



Summary

Esme is born into a world of words. Motherless and irrepressibly curious, she spends her childhood in the Scriptorium, an Oxford garden shed in which her father and a team of dedicated lexicographers are collecting words for the very first *Oxford English Dictionary*. Young Esme's place is beneath the sorting table, unseen and unheard. One day a slip of paper containing the word *bondmaid* flutters beneath the table. She rescues the slip and, learning that the word means "slave girl," begins to collect other words that have been discarded or neglected by the dictionary men.

As she grows up, Esme realizes that words and meanings relating to women's and common folks' experiences often go unrecorded. And so she begins in earnest to search out words for her own dictionary: the Dictionary of Lost Words. To do so she must leave the sheltered world of the university and venture out to meet the people whose words will fill those pages.

Set during the height of the women's suffrage movement and with the Great War looming, *The Dictionary of Lost Words* reveals a lost narrative, hidden between the lines of a history written by men. Inspired by actual events, author Pip Williams has delved into the archives of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to tell this highly original story. *The Dictionary of Lost Words* is a delightful, lyrical, and deeply thought-provoking celebration of words and the power of language to shape the world.



About the Author

Pip Williams was born in London, grew up in Sydney, and now lives in the Adelaide Hills. She has spent most of her working life as a social researcher, studying what keeps us well and what helps us thrive. She is the author of *One Italian Summer*, a memoir of her family's travels in search of the good life and *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, based on her original research in the Oxford English Dictionary archives.

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?

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.