



## **WHEN I WAS YOURS**

### **Reading Group Guide**

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. The evacuation of children from the cities/seaside towns to the countryside was a huge organizational task. Do you think that could happen in a similar way today? Why or why not?
2. Vivienne didn't have any choice about being a host mother to an evacuated child. Do you feel she was a good caregiver? What would you have done if you were in Vivienne's situation? Or in Eleanor's situation as Pearl's mother? Would you be able to send your child away to live with strangers for their own safety? What would be your main concerns?
3. Which sister did you prefer: Olive or Vivienne? Who did you have more sympathy for? Olive pushed to volunteer overseas, and Vivienne went along with her. Yet Olive, the brilliant daredevil, found the demands of ambulance driving harder than the more reticent and cautious Vivienne. Who are you more similar to? Who did you think was braver?

4. Were you surprised to find it was Olive and Lena, not Olive and Walter, who were in love? How do you feel Vivienne handled the truth? If Lena hadn't been killed by the bombings, what might have happened?
5. On anti-Semitism, Sam says: "When times are hard, those who are different are often blamed or scapegoated. We seem always to be at hand for that." Is this a fair summary do you think? Were you surprised to hear of anti-Semitic attitudes during WWI in England?
6. Edmund's mother is a snob, yet she is also surprisingly helpful to her daughter-in-law and often provides her with practical assistance. Why do you think this is? How important is it to challenge people's prejudices?
7. Vivienne thinks: 'I have made wrong choices at every fork in the road, that I have made choices to please other people, choices through the eyes of other people, never my own: and even worse than that, all those other people I had made choices for...it didn't make a difference to their lives – only mine.' Is this a reasonable summary of Vivienne's life? What should she have done? Why didn't she?
8. What impressed you or disappointed you about the way people handled terrible events of the war? What kind of things do you imagine you might have done if you had been around in WWI or WWII?
9. What do you think happens next for Sam and Vivienne and Pearl after the book ends?

10. Some of the women in this book are based on real people, including Olive Mudie Cooke and Lena Guilbert Ford, and Mairi Chisholm (who returns the trunk to Vivi). Had you heard of any of these women before reading the book? What other books have you read, or movies have you watched, that feature forgotten women from history and what did you enjoy most about them?

### **The Characters Behind *When I Was Yours***

**By Lizzie Page**

Around my forty-fifth birthday, it occurred to me that anyone who was my (oh, relatively young!) age during the Second World War would have already gone through the First World War. The thought made a great impression on me, and I decided I wanted to write about a woman who had lived through both world wars – in the first as an active participant and in the second as a participant in a different way.

At about the same time I was mulling this over, I fell in love with a painting: ‘In an Ambulance, a VAD (nurse) lighting a cigarette for a patient.’ It’s a beautiful study of tenderness. We see the vulnerability of the soldier, the gentleness of the nurse, and it seemed to me to portray the start of something special. I knew that it was what I wanted at the heart of my story.

#### **The Artist**

I found out more about the artist behind *In an Ambulance, a VAD Lighting a Cigarette for a Patient*, Olive Mudie-Cooke. There was a small number of women war artists, but Olive was not part of an official cohort. Instead, she had gone out to the Western Front as a volunteer

ambulance and did some wonderful drawings and paintings once there. I learned that she served in France and then Italy. Olive was especially skilled at showing the mundanity of war through her art: volunteers laying a plank road, a driver's hut or a pill box. After the war, Olive went back to mainland Europe, to Belgium and France with another volunteer group. There, she produced some more exciting, visceral work of the battlefields, cemeteries and a tank on its side like some felled monster.

Tragically this wonderfully talented young woman, brimming full of ideas and life, killed herself in 1925. She had an older sister who had also volunteered as an ambulance driver in France throughout the war.

I tend to write about the one who is the sidelined, the quieter one, and so it was natural to me to take on the voice of the less ostensibly remarkable sister – and so the older sister evolved into my narrator and main character, Vivienne Mudie-Cooke.

