



BOOK CLUB KIT

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

“He had a wife? He had *children*?”

That’s the most common reaction I get when I tell people the subject matter of my latest novel. No surprise there: Oscar Wilde has come down to us as the great gay martyr of the late Victorian era, imprisoned for espousing the love that dare not speak its name. But the narrative grows more complicated when you point out that, through all his tribulations, he remained a devoted family man, and it grows even more complicated when you note that the family in question doted on him, too.

Driven into exile by Oscar’s scandal, wife Constance and sons Cyril and Vyvyan had to change not only their names and residences but, to a large extent, their destinies. The story is sorrowful enough that a novel about them could easily tip into pathos, but one of the lessons of Oscar Wilde’s work is that tragedy is never too far removed from its cousin, comedy. It’s this principle that has emboldened me to create *The Wildes*, which takes both its structure and tone from the deliciously multivarious plays that Oscar, in this key moment of his career, was bequeathing to literature.

The result, I hope, is high comedy that descends, at key moments, into the sorrows of the human heart—and that allows readers to sample the real-life charisma of characters like Lady Wilde, Oscar’s formidable mother, and Lord Alfred Douglas, his beautiful and troubled lover. Finally, it’s a book that asks if the Wildes, against all historical odds, might have remained the family they dearly wished to be.

Now that we’re speaking of family, I’ve often said that sending a book into the world is like watching one of your kids graduate. All you can hope is that, somewhere out there, they will find a welcoming home. I sincerely hope you will be that home for *The Wildes*.

Thank you for reading,

Louis Bayard



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OSCAR WILDE

Renowned wit, esthete, novelist and playwright

LADY JANE WILDE

Oscar's Irish-born mother, formerly a fiery republican poet known as Speranza

CONSTANCE WILDE

Oscar's wife, essayist and progressive reformer

CYRIL

Oscar and Constance's older child

VYVYAN

Oscar and Constance's younger child

LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS (aka Bosie)

Poet, third son of the Marquess of Queensbury

ARTHUR CLIFTON

Solicitor and friend of the Wildes

FLORENCE CLIFTON

Arthur's bride

DR. LUIGI BOSSI

Italian physician

LADY MARGARET BROOKE

Ranee of Sarawak, a longtime friend of Oscar and Constance



TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1884

- Oscar Wilde and Constance Lloyd are married.

1885

- Cyril Wilde is born.

1886

- Vyvyan Wilde is born.

1890

- *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published.

1891

- Oscar and Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie) meet.

1892

- February: *Lady Wildermere's Fan* opens.
- August/September: The Wildes and their guests take a summer holiday in Norfolk.

1893

- March: Oscar and Bosie take up residence together in the Savoy Hotel.
- April: *A Woman of No Importance* opens.

1894

- Bosie's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, demands that his son and Oscar sever ties.

1895

- February 18: Queensberry leaves his card at Oscar's club with the scrawled message: "For Oscar Wilde posing sodomite [sic]." Oscar sues the Marquis for defamatory libel.
- April 5: Evidence of his homosexual life causes Oscar to lose his libel case. He is arrested that night on charges of "gross indecency."
- April 26: Oscar's first criminal trial begins.
- May 25: Oscar is sentenced to two years hard labor.
- June: Constance and the boys flee to Europe.



TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1896

- Lady Jane Wilde dies.

1897

- May: Oscar is released from prison and retreats into exile in France.
- August: Oscar is reunited with Bosie.
- September: Constance moves into Villa Elvira in Bogliasco.

1898

- February 3: Oscar's poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," is published.
- April 2: Constance checks into Signor Bossi's clinic and dies shortly after. In the wake of their mother's death, both boys are sent back to England, where they are brought up by their mother's relations.

1900

- Oscar dies in Paris.

1915

- Cyril is killed by a German sniper during the Neuve-Chapelle offensive.

1923

- Lord Alfred is found guilty of libeling Winston Churchill and sentenced to six months in prison.

1943

- Vyvyan marries Thelma Besant. Their son Merlin is born two years later.

1945

- Lord Alfred Douglas dies.

1954

- Vyvyan publishes his family memoir, *Son of Oscar Wilde*.

1967

- Vyvyan dies at age 80.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Wildes* is described in its subtitle as “a novel in five acts.” How does that description color your reading experience? Does the book feel closer to a novel or a play?
2. The prologue consists of a love letter from Oscar Wilde, who, time and again, refers to Constance as “my love.” Is he being sincere? Has the meaning of that endearment changed over time? What does love mean to Oscar?
3. The nickname Bosie is derived from “Boysie.” How does this nickname inform your perception of Lord Alfred Douglas? What about his character remains boyish throughout the book?
4. Why does it take Constance so long to grasp what is going on between her husband and Lord Alfred? What does that say about the times in which they lived and the expectations of a Victorian wife?
5. Oscar’s greatest comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was written as his own life was falling apart. What does this say about the relationship between comedy and tragedy?
6. In the novel, Constance is suffering from a then-mysterious disease, which Dr. Bossi diagnoses as a uterine disorder. What do you suspect she had? How might Dr. Bossi’s diagnosis and treatment be different today?
7. Constance seems to be attracted to powerful mother figures like Lady Wilde and Lady Brooke. How do these women shape Constance’s own identity as a mother?
8. The novel travels from Norfolk to Liguria to northeast France to London. What effect do these changing locales have on the story? Do you have a favorite setting?



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

9. The novel's point of view shifts from Constance to Cyril to Vyvyan, then back again to Constance. Who do you think is the true protagonist of this story? Why?

10. When we first meet Cyril as an adult, he is engaged in the act of killing another man. What about his life has led him to this juncture? And how does the experience of watching a man die up close change him?

11. When we first meet Vyvyan as an adult, he is engaged in the act of watching a play. How does this comport with his own childhood experience? How is he changed by the events that follow?

12. Where does Arthur Clifton fit into the story of the Wilde family? Would you say he acts as an alternative husband for Constance, or perhaps an alternative father for the boys? Why or why not? And what of Florence Clifton? What options would have been available to a divorced wife in Edwardian England?

13. In the final act, Constance gets another chance to arrange the Wildes' future. How likely would that alternative future have been? How would the Wilde legacy be different today? What does this reimagining—and fiction, more broadly—allow that history does not?

14. What did you know about Oscar Wilde and the events leading up to his trial and imprisonment before reading *The Wildes*? How has your perspective changed after reading the novel?





LOUIS BAYARD is the critically acclaimed bestselling author of nine historical novels, including *The Wildes*, *Jackie & Me*, *Courting Mr. Lincoln*, and *The Pale Blue Eye*, which was adapted into the global #1 Netflix release starring Christian Bale. His articles, reviews, and recaps have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Salon*, and the *Paris Review*. His work has been translated into more than a dozen languages.

