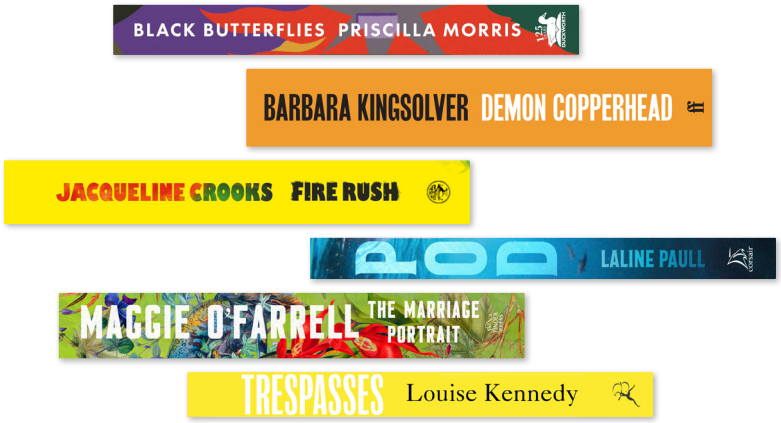
Alternatively, write a short story or a poem about a mother figure in your life, or about an experience of motherhood. See if you can evoke some visceral emotions on the page: is the piece celebratory, critical, sad, bittersweet, warm or joyous? Include some sense detail: smells, tastes, sounds and textures will help bring your piece to life.

'The story of a young boy who is destined to live a life with nothing and who, despite all the odds, rises above it.'

Rachel Joyce, 2023 Judge

If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver is told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. In ***My Name is Leon***, Kit de Waal presents a story of children in foster care in 1981 Britain, dealing with their own issues of race, family and belonging.



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READING GUIDE

FIRE RUSH
JACQUELINE CROOKS

PLOT SUMMARY

Yamaye lives for the weekend, when she can go raving with her friends at The Crypt, an underground club in the industrial town on the outskirts of London where she was born and raised. A young woman unsure of her future, the sound is her guide – a chance to discover who she really is in the rhythms of those smoke-filled nights. In the dance-hall darkness, dub is the music of her soul, her friendships, her ancestry.

But everything changes when she meets Moose, who she falls deeply in love with, and who offers her the chance of freedom and escape. When their relationship is brutally cut short, Yamaye goes on a dramatic journey of transformation that takes her first to Bristol – where she is caught up in a criminal gang and the police riots sweeping the country – and then to Jamaica, where past and present collide with explosive consequences.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Fire Rush asks what it was to be a Black woman in 70s and 80s Britain. Yamaye is the child of immigrant parents, growing up on a deprived South London estate, not yet sure what she wants to do with her life. Her friend Asase is focused on starting her own business, unafraid to be enterprising and take advantage of situations that might benefit her. Both of them feel that Britain, and even multicultural London, is unwelcoming to them, and that there are only specific places such as The Crypt and Dub Steppaz where they feel safe being Black. However, even in those places they are not completely safe as young women: Crooks describes how Yamaye, Asase and Rumer would often stand behind the counter with the record shop owner, Eustace, to avoid getting too much negative attention from the male customers.

In Bristol, with Monassa and his friends, Yamaye realises that the "safe house" is very far from safe, and that she is in danger as a young woman in a place where women are regularly coerced and abused.

Crooks makes the political context of the late 70s and early 80s sus law (repealed in 1981 after the Brixton riots) and police brutality clear: being Black in this environment is not safe, particularly when the structures designed to protect are racist and corrupt. Moose's death in custody all too chillingly recalls George Floyd's death, and Yamaye's experiences with the police, such as when the policeman questions her after Eustace is stabbed, are shocking. Being Black and being a woman are both plagued with difficulty and repression in 70s and 80s Britain. In fact, it is only when Yamaye goes to Jamaica – leaving Britain altogether – that she finds magic and empowerment in the Obeah tradition and in the ancestry of the land.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jacqueline Crooks grew up in 70s and 80s Southall. Immersed in the gang underworld as a young woman, she later discovered the power of writing and music to help her look outwards and engage differently with the world – a power that has driven her ever since, from her work with charities to her short stories, which have been nominated for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, the Wasafiri New Writing Prize and the BBC National Short Story Award.

