

I REMEMBER EVERYTHING

FIONA WILKES

ABOUT THE BOOK

Set in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Bristol and London, this novel follows Billie as she navigates the highs and lows of life coming out as queer, and finding your family, only to lose them again during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Through every hospital visit and heartbreak, Billie's story illuminates the profound bonds that endure through the hardest of times. This is a story of queer joy, queer tragedy, and of finding the strength to love deeply.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona Wilkes is a writer, researcher and educator, specialising in English and Literary Studies. Her work has been published locally, nationally and internationally and has garnered attention from several literary prizes. Born in the United Kingdom, Fiona now lives and works in Perth, WA, on unceded Whadjuk Noongar land. *I Remember Everything* is her debut novel and was shortlisted for the 2024 Hungerford Award.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the image on the front of this novel speak to its title?
2. How do you think the death of Billie's father changes her family?
3. What is her relationship like with her mother? Does it change over time?
4. How would you describe Billie's relationship with her brother, Matt, at the beginning of the novel? Do you think something breaks when she goes away?
5. What differences do you see between Billie's birth family, and the family in Bristol that she comes to make her own?
6. Billie often tells us what she thinks of Laura. What do you think Laura's opinion is of Billie?
7. Do you think their friendship is a balanced one?
8. Who is your favourite character among the Bristol friends – why?
9. How would you characterise Billie's friendship with Tolstoy? Are Billie and Tolstoy similar kinds of people?
10. How does the group react to Valentine's death? Do you think this corresponds with how they cope with the deaths that occur later?
11. Who is Aunt Sarah, and who is Greg? What do you think their characters represent? What parallels are there between their life experiences?
12. Why is coming out such a momentous step in Billie's generation? What are the risks they face, and what are the rewards?
13. How does the world react to the arrival of the virus that Billie and her friends call 'It'? Why are they so reluctant to name it?
14. Who is Carol and why is she important to this story and its telling?
15. What differences do you see in the way that Theo's generation experiences queerness, when compared with that of his mother's?
16. What do you think the author is inviting us to think about when she frames her HIV/AIDS story within a COVID-19 frame?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What prompted you to tell the story of the generation of queer elders above you?

I was reading a lot about this period, and I realised both how much I didn't know about it and also how much my peers don't know about it. I started ruminating on that and realised that there is almost an entire generation of queer folks above us that we have had no access to, because this awful thing happened. I wanted people my age and younger to be able to connect to this lost generation and take guidance from them as much as we can. So I wanted us to remember what we've lost but also reflect on what we might gain from knowing about those who came before us. And that's also why I have the characters of Aunt Sarah and Greg in the book too, to go another generation or even two back and learn from them. Queer folk have always been here, yet so little is known about our histories. This is one tiny attempt to tell the story.

What research did you do to make this story feel authentic? And why did you choose to write in a way that often feels more like a memoir than a novel?

It wasn't an intentional choice to write it in a way that blurred the lines between memoir and novel. I know that might not sound believable given what the novel is, but the only way I could get into the intricacies of this friendship group was to embody someone who was once there, and who was also forced to reflect on what being there was like. The memoir-feel comes from Billie's voice, I think. But that wasn't the difficult part of writing it. I'm a deeply nostalgic person and I live so much of my life in the past so embodying an act of remembering on page was actually the simple bit. It was everything else that was tricky!

Where did your characters come from? Who do you relate to most? And who would you most like to have as your friend?

They come from nowhere and everywhere! I like to build characters from the small things they do up to their big character-defining actions. I'm a thief from life, so it might be that a friend of mine plays with their hair the way Ted does, or scrunches up their nose like Dave, but it doesn't mean that those characters are in any way based on those friends. I've just borrowed idiosyncrasies from them the same way I'd borrow a pencil. And sometimes the quirks of these characters come from complete strangers. I was sitting in a café once and I saw a man playing with his ring finger the way Eleanor does, like he was flicking an invisible cigarette. And I have no idea who that man was or if he actually was a smoker or what – but I never forgot the way his hands looked. In terms of who I relate to the most, it probably is Billie. Apart from the fact that I've lived in most of the places she has lived, we aren't that similar on paper, but I think we love in similar ways, and we have similar fears. I was racking my brain because what I really want is to be in this friendship group. I think one character I really love who actually has less of a starring role because she doesn't move with the group to London is Dave. I just think this lanky, laddish girl with the chipped front tooth is so endearing and I'd love to talk to her about Byron's sexuality.

What is next for Fiona Wilkes?

I'm a superstitious writer so I never reveal what my next project is until it's done! Let's just say that what is next for me is a lot more writing, and I'm excited to see where that takes me.



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