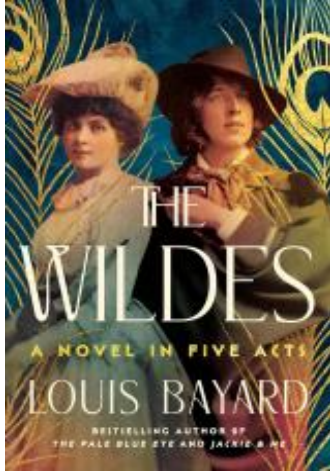


The Wildes: A Novel in Five Acts

by Louis Bayard



About the Book

In this singularly powerful novel, bestselling author Louis Bayard brings Oscar Wilde's wife, Constance, and two sons out from the shadows of history and creates a vivid and poignant story of secrets, loss and love.

In September 1892, Oscar Wilde and his family have retreated to the idyllic Norfolk countryside for a holiday. His wife, Constance, has every reason to be happy: two beautiful sons, her own work as an advocate for feminist causes, and a delightfully charming and affectionate husband and father to her children, who also happens to be the most sought-after author in England. But with the arrival of an unexpected houseguest, the aristocratic young poet Lord Alfred Douglas, Constance gradually --- and then all at once --- comes to see that her husband's heart is elsewhere and that the growing intensity between the two men threatens the whole foundation of their lives.

THE WILDES takes readers on the emotional journey of this family, moving from the Italian countryside, where Constance Wilde flees from the aftermath of Oscar's imprisonment for homosexuality, to the trenches of World War I and an underground bar in London's Soho, where Oscar's sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, must grapple with their father's legacy. And in a brilliant feat of the imagination, act five reunites the entire cast in a surprising, poignant and tremendously satisfying tableau.

With Louis Bayard's trademark sparkling dialogue and deep insight into the lives and longings of all his characters, THE WILDES almost could have been created by Oscar Wilde himself. Lightly told but with hidden depths, it is an entertaining and dramatic story about the human condition.

Discussion Guide

- 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?
- 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?

Author Bio

In the words of the *New York Times*, Louis Bayard "reinvigorates historical fiction," rendering the past "as if he'd witnessed it firsthand."

His acclaimed novels include *THE PALE BLUE EYE*, adapted into the global #1 Netflix release starring Christian Bale; *JACKIE & ME*, ranked by the *Washington Post* as one of the top novels of 2022; the national bestseller *COURTING MR. LINCOLN*; *ROOSEVELT'S BEAST*; *THE SCHOOL OF*

His reviews and articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Salon*, and he is a contributing writer to the *Washington Post Book World*.

A former instructor at George Washington University, he is the chair of the PEN/Faulkner Award and the author of the popular *Downton Abbey* recap for the *New York Times*. His work has been translated into more than a dozen languages.

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