‘A brilliant celebration of Black womanhood. It’s a story about dub reggae, friendships, love and loss, which spans London, Bristol and Jamaica.’

Irenosen Okojie, 2023 Judge

DISCUSSION POINTS

Despite the fact that Britain elected its first female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, in 1979, it could be easily argued that the cultural climate for women – and especially women of colour – did not noticeably improve as a result of having a woman in charge of the country.

On p50, we see Yamaye, Asase and Rumer watching Margaret Thatcher taking up her role: while Asase is enthusiastic that Thatcher is, at least, a “bad blue bitch” that will shake up the male status quo, Rumer warns that Thatcher represents “The National Front in pussy-bow blouses”.

Instead, for Yamaye, it is the wisdom of mothers and grandmothers such as Asase’s mother Oraca and Moose’s grandmother Granny Itiba – and the connection to her own Muma, who inspires her live performances – that provide strength and empowerment.

How do women help and hinder each other in *Fire Rush*, and to what extent are they powerful enough to do so? What does power look like for women – political power, spiritual power, physical power, sexual power? How is it used – effectively, ineffectively, abused? How powerful are Yamaye, Charmaine, Asase, Granny Itiba and Oraca? What restrictions to their power exist?

QUESTIONS

“Man preach revolution but woman carry its sound.” What is the role of music in the book? How does Yamaye find liberation in music?

How does Crooks use deathly or spectral symbolism in *Fire Rush* to represent Norwood? How does that symbolism compare with Crooks’ depiction of Jamaica?

How does Crooks use dialect to build character in the book? What else does the use of dialect add to the reading experience?

How do you feel about Moose – how is the way Crooks describes him different to other men in the book?

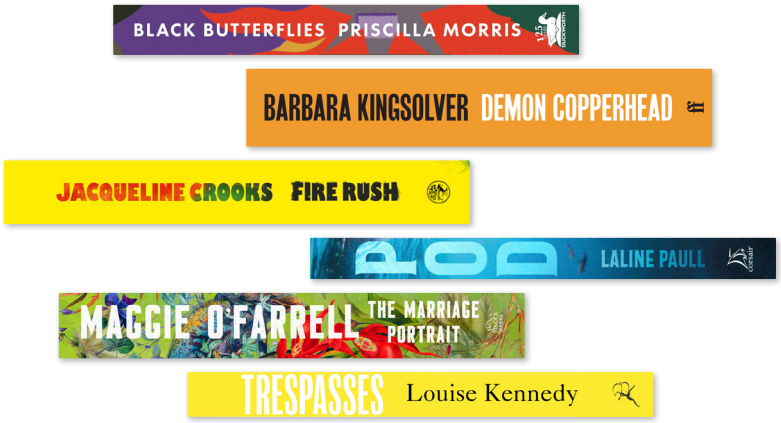
NEXT STEPS

Write about a time that music has transported you somewhere else or been profound in some way. It might be a song that you associate with a fond memory or a person close to you, or even a type of music that is important to you, like dub reggae is to Yamaye. What does that music mean to you? Has it been there at important times in your life? Write about one of those times, if so.

Alternatively, write a poem or a few lines of rap inspired by Yamaye’s freestyling. You might want to choose a political issue you are passionate about as a focus. See how you can use rhyme – challenge yourself to rhyme, but in an original and fresh way! When you’re writing, keep reading your work aloud to see how it actually sounds, off the page.

If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

Called “a love song to black womanhood in modern Great Britain” ***Girl, Woman, Other*** by Bernardine Evaristo follows a cast of twelve characters on their personal journeys in the UK over the last hundred years. In ***Black Cake*** by Charmaine Wilkerson, two estranged children reunite when their mother dies, reconnecting with their Caribbean identity in the process.



