

# The Agency for Scandal

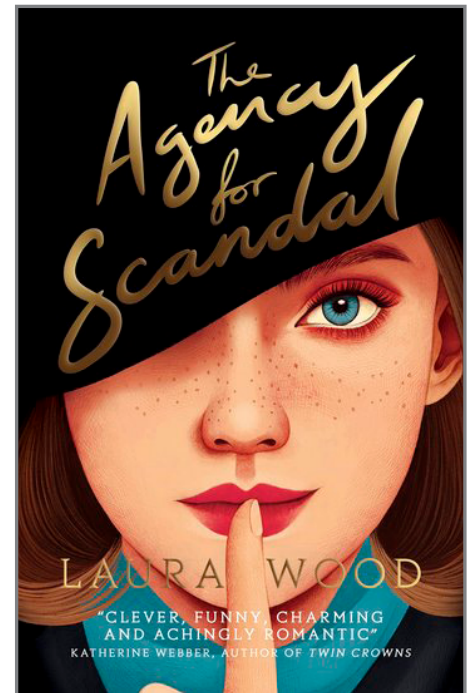
AUTHOR

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Mid to Upper Secondary  
(Sexual References)



## SYNOPSIS

Eighteen-year-old Isobel Stanhope is keeping a lot of secrets. There's the fact that she's head over heels in love with a Duke who doesn't know she exists; there's the fact that her family is penniless but nobody in society knows about it; and then there's her job at the Aviary, an investigative agency run by women that specialises in digging up scandal on powerful men. When Izzy finds herself pulled into a case that involves gaslighting, blackmail and missing jewels, as well as the Duke who holds her heart, can she and her friends untangle the web of secrets and lies to uncover the truth and protect the innocent? And when the stakes are so high, what happens when the crush she's been hiding begins to turn into so much more?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Wood is an academic and a writer. She is the winner of the Montegrappa Scholastic Prize for New Children's Writing and the author of the Poppy Pym series. Visit her at [lauraclarewood.com](http://lauraclarewood.com) or find her on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

## STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, as a class, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
  - What do you think an Agency for Scandal might be?
  - Where and when do you think this book might be set?
  - What does the cover art tell us about the book?
  - What genre do you predict this book might be and why?
  - Who do you think the main character of this novel is likely to be, and why have you come to this conclusion?
  - In small groups, hypothesise as to what might occur within this book. After reading the novel revisit your hypotheses and compare them all to the actual events of the novel.
- Describe the Sydney Opera House using a similar style as the description of the Opera House at the beginning of the book. You may need to research details of the different spaces within the Sydney Opera House, for example: how many people can be seated there; how the performance spaces and seating are arranged; and the colour schemes and materials used within and without.
- Having read the first chapter, as a class, discuss how the author has set the scene, and what you have learnt about the main character, their life, where they live, and what sort of person they are. Some things to consider in your discussion could be:
  - When is this book set? How do you know?

- What was life like for people back then?
- Where is this book set?
- What do we know about Izzy and the agency by the end of Chapter One? Make a list of important facts, and as a class discuss what you think might happen next in the novel.
- Before reading past the end of Chapter One, as a class, brainstorm what you know about what life was like in Izzy's time, and what major social and technological changes have happened between her day and now.
- During the course of the novel, Izzy describes in detail the colour of a lot of different things, with a strong emphasis on the colours of clothing, and more specifically she frequently describes the unfortunate colour choices that Teresa is prone to making. In small groups, discuss the various colour terms you have noticed Izzy using, and attempt to come to firm conclusions as to what is the difference between shades such as lemon yellow and primrose, and how puce differs from salmon.
  - Individually or in pairs, create two contrasting colour charts that could be used to help someone choose the colour of a new gown. Have the first of your charts be filled with what would have been considered tasteful colour choices, while the second chart should be filled with what Izzy would have called eyewateringly lurid colours.
- How many different colour terms are used in the book? What are they all? Do you know what colours they refer to? Make a colour chart of all colours mentioned and how you imagine they look.
- At the start of the novel, Izzy dresses almost exclusively in pale grey shades that indicate she is still in mourning for her father. These gowns have the added benefit that she appears drab and uninteresting, and they help her frequently remain completely unnoticed. What colour clothes would you choose to blend in and be as unnoticeable as Izzy manages to be if you were at the following locations:
  - on a construction site
  - at school
  - in a restaurant
  - at a wedding
  - at a sports game.

