

*The Liar's Dictionary*, by Eley Williams (2020, Doubleday)

Late in 19th-Century London, Peter Winceworth is bored and frustrated by his job defining words beginning with S for Swansby's New Encyclopaedic Dictionary, so he starts inventing words of his own. Early in 21st-Century London, Mallory is an intern hired to help the last scion of the Swansby family digitize the never-completed dictionary, but she keeps getting threatening phone calls at work. From A to Z, in alternating chapters, we follow the stories of these two people in this amusing novel. If you are at all interested in words, or if you've ever felt the lack of a word for something you've experienced, this book might be for you.

Peter has a secret: his lisp is something he has invented to earn pitying help. Mallory has a secret: she's deep in a loving lesbian relationship, but something keeps her from coming out to her family or her employer. Peter's boss sends him to a speech therapist, where he wars with a caged songbird, and he falls hopelessly in love with the Russian fiancée of a wealthy playboy colleague. The resulting situations make for zany comic scenes, intensified by the self-conscious chagrin of the principals.

Williams has published a collection of short stories and regularly contributes to several British journals, but *The Liar's Dictionary* is her first novel. It is said that although the English language has more than a million words, we commonly use only 20,000 of them. Williams introduces us to many of those remaining. It will be hard for her to surpass this delightful and inventive debut.