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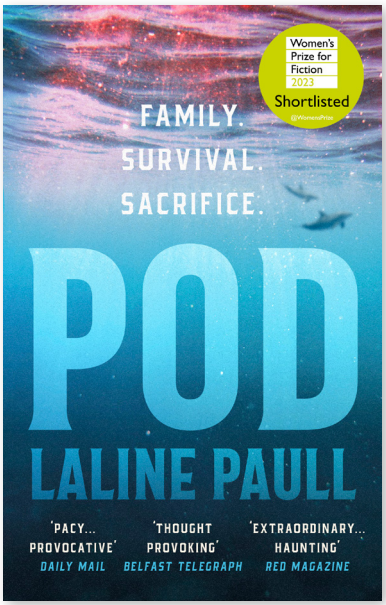
READING GUIDE

POD
LALINE PAULL



PLOT SUMMARY

Ea has always felt like an outsider. As a spinner dolphin who has recently come of age, she's expected to join in the elaborate rituals that unite her pod. But Ea suffers from a type of deafness that means she just can't seem to master spinning. When catastrophe befalls her family and Ea knows she is partly to blame, she decides to make the ultimate sacrifice and leave the pod.

As Ea ventures into the vast, she discovers dangers everywhere, from lurking predators to strange objects floating in the water. Not to mention the ocean itself seems to be changing: creatures are mutating, demonic noises pierce the depths, whole species of fish disappear into the sky above. Just as she is coming to terms with her solitude, a chance encounter with a group of arrogant bottlenoses will irrevocably alter the course of her life.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Pod,* Paull continues her focus on the environmental issues explored in her previous books – *The Bees* and *The Ice* – by following the story of Ea, a bottlenose dolphin who leaves her pod and finds herself lost in the often savage environment of the wider ocean.

As a genre, climate fiction is sometimes set in the present day, like *Pod*, and sometimes framed as a dystopian future in the aftermath of a climactic environmental event. Both types of climate fiction act as warnings to readers, highlighting specific environmental problems and envisioning their consequences. Often, the focus is on the consequences for humans; in *Pod*, Paull reminds us how hunting, ocean pollution and military practices impact animals and plant life too.

Paull resists the possible temptation to represent animals as saintly. The dolphins, in particular the Tursiops pod, are violent, and the Remora is repellent to its hosts, though it fulfils its own function in the oceanic ecosystem.

In *Pod* the reader can easily appreciate the depth of research that Paull has undertaken, some of which is detailed in her endnotes. We never feel that *Pod* has become a scientific study or a factual manual about ocean life because the story is so well-plotted and immersive, but we do come away from the page with a greater understanding of how certain ocean ecosystems and animal hierarchies work, and how they are affected by humans. For instance, the Wrasse and the Fugu have to make a new life in the sulphuric vents, which is not easy, but reflects the way that nature can reinvent itself and adapt to environmental change. Pollution is changing the Wrasse's body in particular, affecting its already sensitive hormonal balance. The detailed and delicate social hierarchy of dolphins is rendered beautifully, and it's in this kind of detail that Paull ensnares the reader, making us care.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The author Amitav Ghosh makes a crucial point about *Pod* in saying "Laline Paull succeeds splendidly in rising to the most important literary challenge of our time – restoring voice and agency to other-than-human beings."

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

London-born and of Indian heritage, **Laline Paull** studied English at Oxford, screenwriting in Los Angeles, and theatre in her home city. She writes across a variety of forms and lives in the English countryside with her family.

In presenting a novel told from the points of view of various animals – Ea and Google, both dolphins, a Wrasse and a Remora fish among others – Paull is doing something quite revolutionary. She connects us directly with the creatures in the ocean and makes us sympathise with them with no human intermediary.

Paull knows that fiction is an effective way for humans to connect to meaning. If we, as readers, can empathise with the animal characters, we can both understand their plight and perhaps care enough to do something about the issues that are ruining the oceans for wildlife. Restoring agency to dolphins, fish, whales and other ocean creatures in *Pod* means that Paull starts to unpick our attitudes towards animals and nature as "other".

How did reading the various animal points of view feel? Did it take a while for you to get used to there being no human voices? Did you feel anything was lost by not including humans, or did you forget they were absent? How can we accurately represent an animal point of view in a story? Is it possible?

QUESTIONS

What were your thoughts regarding the parallels between human and dolphin patriarchal societies?

In *Pod*, gendered sexual violence is present in the ocean as it is on land. How does Paull represent sexual abuse in the novel? Did it surprise you to read about this?

What effect did reading *Pod* have on your own feelings toward ocean pollution, climate change and the protection of animals?

Paull includes a note at the end of the book explaining how she wrote Google's story based on real-life military intelligence gathering techniques. Are you shocked to learn that dolphins are used by governments in this way?

