



## **THESE DAYS by Lucy Caldwell Reader's Guide**

What the Walter Scott Prize judges said about *These Days*:

'In historical setting, ambition and style, the 2023 Walter Scott Prize shortlist was at its most varied, and the judges' discussions lengthy and impassioned. But in Lucy Caldwell's *These Days* we found a pitch-perfect, engrossing narrative ringing with emotional truth. Through the visceral shock of the 1941 Belfast Blitz the reader learns exactly what war means - 'the twinkling of an eye, and all of us changed', as Florence Bell, mother to Emma and Audrey, recalls of a previous agony. Change comes to the city of Belfast in the form of utter destruction, and to the Bell family in the form of love. A story of both great violence and great tenderness, *These Days* ends at eleven minutes past eleven o'clock, carrying all the freight that number holds. 'Have you lived a life that is true?' Lucy Caldwell asks. For the 2023 Walter Scott Prize, it was a winning question.'

You can find out more about how Lucy wrote the book in these two articles: Faber's ['Behind the Book'](#) feature, and an interview in the [Irish Times](#).

### **Reading Group discussion questions**

1. The novel begins with an epigraph from Louis MacNeice's poem 'Selva Oscura', which also inspired the title of the novel. Why do you think the author chose this?
2. Many characters witness graphic, devastating scenes. How did the novel make you think about trauma?
3. Caldwell draws interesting parallels between Emma's passionate affair and Audrey's stifling relationship. How does the story of the Bell sisters help us with understanding the broader politics at the heart of the novel?
4. The author has made a deliberate choice not to use speech marks throughout the novel. What do you think this technique intends to say about the difference between our private and public selves, what we think and what we say? Can you think of moments in the novel where these boundaries are deliberately blurred?
5. Do you think that you can sometimes learn more about the experience of an event through fiction than non-fiction?
6. *These Days* is a polyphonic novel. While it is principally focused through the Bell family, what did you think of the sections written from the perspective of secondary

characters? How was the author using those different perspectives to broaden the novel's scope?

7. The novel is split into three parts: 'The Dockside Raid', 'The Easter Raid' and 'The Fire Raids'. Did you find that each section had a distinct tone? How did this structure impact your reading experience?
8. *These Days* was praised for its exploration of community and resilience - which parts of the novel did you feel really achieved this? And did it make you think about these themes in relation to present-day tragedies?
9. The final pages of the novel take place outside, during a full Mother's moon, at eleven minutes past eleven o'clock at night. How did you read the significance of this?
10. If you could ask the author one question about this book, what would it be?