Did you choose the same colours for each? Why/why not? Explain your choices in three paragraphs or less.

- Izzy describes Max as resembling one of those statues of classical Greek heroes. What does this mean? What do statues of classical Greek heroes look like? Research online and collect images of at least four. Write a description based on both Izzy's descriptions of Max, and all the things that your collated images have in common.
- How is the narrative structured in terms of chronological progression? How does the author inform the reader of past events? In small groups, discuss the chronological progression of the novel, identify narrative techniques used over course of the novel and finally write a brief description of the narrative structure.
- Reread Izzy's description of Teresa's usual taste in men on p 23. Draw a picture of a person who you feel fits this description. After completing your drawing, write a short fiction starring your illustrated character.
- Izzy implores Teresa to think of Wordsworth's daffodils. Read Wordsworth's poem featuring daffodils, and as a class, discuss how they are portrayed and why Izzy might view the poem (and the daffodils) as she does.
  - What are some other poems that were written and popular in Izzy's time? Research and identify at least three poets who were famous and/or popular in the 1890s. Choose one poem by each poet to discuss in a small group, and share your favourite of the three with the class. Is poetry less popular today? On what are you basing your answer, and why do you think this is so?
- What is a cicisbeo and how is the word pronounced? What word/s might be used instead of cicisbeo today? How might different people choose to describe a cicisbeo, how would their descriptions differ, and why?
- What is a ghoul? What colour do you imagine ghoulish-yellow to be? Experiment with colour mixing, and paint a picture of a ghoulish-yellow ghoul.
- The sign above the exterior door of the Aviary is described as being painted in swirling calligraphy. Using an A4 piece of paper, create a sign of your own that you feel fits the description of the Aviary sign as described by Izzy. Before you start, you might want to think about what would have been considered 'calligraphy' in the 1890s, as well as researching common fonts that were popularly used in printed matter during that era.

