

ARRT Book Club Study
March 8, 2023
Virtual Meeting
[Nothing to See Here](#) by Kevin Wilson
Led by Stacey Peterson
Notes taken by Elizabeth Hopkins
17 participants

Stacey began the discussion by sharing author biographical information.

At what point did it start to seem normal that the twins were spontaneously combusting?

- Normal or accepted? I accepted it very early on.
- I never accepted it! I just decided I better go with it. It was pretty horrifying as a parent.
- When they described the routine of calming them down. It reminded me of de-escalating a toddler who was about to throw a tantrum.

Was there any time where it was just too much? And maybe it bugged you through the whole thing?

- I'm not sure there's anything else that could be done to tell the story.

Let's talk about Lillian and Madison. Are they friends? What's going on there?

- I had a harder time accepting Lillian would just run to Madison's aide. More than accepting the twins
- They really didn't know each other that well. They weren't friends for a very long time. They didn't have this huge relationship that traveled from childhood to adulthood. The friendship itself seemed lopsided.
- Something more than friendship on Lillian's side.
- If you read it as horror, it's as if Madison possessed Lillian.
- And Madison had control over her husband as well.
- Lillian had a crush on Madison, but an unhealthy crush.
- A love that was serving her best interest
- They were also so competitive. When Madison elbowed Lillian during the basketball game...
- And she metaphorically elbowed her before.

Another key aspect is the wealth and privilege of Madison and Jasper vs. Lillian's experience. Can we talk about that dynamic?

- That power dynamic goes back to their friendship and the fact that Madison came from that family background. It was probably one of the reasons their relationship was always unbalanced. It was an unjust dynamic.
- I was surprised that Lillian confronted her about that so late in the story. Madison seemed to remember it differently in order to put herself in a better light.

-I think that's why the title is what it is. They were trying to make everything normal and just move along. But Lillian felt like no one was really looking at her anyway. The only time Wilson uses that phrase is that scene in the library. The title summed up the point of the book well.

Let's talk about the title and the library scene. Lillian being sort of invisible, are there other parts of the title that really work?

-It's at such odds with the cover image itself. That dynamic is so eye-catching, very good marketing. It invites curiosity.

-I loved the moment when Roland tosses the library book.

-Their dialog about library cards was also really funny. Why don't you just go to the desk and explain?

-I was cringing at that moment

-I enjoyed that it portrayed Lillian as someone who was willing to break rules in order to help the kids. She found a way to make it feel OK and she wasn't doing anything that bad. It was a nice symbolic scene.

The book takes place in the 90s. Why did it need to take place in the 90s?

-The whole thing with Timothy catching on fire. Someone would have had that on Twitter immediately.

-And in this day and age, you could Google most of that. How to put out a fire, etc.

Let's talk more about Lillian. Did you think it was a good idea for her to be put in charge of these children?

-Ultimately, yes. It ended up working out for them.

-I don't think she had preconceived notions, she was flying by the seat of her pants. What would keep them calm?

-A wonderful metaphor for how people become parents. You are flying by the seat of your pants. I think Wilson was having fun with poking holes in how people think we can prepare for stuff.

-It was one big wild card and in comes Lillian, who is a wild card herself. She doesn't have any plans of attack. She wanted to be this Mary Poppins character, but she was just herself and she rolled with it. Literally, when she fell into the pool. It was a great metaphor for however much you think you can plan, you won't be ready. It's more about responding and looking out for their needs. Think of how the guest house was set up with books and entertainment. She took what was given to her and molded it into what they needed, taking the kids outside to play basketball, etc.

-She was great with the kids even though it was painful for her every single time. She was the only person in the book who was honest with the kids.

-For all the ways a reader might view her kind of askance, they also understand she's a sympathetic character. They're rooting for her.

-I thought it was interesting that she didn't think she was good with kids. She definitely had empathy for them.

- Maybe that goes back to her own childhood. Her mother was a real piece of work. She didn't have a good role model.
- She didn't really approach this looking at them other than being two little humans, two small people, rather than KIDS.

Lillian's mother...let's discuss. What kind of lessons did Lillian get from her?

