2024 Quick Reads Discussion Guide

Without Warning and Only Sometimes

A story of laughter, love and hope

Kit de Waal
About the Author

Kit de Waal is the author of the novels My Name is Leon, which was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award and won the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year, and The Trick to Time, which was longlisted for the Women’s Prize for Fiction, and a short story collection, Supporting Cast. She is also editor of the Common People anthology, and co-founder of the Big Book Weekend festival. My Name is Leon was adapted as a film for BBC Two.

Discussion Questions

Front cover: What are your first impressions? Does it give any clues as to what the story may be about?

Chapter 1: The opening chapter introduces us to the narrator of the story. What do you know about the main character at this early stage? What do you think of the opening line - is it striking?

Chapter 2: What is the relationship like between the narrator and her grandmother? What impression do you get of the family situation?

Chapter 3: Why did Black Nana have to leave the house? How do you think the narrator felt about what happened to her birthday present?

Chapter 4: Why do you think the narrator’s mother was attracted to become a Jehovah’s Witness? What does the narrator mean by “the end will come in 1975 when I am fifteen”?

Chapter 5: The narrator refers to herself as “a bullied black girl”. What do we learn from this chapter about her experiences?

Chapter 6: How did the narrator Mandy, come to be known by the nickname, ‘Kit’?
Chapter 7: What does Mandy discover about Conrad? What do you make of her reaction?

Chapter 8: What do we learn about Mandy’s mother’s history from this chapter? How does she feel about Lorraine?

Chapter 9: What clues are there in the text to show that the family are struggling for money?

Chapter 10: Why does Mandy feel that she is “not in the same league as her white cousins”?

Chapter 11: How would you describe the relationship between Mandy’s Irish grandmother and her father?

Chapter 12: How does Mandy feel about not being able to celebrate Christmas? What do you make of Mandy’s mother singing ‘Please release me, let me go’ as she goes to bed?

Chapter 13: Why does Mandy’s mother refer to Mr Morgan as a ‘cheeky sod’? Do you agree with her?

Chapter 14: Do you think Mandy’s father is a supportive parent and husband?

Chapter 15: Imagine you are Mandy’s father. What differences are there between your home country and England? Do you have any regrets?

Chapter 16: Why do Mandy’s parents argue over his buying a new car?

Chapter 17: Why is Mandy’s mum upset and angry when she mentions her encounter with Ned?

Chapter 18: What challenges does Mandy face? Can you see changes in her character and attitude?
Chapter 19: What ‘rules’ did Mikey have that Mandy found difficult to ‘keep up’ with?

Chapter 20: What role does the Jehovah’s Witness faith play in the family at this point? What do you think of Mandy’s current lifestyle?

Chapter 21: Why does Christian refer to Mandy as a ‘Jezebel’? Were you surprised by what happened to him, given his erratic behaviour?

Chapter 22: What made Mandy return to see her mother and her family home?

Chapter 23: What does Mandy discover that changes her life? What do you think of the final line of the book? How does this compare to the opening line in chapter 1?

Final thoughts on Without Warning and Only Sometimes:

- This book is a memoir of the author Kit de Waal’s experience of growing up. How does this make you feel about the story, knowing that it is a true account?
- Kit’s dual heritage of being born to a white mother and black father features heavily in the story. What challenges did she and her family face over the years? Do you feel that times have changed since then?
- What did you think about this book? Would you recommend it to a friend / family member?
- The books deals with some very difficult themes - poverty, racism, identity, religion, politics and bullying. Yet there are some moments of humour and tenderness. Overall, how would you describe Kit de Waal’s childhood and adolescence?
- Do you think that the author, now an adult, can interpret her family situation differently than how she did as a young girl?