NEXT STEPS

Laline Paull gives the reader a wealth of fascinating research material at the end of *Pod* including films such as *My Octopus Teacher* on Netflix. Watch one or more of these films or read some of the more scientific papers she lists as inspiration. Do any of these sources inspire ideas for a story? You could follow Paull's example and write a short story from the point of view of an ocean creature – perhaps an octopus! What challenges do you encounter? Or do you find writing an animal point of view easier than a human one?

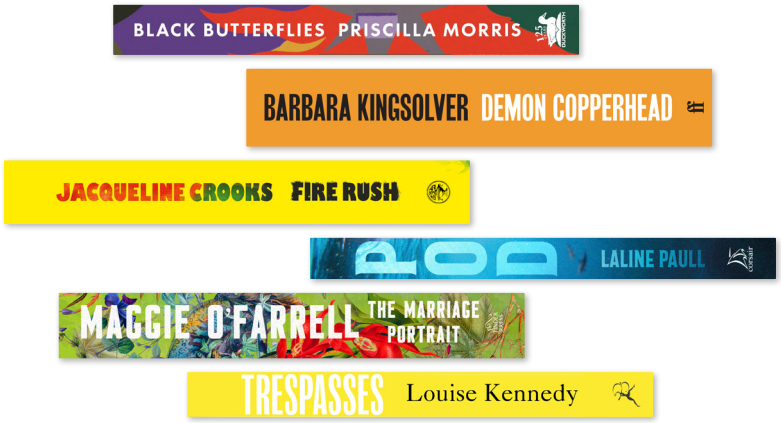
Alternatively, think about an issue you are passionate about as Paull so clearly cares about the environment. If you are someone who enjoys creative writing, do you tend to weave this topic into your writing? If so, how do you balance your personal opinions and research along with the story?

'*Pod* follows a dolphin who takes great risks to save her pod. The novel speaks to climate change and is also a wonderful celebration of family.'

Irenosen Okojie, 2023 Judge

If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

The Bees is another novel where Laline Paull restores the character voice to animals, in this case the story is set entirely in a beehive. In ***Future Home of the Living God***, Louise Erdrich paints a startling portrait of a young woman fighting for her life and her unborn child against oppressive forces that manifest in the wake of a cataclysmic event.



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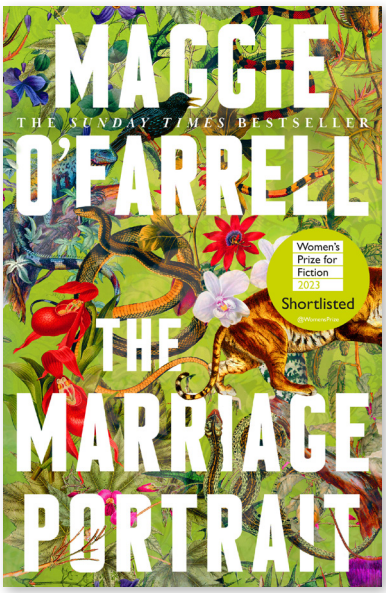
READING GUIDE

THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT

MAGGIE O'FARRELL



PLOT SUMMARY

Florence, the 1560s. Lucrezia, daughter of Cosimo de' Medici, is comfortable with her obscure place in the palazzo: free to wonder at its treasures and to devote herself to artistic pursuits. But when her sister dies on the eve of marriage to Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara, Lucrezia is thrust into the limelight: he is quick to request her hand in marriage, and her father to accept on her behalf.

Having barely left girlhood, Lucrezia must now make her way in a troubled court where her arrival is not universally welcomed. As Lucrezia sits for the painting which is to preserve her image for centuries to come, one thing becomes worryingly clear. In the court's eyes, she has one duty: to provide the heir who will secure the future of the Ferrarese dynasty. Until then, for all of her rank and nobility, the duchess's fate hangs entirely in the balance.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In O'Farrell's notes at the end of the book she explains that uxoricide – the killing of one's wife – was not an uncommon practice in sixteenth-century Italy. Lucrezia's sister, in real life, Isabella de Medici Orsini, was strangled by her husband, and their cousin Dianora was choked by a dog leash by her husband, Pietro de Medici. O'Farrell notes that both deaths seemingly had the approval of the women's families, and that neither man was ever held to account.

