

Anna Funder



Wifedom

Mrs Orwell's Invisible Life



Penguin Readalong

Welcome to our exciting readalong of *Wifedom*
in celebration of the new paperback edition,
available on shelves from April 1st.

Throughout this booklet, we've included
prompts to spark your thoughts.

Reading Schedule

Day 1 Start to page 39

Day 2 Page 40 to 78

Day 3 Page 79 to 120

Day 4 Page 121 to 159

Day 5 Page 160 to 199

Day 6 Page 200 to 239

Day 7 Page 240 to 283

Day 8 Page 284 to 321

Day 9 Page 322 to 364

Day 10 Page 364 to end

Day 1

For Orwell, it was love at first sight.

Eileen took a little longer to come around.

How does Eileen O'Shaughnessy's character come across in the early pages of the book?

What are your initial impressions of her personality and her relationship with George Orwell?

Day 2

Walking with the family before her wedding, Eileen bolts.

To what extent do you think she knew what she was taking on, in marrying this unknown writer? Do you think she was excited by the possibility of what he - with her help - might write?

In these pages, Funder shows how patriarchy leaves out women and their accomplishments from the story of history. *'Patriarchy is a fiction in which all the main characters are male and the world is seen from their point of view.'*

What are some of the examples of women in Orwell's life, as well as Eileen, who have been left out of the story?

Day 3

Funder says she was reluctant to go into Eileen and George's intimate life. What changed?

How are the themes of domesticity and intimacy explored in pages?

Especially consider ideas around relationships, love, and sexuality - how do Eileen and George differ?

Day 4

Eileen is engrossed in her work with the POUM Headquarters in Barcelona, while Orwell is away in the trenches.

She writes to her mother, 'I thoroughly enjoyed being at the front, she begins. *Then she realises it is true. There, the enemy is clear.*' Eileen's office is riddled with spies. Orwell's friend, Richard Rees, realised when Eileen tried to protect him, that she was living in 'political terror.' Why do you think no biographer wrote about what this situation of Stalinist terror was like for Eileen and her colleagues in their office?

Day 5

Funder reflects on Eileen's sacrifices as the POUM disbands in Spain; saving George's manuscript, caring for him on the front, securing visas to rescue him and his comrades, yet she remains absent from his writing of that time.

Was this omission deliberate, or a product of Europe in the 1930s? If it was 'normal' for a woman who did so much, including save lives to be left out, what does it say about those times? *'Orwell mentions 'my wife' thirty-seven times. And then I see: not once is Eileen named'.*

Is this kind of undervaluing of women's acts still happening?

Day 6

We're greeted with Orwell's concept of DOUBLETHINK in these pages, the idea of holding two contradictory beliefs in mind at the same time, but one of them has to remain unconscious, because if it came to the surface it would bring with it a feeling of 'guilt'. Orwell applies this to how white colonists thought themselves to be good people, whilst being racist towards the Burmese. [and accepting both of them as truth.]

Funder's application of this concept points to the experience of women. Do you agree that patriarchy is a system of 'doublethink' in which men think of themselves as good people, while benefitting from the domestic and emotional labour of women?

Day 7

Amid Eileen's immense grief, her upkeep of the house, and her busyness with work, it seems George's eyes were transfixed on another prize.

His repeated advances and affairs likely caused Eileen pain. Biographers have invented the idea that they had an 'open marriage' as if she was OK with it.

In 'Strawberries', Funder shows Eileen tossing up whether to stay with Orwell, or leave. Eileen can see that Orwell's endless affairs make him feel like a man. How much, if at all, does sexual politics influence creative work?

Day 8

Animal Farm is a widely recognised and celebrated work of Orwell's, arguably studied as much as *1984*. In *Wifedom*, it's revealed that many of Orwell's peers were astonished by the brilliance of it.

Tosco Fyvel sees Eileen's genius behind it, and based on what we've seen in the book so far it seems like the only plausible explanation. What do you think?

Day 9

Eileen's death is swift and unforgiving. George seems to cope with it in a specific way. Funder says *'For the rest of his life he is looking, more or less desperately, for someone – even a team of people – to replace her.'*

What does the loss of Eileen ultimately mean for George?

Day 10

Norah Symes Myles plays a pivotal role in Eileen's life, finishing the story of George and Eileen that we know today. *Wifedom* both begins and ends with her.

What do we think she signifies at the end of the book, with her statement, *'It was life itself she accomplished instead'?*

BONUS QUESTION

Can you think of a woman in another industry whose impact has been undervalued/underplayed?

More from Anna Funder

