

Women's
Prize for
Fiction
2020 25



Fremantle



2020 SHORTLIST

WEATHER BY JENNY OFFILL

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jenny Offill's novel *Dept. of Speculation* was shortlisted for the Folio Prize and the International Dublin Literary Award, and was chosen as a book of the year over 20 times, including by the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *FT*, *Daily Mail*, *Stylist*, *Observer* and *Vogue*. She is also the author of the novel *Last Things*, and four books for children. She lives in upstate New York with her family.

PLOT SUMMARY

Lizzie Benson slid into her job as a librarian without a traditional degree. But this gives her a vantage point from which to practice her other calling: as an unofficial shrink. For years, she has supported her God-haunted mother and recovering addict brother. They have both stabilised for the moment, but then her old mentor, Sylvia Liller, makes a proposal. Sylvia has become famous for her prescient podcast *Hell and High Water* and wants to hire Lizzie to answer the mail she receives: from left-wingers worried about climate change and right-wingers worried about the decline of Western civilisation.

As Lizzie dives into this polarised world, she begins to wonder what it means to keep tending your own garden once you've seen the flames beyond its walls. And all the while the voices of the city keep floating in – funny, disturbing, and increasingly mad.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Jenny Offill's slightly experimental novel feels fragmented to read, like a series of inter-relating stories,

remembrances, notes and splashes of narrative rather than a traditional story. However, we still manage to follow what's going on, and in fact this narrative method serves to reflect the anxiety belonging to, at different levels, Lizzie, Ben, Henry and the listeners of Sylvia's podcast. Overall, the fractured style of the book (although the narrative structure is conventionally linear) also reflects our wider society's frenzied pace and subsequent lack of focus, and the specific development of eco-anxiety. *Weather* is very much a book for our times in the way that it captures ongoing general fear and stress in a world full of people who are all pressing forward and trying to pretend that nothing is wrong.

The oddness of Offill's narrative style, as well as reflecting Lizzie's jumbled thoughts, worries and lack of clarity about her relationships, also has a sense of absurdity and humour which makes sense within the context of eco-anxiety: when faced with a potentially insurmountable problem such as the implications of climate change, one of our responses may be to find it absurd (and even darkly humorous).

Lastly, Offill represents the double thinking we all do with Lizzie's ongoing frantic, funny and sometimes unhinged internal chatter and her rather more focused outer monologue. In fact, in her 'outer' life, Lizzie often finds herself listening to and counselling others, even before she is formally asked to give concrete answers to the occasionally crazy questions asked by Sylvia's podcast listeners. There is a subtle irony in that, as well as in the fact that Sylvia has tasked an unqualified librarian with the job in the first place.



DISCUSSION POINTS

In *Weather*, Offill explores Henry's mental health as a kind of foil to Lizzie's. Henry is far more outwardly and obviously experiencing difficulties: the strain of a new baby sparks a nervous breakdown that Lizzie feels obligated to help him through, even though it means it temporarily alienates her husband and child, who leave to go glamping without her. Yet Lizzie experiences her own crisis when Ben is away, being attracted to Will and having a kind of emotional affair with him. Catherine, Henry's very organised and fierce partner, leaves him, and yet she begins sending Lizzie some odd emails later in the book.

What do you think Offill is telling us, or inviting us to think about, in her depiction of Henry, the frenzied responses to the podcast and Catherine's emails? Is there fragility in all of us? Given that most of us are likely to experience some kind of mental health issue in our lives, what do you think about the way Offill represents anxiety, stress, addiction and breakdown? Are modern times more stressful than they have ever been, or are they more or less the same – but it's people who are more open about their feelings and worries?

QUESTIONS

Sylvia describes the political left and right as having different concerns when it comes to climate change. Why is this?

Have you heard of eco-anxiety before? Sylvia asks Lizzie how she thinks she will protect her family from climate disaster in the future without being very rich. Is this something you've thought about?

Do you have sympathy for Henry? Why/why not?

Lizzie's meditation and yoga teacher Margot asks the class, "What is the core delusion?", but nobody knows the right answer. The final sentence of *Weather* seems to be Lizzie's answer to Margot's question: "The core delusion is that I am here and you are there." How might this 'delusion' relate to mental breakdown and climate change?

NEXT STEPS

Write alternative replies to some (or all) of the questions Lizzie receives in *Weather*. Will you be factual, flippant, insulting, sarcastic or sympathetic? Do you feel compelled to answer in a certain way, i.e. does your own political or religious position influence your answer? What kind of answer do you think the people writing the questions want and/or need? Will you keep your answers long or short? You could even write some questions yourself and then answer them – or ask a friend to write to you with their concerns about climate change and answer them, and vice versa.

Inspired by the title of Jenny Offill's book, write about weather in relation to emotions. Write an extended piece, a scene or two perhaps, which uses a weather-based extended metaphor, i.e. a storm to describe an argument, a realisation or a person experiencing emotion of some kind after a revelation. As well as storms, you could use rain, wind, hail or snow. Ideally you need a weather type that contains some kind of variation so you

can describe something intensifying or lightening according to the mood – so an unbroken sunny day might not work as well as a sunny day that becomes cloudy, for instance. See if you can convey mood and keep the metaphor going through the piece.



THE 2020 WOMEN'S PRIZE
FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

“ **SUCH A BRILLIANT, HILARIOUS AND INCREDIBLE BOOK ABOUT FEAR, HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND INFORMATION OVERLOAD** ”

SCARLETT CURTIS
JUDGE 2020

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

DEPT. OF SPECULATION BY JENNY OFFILL
SOVEREIGN BY NICOLA BARKER