The theme of violence against women is present throughout *The Marriage Portrait,* because women are routinely viewed as objects to be used for male pleasure or reproduction, and, in the case of noble families, as pawns to make political alliances. Cosimo thinks nothing of initiating sex with his wife without warning in front of her ladies in waiting, and indeed Queen Eleanora accepts that this is her lot, to produce as many heirs as possible, without complaint.

Alfonso clearly thinks nothing of marrying and raping his teenage wife, and, when she is unable to produce an heir, planning to murder her.

It is fitting that O'Farrell surrounds Lucrezia – the prey – with a hunting lodge as the place of her potential demise. In *The Marriage Portrait,* men are the hunters and women are the prey, and it seems that there is no escape: for the real-life women who died at their husband's or father's hands, there was none, but O'Farrell gives a hopeful ending to Lucrezia's story, with Lucrezia escaping with Jacopo to pursue a life of freedom.

DISCUSSION POINTS

In the scene where Lucrezia's father, Cosimo, the Grand Duke, takes his children to the Sala de Leoni – an enclosure in the bowels of the palazzo, containing all manner of captive wild animals – Lucrezia feels a bond with the tiger:

"Lucrezia and the tigress regarded each other, for a stretched moment, the child's hand on the beast's back, and time stopped for Lucrezia, the turning world stilled.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Maggie O'Farrell is the author of *Hamnet*, winner of the 2020 Women's Prize for Fiction, and the memoir *I Am, I Am, I Am,* both *Sunday Times* no. 1 bestsellers. Her novels include *After You'd Gone, My Lover's Lover, The Distance Between Us,* which won a Somerset Maugham Award, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox, The Hand That First Held Mine,* which won the Costa Novel Award, *Instructions for a Heatwave, This Must Be the Place* and *The Marriage Portrait.*

Her life, her name, her family and all that surrounded her receded and became void. She was aware only of her own heart, and that of the tigress, pulsing inside the ribs, drawing in scarlet blood and shooting it out again, flooding their veins." (p46)

How are Lucrezia and the tiger similar? O'Farrell tells us that Lucrezia is the odd one out among the children, the rebel who yearns for freedom and doesn't want to perform the usual princess duties. Is the tiger symbolic of her? Or does the caged tiger represent the fate of all the female children whose lives will be spent locked away in palaces and dominated by violent men? What of the reference that Lucrezia has "charmed the beast" in touching the tiger without being harmed? Does this presage a kind of immunity to Alfonso's plans to murder her, later?

Or, is the tiger reminiscent of the savage threat posed to Lucrezia and her sisters by their fathers and future husbands, who will beat, rape and possibly even murder them? And, if this is the case, what is it in Lucrezia that feels a bond or an attraction to the tiger? Does it represent a power she craves, or a power that is already within her?

QUESTIONS

What is the symbolism of the portrait of Lucrezia? Why do you think Alfonso keeps it in his bedroom after he believes he has murdered her?

Is Eleanora a good mother? Why, or why not?

How do you feel about the character of Sofia? Is Sofia the one person who has ever really cared for Lucrezia?

How does O'Farrell use the present tense, and is it effective? How does it make us feel about the characters and events?

NEXT STEPS

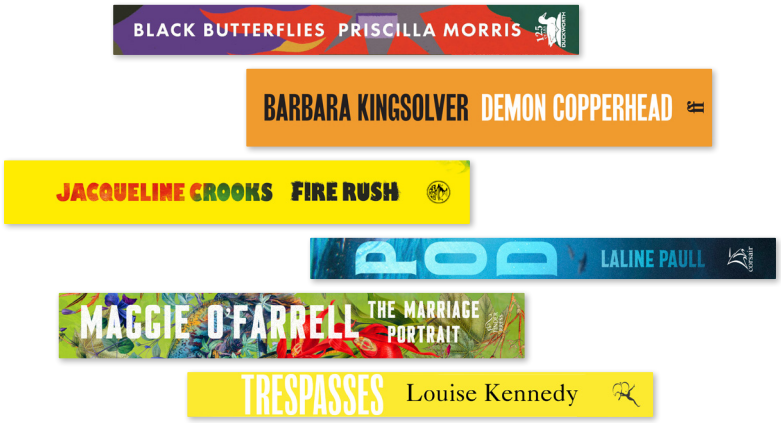
Choose a portrait of a woman from history – perhaps a relatively obscure one – and study it. Go to your local gallery, if you have one, or look up images on an art gallery website, such as the National Portrait Gallery. Then write her story, without researching who she was. Imagine your way into who she might be in the present day, if she lived now. What might her interests be, her passions? What are her likes and dislikes, her fondest memories? Who does she love, and who has she lost? Create the character as fully as you can with plenty of notes and then begin a piece of writing in the present tense as "I". See if you can evoke a character voice.