### The Songwriter

Another character I borrowed from real life was Lena Guilbert Ford. I found her story fascinating. Lena was American, a single mother who had divorced and had come to London with her mother and son to pursue her dreams of making music. She co-wrote 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' with Ivor Novello – such a classic, enduring song with a sweet and wistful message - and yet no one seems to remember Lena's name. Neither do many people know that Britain was bombed during the First World War – and unfortunately, Lena was the first American to die on British soil in that war. She was survived by her mother.

When I found out about Lena Guilbert Ford, I knew I wanted to write about her. I wanted the whole world to know about her. And it seemed perfectly logical to put this brilliant, rebellious character with Olive. Two enormously talented female artists, lost in time...

## The Child

If the story of Lena Guilbert Ford came from the head, Pearl's story, the evacuation section was one very close to my heart. When I was growing up, my dad always told me about being evacuated from Stepney in London to Hinckley in Leicester when war broke out in 1939. Dad and his older sister, my Aunt Nita, went to separate homes, while his mum and baby brother, Moss, remained in London for a while.

My dad had quite a rough time. Like Pearl, he was chosen last in the church hall. He struggled with unfamiliar food (he hated pork chops), he was locked in the closet when he was homesick, and there was fighting between the 'local' and the townie' children.

Nita, by contrast, had the most amazing time. She was adored by her host parents and even requested to be adopted instead of returning to her own family!

So I was always aware that these things could go either way. For some, evacuation was the worst thing that happened; for others, it was the best. From a young age, I always wondered what it must have been like to be an evacuated child. Hence the development of Pearl. I confess, that she does share several characteristics with my daughter, Miranda, who is about the same age. (Sorry, Miranda!) Pearl Posner is also the name of my great-grandmother.

## The Mother

As I got older and had children of my own, I also wondered what it must be like to look after someone else's child. I wanted to explore the pleasures and the pitfalls of that in *When I Was Yours*. I wanted to delve into the transformative power of caring and the way society often underestimates that role. All this informed the character of Vivienne, who starts the story

depressed by loss, her sour marriage and infertility, and then undergoes change as she becomes a strong and loving advocate for Pearl.

### The Neighbour

I love Mrs Burton, her dogs and the community she creates. She seems to me to represent something good, something simple and down to earth, something that affects Vivienne profoundly. If Vivienne's marriage is cold, Mrs Burton's is warm and caring. Mrs Burton manages to parent her daughters with unconditional love and humour even when she doesn't approve. I suppose Mrs Burton is an idealised mother – but she is someone who Vivienne needs to observe and be with in order to change.

### The Friend

Mairi Chisholm is a character from an earlier novel I wrote called *The War Nurses*, and she too is based on an incredibly brave woman who served along the Western Front in WWI. She connects Vivienne to her beloved sister and brings her the message that she is loved and forgiven. This allows Vivienne to move on.

### The Husband

If there's a villain of the book, I expect it is Edmund Lowe. Yes, Edmund is a ...bad guy. Nevertheless, I didn't want to make him *too* villainous. Vivienne's feelings toward Edmund were complex. She was bound to him by a sense of duty, yearning for a conventional family and a

triumph of optimism over reality. Ultimately, like many couples, they were just wrong for each other.

### The Boyfriend

Sam is the hero, but again, I didn't want to make him too heroic. I liked the fact that they meet by Vivienne saving him - in a reversal of the old romantic tropes. He is a loving uncle and a kind and emotional family man. These are qualities I like. Plus, I don't know if you picked up on it or not, but Sam is also very handsome!

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I hope you enjoyed *When I Was Yours* even half so much as I enjoyed writing it. I loved all the characters even if I had to put them through a lot of painful stuff sometimes. I feel that sometimes World War One is the forgotten war when it comes to historical fiction, so I was really pleased to be able to incorporate both World Wars in this story and to show how through those terrible times ordinary people ended up doing quite extraordinary things.

Thank you so very much for reading. I'd dearly love to hear your thoughts on *When I Was Yours*, so do get in touch via Twitter (@LizziePagewrite) or Facebook ([facebook.com/lizzie.page.75](https://www.facebook.com/lizzie.page.75)).