- If you were illustrating a graphic version of this book, how would you represent the room where Izzy first meets Miss Finch? Use Izzy's description of the room on p 60 to help you draw or paint a detailed representation of the room.
- Why is the name Miss Finch clearly pseudonymous? What is a finch, where are they found and how do they behave? Why do you think Miss Finch chose this particular pseudonym?
- Isobel sympathises with the heroine of *Jane Eyre*. Who wrote *Jane Eyre* and when was it published? What happens in *Jane Eyre* and why do you think Isobel felt a kinship with the main character?
- In the late 1890s women in Britain were rarely treated as independent individuals in their own right. Answer the following questions about gender inequalities:
  - What other inequalities existed in British society at that time?
  - What other examples of gender inequality can you find in the book?
  - Did these inequalities also exist in the rest of the English speaking world?
  - Do they exist in the same way now?
  - What has happened to change this between then and now?
  - What inequalities still exist and why?
  - What are people doing today to try to reduce inequalities in society?
- Locate the places mentioned in the novel such as Grosvenor Square, Whitechapel, Peterborough, Hatfield, and York, and trace Max and Isobel's journeys over the course of the novel. Compare how long it took them to travel to Yorkshire, to how long it would take to travel there from London today.
- Why did Isobel bite the coin that Max used to pay Kes?
- Draw a picture of Isobel's Medusa dress based on the description in the book. Compare it to pictures online of British clothing in the 1890s.
- Write about the events at the ball where Izzy steals the ruby brooch from Teresa's point of view.
- After you finish reading Part Two, speculate on the secrets of the ruby brooch. What do you think it might be hiding, and why might Moreland have specifically asked Kitten to wear it on various occasions?
- What season is it in England in July? What would the weather typically be like, and how would the aristocracy have dressed in this weather in the 1890s? How and why might the weather in Yorkshire have differed from the weather in London?
- How much variation would there have been in the accents of members of lower classes such as Rook and Kes, as compared to how Max and Isobel would have normally spoken? How different would the Yorkshire accents have been again? Research British accents online and listen to a cockney accent; an aristocratic accent (such as the king); and a Yorkshire accent.
- What would a Yorkshire shepherds hut have looked like in the 1890s, why would shepherds have huts, and why might one be vacant yet furnished?
- Max is described at one point as having a 'sphinx-like' expression. What is a sphinx, what is its expression like, and why might Izzy describe Max's expression as being 'sphinx-like'? What is another way that she could have described his expression that conveys the same information about what he looked like at that time?
- Oliver Lockhart's home had many rooms exuding a feeling of 'faded grandeur' while in contrast the library in his house is handsomely furnished. What is faded grandeur? How would handsomely furnished be realised? Write a detailed description of two separate rooms that you feel would, respectively, merit these two phrases as descriptions.
- Lockhart's house as a whole is also described as being a 'gothic monstrosity'. What does gothic architecture look like, and why might Izzy see a house in this style as a monstrosity?
- Write about Mac and Izzy's visit to Oliver Lockhart, from the perspective of Oliver.
- Morland's tiepin, and the ruby brooch, are both secretly keys as well as being items of jewellery. Design an item of jewellery that is also secretly a key.
- Izzy counters Max's objections to breaking the rules by telling him that his desire for adherence to rules is 'because all the rules were designed with you in mind.' Discuss how difficult it can be for those with privilege to see that they have it, because of the way the system is set up. Include in your discussion consideration of different ways to gently let people know that they are operating from a place of privilege, without making them feel attacked and defensive.

What are some examples of unthinking privilege within the system that we have here today?

- Hartwell is revealed as being blackmailed by Morland, because he (Hartwell) is gay. At the time and place that the book is set, homosexuality was punishable by prison. When did the laws about this change in England? When did they change in Australia? Why did society believe homosexual love was so indecent, and what homophobic attitudes and practices do we still need to eradicate from society here today?
- Izzy and Teresa attended parties and balls in the company of a chaperone. Why were chaperones needed at balls, etc? Who served as chaperones and what was their purpose in being there?
- Izzy finds fashionable gowns have too much smothering fabric and she also hates the voluminous sleeves. She is delighted when Iris starts to create dresses for her that she finds both comfortable and flattering. Design an outfit of your own that you think Izzy would appreciate, and/or a coordinating one for Max to wear.
- Izzy states that Kitten Morland created a 'party fit for royalty on only several days notice . . .' who would have had to do all the hard physical work necessary to decorate and organise the house, arrange the entertainments, purchase the supplies and cook the refreshments as well as serving, catering, and so on? What would the hostesses role be in all this? Write a description of the preparations for this party from the point of view of a servant in the Morland household.
- Izzy tells Max that she tried once to write poetry and it was 'absolutely terrible'. What makes a poem terrible? Write some disastrous poetry that Izzy might have penned in her youth.
- Before reading Chapter Thirty-Seven, as a class, discuss the decision Izzy says she is avoiding. You might wish to consider:
  - What decision is Izzy avoiding having to make? Why is she avoiding it?
  - What does she see as the negative consequences?
  - What do you think she will decide to do and why?
  - What do you think Max was about to say to her?
  - What does Izzy think he is about to say?
  - What do you think Izzy should do next?
- What is your opinion of the conclusion of the story, and how Izzy handles events after the mystery is solved and Morland's evil plans are foiled?
- What do you think is likely to happen to Izzy next?