Alternatively, use O'Farrell's symbol of the tiger and write a descriptive piece using the tiger as a metaphor for a woman. How are her tiger qualities expressed – her physicality, her sexuality, her desirability or wildness? Or, is your tiger caged or hunted by someone? Perhaps your tiger is the huntress, instead. You could look at William Blake's famous poem "The Tyger" for inspiration, or look up women poets such as Audre Lorde, Rupi Kaur and Carol Ann Duffy, all of whom have written about women's sexuality and identity.

> 'An exquisite book that explores extraordinary themes of bravery and of pure evil. I absolutely loved it.'
>
> Louise Minchin, 2023 Judge

If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

In ***Hamnet***, Maggie O'Farrell tells the story of the women and children in William Shakespeare's life, and in ***Catherine de Medici*** (soon to be a TV series starring Samantha Morton) Leonie Frieda tells the real life story of one of 16th-century Italy's most powerful women.



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?

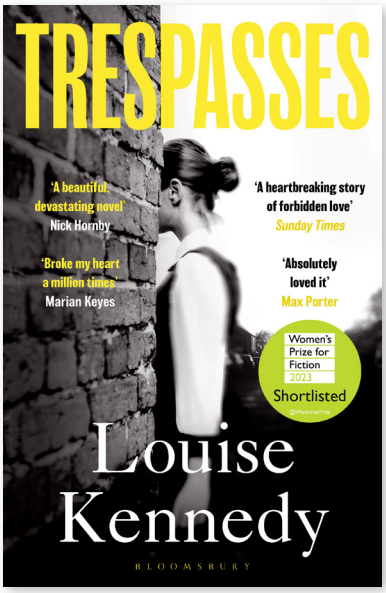
Women's Prize for Fiction 2023

BAILEYS audible

2023 SHORTLIST

READING GUIDE

TRESPASSES
LOUISE KENNEDY



PLOT SUMMARY

Cushla Lavery lives with her mother in a small town near Belfast. At twenty-four, she splits her time between her day job as a teacher to a class of seven-year-olds, and regular bartending shifts in the pub owned by her family. It's here, on a day like any other – as the daily news rolls in of another car bomb exploding, another man shot, killed, beaten or left for dead – that she meets Michael Agnew, an older (and married) barrister who draws her into his sophisticated group of friends.

When the father of a young boy in her class becomes the victim of a savage attack, Cushla is compelled to help his family. But as her affair with Michael intensifies, political tensions in the town escalate, threatening to destroy all she is working to hold together.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Kennedy's description of setting in *Trespasses* is detailed, gritty and often grim, such as the warning signs about guns and bombers on roadside hoardings, the mould inside kitchens, the blocks of flats where children cannot sleep at night because of the lights from the police helicopters shining in through the windows. Kennedy renders Eamonn's pub full of sticky surfaces, stubbed-out cigarettes and aggressive men, and Cushla and Gina's home the place of shallow baths, indigestible food and family arguments.

Yet, despite its bleak setting, *Trespasses* is a love story, and Cushla and Michael's moments together transcend the mundanity of their surroundings. In Michael's flat, he and Cushla listen to music, talk and make love, and even the less romantic aspects of Michael – washing under his underarms with a flannel, his ugly pyjamas hidden under the mattress – don't deter Cushla from falling for him.

In this way, Kennedy seems to be saying to the reader that love is a remarkable occurrence that can happen anywhere and at any time, regardless of whatever oppressive context might surround it. Cushla and Michael's love is far from ideal, but, perhaps because of the context of The Troubles, Cushla feels that she would rather have the limited version of a relationship Michael can offer, than nothing at all:

"She had been unable to say no to him. It wasn't because he had been kind to her. It was because each time she saw him she was afraid it would be the last time." (p141)

In this way, the grim setting of Northern Ireland in the early 1970s seems to in part provide the motivation for Cushla and Michael to pursue their affair: in such an environment, any love at all is worth pursuing.

