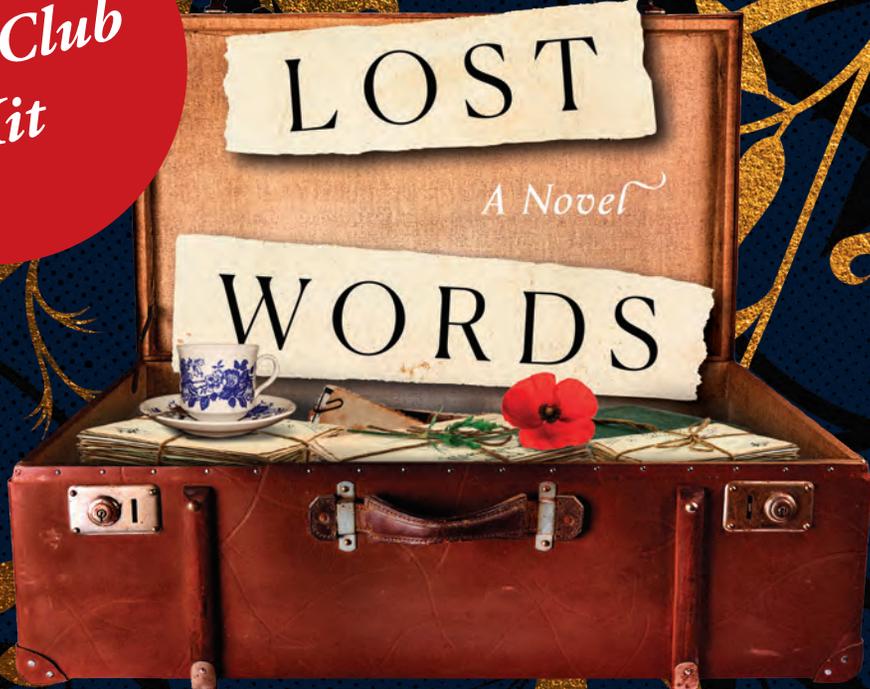


THE  
DICTIONARY  
OF

Book Club  
Kit



PIP WILLIAMS



# *A Letter from the Author*



**This book began as two simple questions:** Do words mean different things to men and women? And if they do, is it possible that we have lost something in the process of defining them?

I have had a love-hate relationship with words and dictionaries my whole life. I have trouble spelling words and I frequently use them incorrectly. Despite my clumsy handling of the English language, I have always loved how writing words down in a particular way can create a rhythm, or conjure an image, or express an emotion. It has been the greatest irony of my life that I should choose words to explore my inner and outer worlds.

A few years ago, a good friend suggested I read Simon Winchester's *The Professor and the Madman*. It is a non-fiction account of the relationship between the Editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and one of the more prolific (and notorious) volunteers. I thoroughly enjoyed it, but I was left with the impression that the dictionary was a particularly male endeavor.

Where, I wondered, are the women in this story, and does it matter that they are absent? It took me a while to find the women, and when I did, they were cast in minor and supporting roles.

I decided that the absence of women did matter. A lack of representation might mean that the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* was biased in favor of the experiences and sensibilities of men. Older, white, Victorian-era men at that.

This novel is my attempt to understand how the way we define language, might define us. Throughout, I have tried to conjure images and express emotions that bring our understanding of words into question. By putting Esme among the words, I was able to imagine the effect they might have had on her, and the effect she might have had on them.

The dictionary, like the English language, is a work in progress.

—Pip Williams



# Discussion Questions

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?

# Timeline of the Oxford English Dictionary

- 1857** The Unregistered Words Committee of the Philological Society of London calls for a new English Dictionary to succeed Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755).
- 1879** James Murray appointed as Editor.
- 1881** Edith Thompson publishes *History of England (Pictorial Course for Schools)*. Multiple editions follow as well as adaptations for American and Canadian markets.
- 1884** "A to Ant" published. It is the first of approximately 125 fascicles.
- 1885** James and Ada Murray move from London to Oxford, erecting a large corrugated iron shed in the garden of their house. The house is known as Sunnyside. The shed is known as the Scriptorium.
- 1885** Pillar post box placed outside Sunnyside in recognition of the high volume of mail generated by the Scriptorium.
- 1887** Henry Bradley appointed as second Editor.
- 1888** *A and B* published. It is the first of twelve volumes originally titled *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*.
- 1901** William Craigie appointed as third Editor.
- 1901** Bradley and Craigie move into the "Dictionary Room" at the Old Ashmolean.
- 1901** *Bondmaid* discovered missing following a letter from a member of the public.
- 1914** Charles Onions appointed as fourth Editor.
- 1915** Sir James Murray dies.
- 1915** Staff and contents of the Scriptorium are moved to the Old Ashmolean.
- 1928** *V to Z* published as *Volume 12*.
- 1928** 150 men gather in London's Goldsmiths' Hall to celebrate the publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, seventy-one years after it was proposed. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin presides. Women are not invited, though three are allowed to sit in the balcony and watch the men eat. Edith Thompson is one of them.
- 1929** Edith Thompson dies aged 81.
- 1989** Publication of the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.



# *From the Scriptorium*



**Bondmaid** [bond-meyd]  
*noun*

Bonded for life by love, devotion or obligation.

**Dollymop** [dol-ee-mop]  
*noun*

A woman who is paid for sexual favours on an occasional basis.

**Knackered** [nak-erd]  
*adjective*

Tired from physical work.

**Madcap** [mad-kap]  
*noun*

Often applied playfully to young women of lively or impulsive temperament.

**Sisters** [sis-ters]  
*noun*

Women bonded by a shared political goal; comrades.

