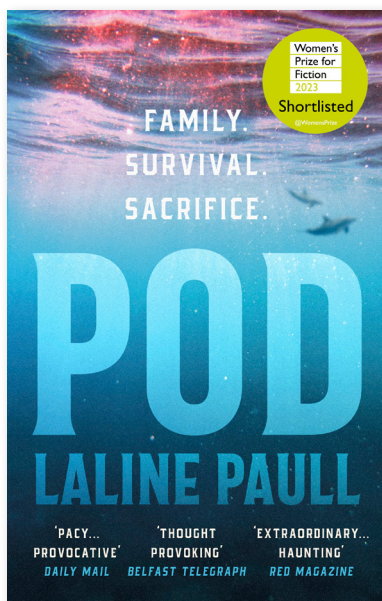


Women's Prize for Fiction 2023



2023 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

POD LALINE PAULL



PLOT SUMMARY

Ea has always felt like an outsider. As a spinner dolphin who has recently come of age, she's expected to join in the elaborate rituals that unite her pod. But Ea suffers from a type of deafness that means she just can't seem to master spinning. When catastrophe befalls her family and Ea knows she is partly to blame, she decides to make the ultimate sacrifice and leave the pod.

As Ea ventures into the vast, she discovers dangers everywhere, from lurking predators to strange objects floating in the water. Not to mention the ocean itself seems to be changing: creatures are mutating, demonic noises pierce the depths, whole species of fish disappear into the sky above. Just as she is coming to terms with her solitude, a chance encounter with a group of arrogant bottlenoses will irrevocably alter the course of her life.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Pod*, Paull continues her focus on the environmental issues explored in her previous books – *The Bees* and *The Ice* – by following the story of Ea, a bottlenose dolphin who leaves her pod and finds herself lost in the often savage environment of the wider ocean.

As a genre, climate fiction is sometimes set in the present day, like *Pod*, and sometimes framed as a dystopian future in the aftermath of a climactic environmental event. Both types of climate fiction act as warnings to readers, highlighting specific environmental problems and envisioning their consequences. Often, the focus is on the consequences for humans; in *Pod*, Paull reminds us how hunting, ocean pollution and military practices impact animals and plant life too.

Paull resists the possible temptation to represent animals as saintly. The dolphins, in particular the Tursiops pod, are violent, and the Remora is repellent to its hosts, though it fulfils its own function in the oceanic ecosystem.

In *Pod* the reader can easily appreciate the depth of research that Paull has undertaken, some of which is detailed in her endnotes. We never feel that *Pod* has become a scientific study or a factual manual about ocean life because the story is so well-plotted and immersive, but we do come away from the page with a greater understanding of how certain ocean ecosystems and animal hierarchies work, and how they are affected by humans. For instance, the Wrasse and the Fugu have to make a new life in the sulphuric vents, which is not easy, but reflects the way that nature can reinvent itself and adapt to environmental change. Pollution is changing the Wrasse's body in particular, affecting its already sensitive hormonal balance. The detailed and delicate social hierarchy of dolphins is rendered beautifully, and it's in this kind of detail that Paull ensnares the reader, making us care.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The author Amitav Ghosh makes a crucial point about *Pod* in saying “Laline Paull succeeds splendidly in rising to the most important literary challenge of our time – restoring voice and agency to other-than-human beings.”

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

London-born and of Indian heritage, **Laline Paull** studied English at Oxford, screenwriting in Los Angeles, and theatre in her home city. She writes across a variety of forms and lives in the English countryside with her family.

In presenting a novel told from the points of view of various animals – Ea and Google, both dolphins, a Wrasse and a Remora fish among others – Paull is doing something quite revolutionary. She connects us directly with the creatures in the ocean and makes us sympathise with them with no human intermediary.

Paull knows that fiction is an effective way for humans to connect to meaning. If we, as readers, can empathise with the animal characters, we can both understand their plight and perhaps care enough to do something about the issues that are ruining the oceans for wildlife. Restoring agency to dolphins, fish, whales and other ocean creatures in *Pod* means that Paull starts to unpick our attitudes towards animals and nature as “other”.

How did reading the various animal points of view feel? Did it take a while for you to get used to there being no human voices? Did you feel anything was lost by not including humans, or did you forget they were absent? How can we accurately represent an animal point of view in a story? Is it possible?

QUESTIONS

What were your thoughts regarding the parallels between human and dolphin patriarchal societies?

In *Pod*, gendered sexual violence is present in the ocean as it is on land. How does

Paull represent sexual abuse in the novel? Did it surprise you to read about this?

What effect did reading *Pod* have on your own feelings toward ocean pollution, climate change and the protection of animals?

Paull includes a note at the end of the book explaining how she wrote Google's story based on real-life military intelligence gathering techniques. Are you shocked to learn that dolphins are used by governments in this way?

NEXT STEPS

Laline Paull gives the reader a wealth of fascinating research material at the end of *Pod* including films such as *My Octopus Teacher* on Netflix. Watch one or more of these films or read some of the more scientific papers she lists as inspiration. Do any of these sources inspire ideas for a story? You could follow Paull's example and write a short story from the point of view of an ocean creature – perhaps an octopus! What challenges do you encounter? Or do you find writing an animal point of view easier than a human one?

Alternatively, think about an issue you are passionate about as Paull so clearly cares about the environment. If you are someone who enjoys creative writing, do you tend to weave this topic into your writing? If so, how do you balance your personal opinions and research along with the story?



‘Pod follows a dolphin who takes great risks to save her pod. The novel speaks to climate change and is also a wonderful celebration of family.’

Irenosen Okojie, 2023 Judge



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

The Bees is another novel where Laline Paull restores the character voice to animals, in this case the story is set entirely in a beehive. In ***Future Home of the Living God***, Louise Erdrich paints a startling portrait of a young woman fighting for her life and her unborn child against oppressive forces that manifest in the wake of a cataclysmic event.



BARBARA KINGSOLVER **DEMON COPPERHEAD** ff

JACQUELINE CROOKS **FIRE RUSH**



TRESPASSES Louise Kennedy

WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?