DISCUSSION POINTS

We learn that Michael has a reputation for being a ladies' man, and Michael is married when he starts seeing Cushla. On p85 and p86 we see Cushla trying to come to terms with the fact that she's involved with a married man and imagining what Michael's wife could be like.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Louise Kennedy grew up in Holywood, Co. Down. She is the author of the short story collection *The End of the World is a Cul de Sac*, and was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Audible Short Story Award in both 2019 and 2020. *Trespasses* is her debut novel. Before starting her writing career, Kennedy spent nearly thirty years working as a chef. She lives in Sligo with her husband and two children.

The pressure on Cushla and Michael to keep their affair a secret isn't just because he's married: Cushla is Catholic and Michael is Protestant, which means that the society of the time deems it wrong that they should be together. Eamonn, Cushla's brother, is also very protective of Cushla, seeing it as his responsibility to screen her boyfriends and tell her who and how she can date. Gina, too, is restrictive of Cushla's behaviour, saying she shouldn't be going out to see men, but later seems to understand that at 24 Cushla should be allowed a private life.

Can you imagine being Cushla and having your actions and relationships monitored so closely? Do you judge Cushla and Michael for their affair, or does Kennedy make us feel sympathetic towards them?

QUESTIONS

In the scene where Cushla is reading *Cosmopolitan* magazine just before she and Michael have sex in his car, what might Kennedy be showing us about differing attitudes to sex and women in the 1970s?

How do you feel about Gina as a character? How does her alcoholism affect her relationship with Cushla, and is Gina's drinking perhaps a response to the stressful environment?

What are Michael's friends' motivations towards Cushla during their Irish lessons?

How do those scenes highlight tensions between Catholics and Protestants at the time?

How are The Troubles represented through the voices and experiences of the children in the book, and Cushla's relationship with Davy in particular?

NEXT STEPS

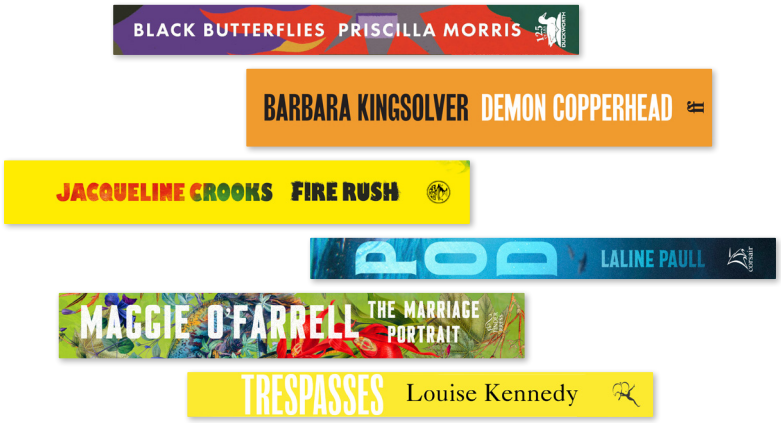
Write a poem in which lovers are kept apart by politics or religion (or both). How will you create the tension of the situation? You might choose to depict two voices in the poem, or one narrative voice that knows each side of the relationship. How can you best capture the couple's yearning, despite the situation? Will it be a poignant poem, sad, tragic, optimistic for the future?

Alternatively, you might look back at British and Irish media coverage of The Troubles. What language is used in broadsheet and tabloid stories of the time? Kennedy details the daily occurrence of seeing headlines reporting people dead – how is it phrased when you look back at it? How does the language used attempt to form an opinion in the reader? Were there assumptions being made about either side? You could take a dramatic headline and use it as the title of a poem about conflict, or about love.

> 'Set during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, *Trespasses* is ostensibly a love affair, but it also weaves in community and religion and politics. It is a deftly woven novel.'
>
> Bella Mackie, 2023 Judge

If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

In ***The End of the World is a Cul de Sac***, Louise Kennedy's short stories delve into domestic violence, poverty, sex and Ireland's folklore and politics. In Louise O'Neill's ***After the Silence***, police investigate the murder of a young girl in Ireland, uncovering a dark undercurrent of abuse.



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?