- Not to act like her mother
- She learned a lot through negative example. She learned what NOT to do. Which can be just as helpful.
- Especially if someone has the strength to rise above and reverse the course.
- It was interesting that this one area Madison could not handle at all. Lillian seemed to take it all in stride.
- Lillian's life has been one disaster after another. When she saw the kids burst into flames she was like "Eh, just one more crazy thing to deal with"
- I felt like her mother was almost a cliché. We've seen so many self-centered parents in other stories. I was so uncomfortable with the twins' mothers, Jane. That whole scene was incredibly distressing.
- The children need more therapy than they got. Given what they've been through with their mother. Given that they've been shuffled off to other people.

Will they turn out all right?

- It was interesting that they didn't want to give up this power of bursting into flames. That's part of who they are.
- Her ability to control the fire showed a growth that progressed through time. She would be able to integrate that into her life with therapy
- Lillian was really attentive to her emotions. Having a parent that is attentive to their emotions can go a long way.

Let's talk about the father, Jasper. Anybody want to make a case that he's not dreadful?

- No, he's a jerk. Loved when Timothy burst into flames because you want him to have that payback. Wilson does a good enough job writing it that people aren't expecting that to happen. He didn't want anything to do with those kids. Another cliché of what a politician is like.
- He's portrayed the way a lot of fathers are in fiction. He's just not there.
- They enjoy the idea of children but not the children themselves. Madison notes that Jasper loves the kids the way he loves his constituents.
- I thought Mary's reaction to the kids was interesting. She made that one comment that she never minded the children. It seemed like when she saw the kids on fire on the lawn, Mary saluted her from the porch.

The author is male, the protagonist is female. Was the POV convincing?

- I was uneasy about that as I started the book. But I was totally won over. He did a pretty good job. It was well written.

-I first assumed the main character was male because it was a male author. But then I got pulled into it and forgot it was a man writing.

Was there any point where the voice didn't ring true?

-The detail about her never babysitting seemed odd. Especially as she could have done for cash at a young age. I was surprised that more people didn't react to her injured face in public.

-It's interesting how this book illustrates how you can externalize a lot of internal happenings. Lillian's experiences and hard-won knowledge are worn on her body like wounds. The kids burst into external flames when emotional.

-I thought it was more about parenting than mothering. And that's not bound to gender. Anyone can potentially parent.

"This novel is a love letter to the weirdness and difficulties of parenting..." From a LJ review
Stacey shared snippets from author interviews:

-Wilson wrote this book in 10 days.

-The inspiration behind the novel...see the author essay in the back of the paperback version. As a young person Wilson wished he could combust. Thinking it would burn away any worry.

Does the amount of weirdness in this book work or does he push it too far?

-I read a lot of weird books, so I don't think so. This is a nice intro into things that are strange.

-It works because he sticks to it. He doesn't back off or sugar coat at any point. He just goes for it. He's unwavering in his weirdness.

-I once created an annotated bib on peculiar reads. I'm just realizing they were all short. You can't carry that on too long.

-I don't feel like I read a ton of weird fiction, but it reminded me that Sarah Addison Allen does this too. She just sprinkles in some magical realism in there and you just go with it.

-Reminded me of *Such a Fun Age* by Reid. Rearing a child when they weren't actually a parent and other connections.

-That book was mentioned a lot in conjunction with this book. They are frequently paired together.

Are there readers who would never like this title? Or are there groups that would love it?

-My group has trouble with magical realism. To the point where they get angry. I get a totally different audience with my evening group, they are more experimental.

-Folks who take everything literally are not going to like this. They aren't going to get it.

-I would recommend this to 85% of people. It's universal enough that people would find connection.

-I would be wary of giving this to genre readers. Anyone who understands metaphor would enjoy this.

-I might have to sell it, but I would recommend it to the group. They are willing to push the boundaries. Especially if they can come to book club and learn something new.

-It's such an easy read. It's breezy. It's not a hard book, so if it's outside your comfort zone it will go by quick.

-Think of all the overly long books that need a good edit. The brevity was in its favor, it was fun.

-My group was 50/50 split on *Addie LaRue*. I think the length is part of the problem.

-I did this with our 50+ group. They didn't care for it. They did not care for it. For some it was the language. For others they weren't willing to accept the weirdness.

-Sometimes a discussion is easier if people hate the book.

-Wilmette is having Kevin Wilson for a virtual talk! *Now Is Not The Time to Panic* is our most checked out book.