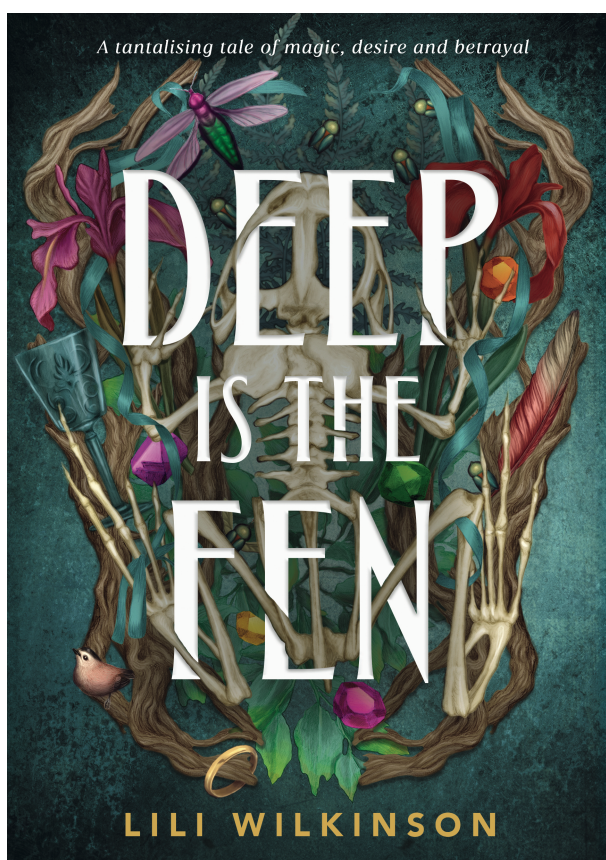


Deep Is the Fen

By Lili Wilkinson



A bewitching journey behind the closed doors of a secret society, featuring sinister toadmen, resistance witches and a steamy enemies-to-lovers romance, from the acclaimed author of *A Hunger of Thorns*.

RECOMMENDED FOR

13–18 (Lower and Upper Secondary)

THEMES

Fantasy, magic, friendship, queer, LGBTQIA+, feminism, witches, romantasy, romance, society

ISBN (AUS)

9781761066863



SYNOPSIS

Merriwether Morgan doesn't need a happily-ever-after. Her life in the idyllic town of Candlecott is fine just as it is: simple, happy, and with absolutely no magic. Magic only ever leads to trouble.

But Merry's best friend, Teddy, is joining the Toadmen – a secret society upholding backward thinking and suspiciously supernatural traditions – and she is determined to stop him. Even if it means teaming up with her academic arch-nemesis, Caraway Boswell, an ice-cold snob who hides his true face behind a glamour.

An ancient Toad ritual is being held in the nightmarish Deeping Fen, and if Merry doesn't rescue Teddy, she'll lose him forever. But the further she travels into Deeping Fen's foul waters, the more Merry wonders if she can possibly save her friend – or if she's walking straight into a trap.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'I've always been drawn to fairytales and folklore. I love that perfect blend of strange and familiar. But I've always been frustrated by passive female characters in fairytales. They say that boys in classic children's literature want to have adventures, but girls just want to go home.

'I wanted to write fairytales for brave girls, wild girls, obstinate girls. Girls who make mistakes and learn from them. Girls who take comfort in hearth and home, but also love to breathe strange winds from unfamiliar worlds.

'In *A Hunger of Thorns*, I wanted to explore the intensity of adolescent friendship, and the pressures placed on girls to be good and nice and submissive. In *Deep Is the Fen*, I wanted to look at power, and how it can corrupt. The Order of Toadmen in the book is inspired by a real-life secret horsemen's fraternity that flourished in Scotland in the 1800s. I've always

been fascinated by cults, and secretive, exclusive organisations. My grandparents were prominent Australian Scientologists, so I grew up thinking a lot about belief, and how belief can be misused as a tool to control people.'

Lili Wilkinson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lili Wilkinson is the award-winning author of nineteen books for children and teenagers, including *A Hunger of Thorns*, *After the Lights Go Out*, *The Erasure Initiative* and *How to Make a Pet Monster*. Lili established the Inky Awards at the Centre for Youth Literature, State Library of Victoria. She has a PhD in Creative Writing, and lives in Melbourne with her partner, child, dog and three chickens.

IN-CLASS DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Pre-Reading Discussion

- Define the term 'fairytale' and name some of the most famous fairytales. Discuss how and when you discovered these stories and why you think they were first told.
- Discuss the idea that fairytales may have begun as a means of teaching children about the perils of a dangerous world, and that they have evolved over generations to paint pictures of 'ideal' heroes and heroines. Using examples from fairytales already mentioned, make a list of characteristics that define the leading females and males. [Expect words for females such as: beautiful, kind, young, fragile, powerless; and for males: tall, handsome, 'princely', powerful].
- Open *Deep Is the Fen* and read its epigraph: *'For every girl who refused to be a damsel in distress.'*

What expectations does this create for the story to come? Do contemporary games, films, books and social media challenge or reinforce fairytale tropes?

During Reading

- *'I can barely form words. 'I'm here to rescue you,' I tell him. His brow furrows. 'I don't need rescuing.'*" page 129
Merry sets out to 'rescue' Teddy from the Toadmen and, in the process, subverts the usual role for young girls in fairytales. In what other ways is Merry not your typical 'damsel in distress'?
How do Caraway, Teddy and Sol conform to and defy fairytale tropes?
- *'Teddy, Sol and I used to wear glamours when he played make-believe as children. Teddy always went for the hero-knight patches, ending up square-jawed and excessively muscled. Sol wore handsome-prince patches even before he told us he was a boy, and as soon as he put one on, he'd seem more relaxed, more himself.'*
page 189

'Magic is all illusions. It's never as good as the real thing.' page 238

'Once again, magic makes promises it cannot deliver on.' page 283

If glamours existed in our world, what sort might you want to use and in what circumstance? In your opinion, is our world better or worse without glamours being available? Why/why not?

- *'All that power, that money, that magic. All in the hands of a bunch of rich men who don't have to play the same game as everyone else.'* page 142

What do you think Merry means here? In what way might Merry's observation apply to our world?

- *'She is a fine woman. A great woman. She presides over charities. She spends her days caring for those less fortunate than she....*

But at what cost?' page 245

Thurmond Boswell justifies the harm done by the Toadmen by claiming that his power – and by extension the power he provides to his wife – makes the world a better place. Is there any evidence in the book that he is right, or do you think he is only driven by the desire for power? More broadly, does the old saying that 'the ends justify the means' ring true to you?

After Reading

- The story of the Fox Bride features a knight, an unwilling bride (the Fox Bride), a Beast and a toad: all common characters in a classic fairytale. Choose from one of the characters in the story and compare and contrast them with their more traditional counterpart.
- Some historians theorise that strong, independent women were more likely to be accused of practising witchcraft in times gone past because men feared them. More contemporary tales of witches have reframed them as empowering female role models. How does *Deep Is the Fen* portray them?



- Fathers are problematic in *Deep Is the Fen*. Merry's is kind but easily led, while Caraway's is cruel and manipulative. Which would you say is the more 'typical' father figure in fairytales?
- The corporations Ilium, Moracle and Welch control almost everything in the world of *Deep Is the Fen*. Is our world similarly 'ruled' by a handful of corporations? Which are they and how do you think they wield power?
- According to Wikipedia, fantasy novels share five key tropes (commonly recurring literary devices, motifs or cliches). These tropes are: good vs. evil, quest, magic, medievalism and the existence of unusual races or species. Find examples of each trope in *Deep Is the Fen*.