



Public Battles, Private Wars

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Yorkshire 1983. Miner's wife Mandy is stuck in a rut. At twenty-three, and trapped by domesticity, her future looks set and she wants more from life. Husband Rob is a good-looking drinker, content to spend his days in the small town where they've always lived - where Mandy can't do anything other than bake cakes and raise her children. When Mandy's childhood friend - beautiful, clever Ruth - and Ruth's Falklands war hero husband, Dan, return to town, their homecoming is shrouded in mystery. Like in their schooldays, Mandy looks to Ruth for inspiration - but Ruth isn't all she appears. As conflict with the Coal Board turns into war, the men come out on strike. The community and its whole way of life is threatened. Mandy abandons her dreams of liberation from the kitchen sink and joins a support group. As the strike rumbles on, relationships are pushed to the brink, and Mandy finds out just who she is - and who her true friends are.

Public Battles, Private Wars Details

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Ivy Pavlova says

A lovely, detailed picture of a way of life that was completely unfamiliar to me; what I probably liked most was its skilfully evoked sense of place and time. The miners' strike is a backdrop and in part the catalyst of Mandy's very personal yet fairly archetypal struggle for personal autonomy. Wilkinson neatly uses a 'will they, won't they?' romance to lure the reader toward a resolution that's altogether more profound. Characters are subtly drawn but believable, as are the relationships of our self-effacing heroine with her family and childhood friend. I'll definitely be looking out for the next one!

Anne says

Set against the miner's strike in the early 80s, in a small Yorkshire pit town; Public Battles, Private Wars is a story of a community's fight to survive and one woman's personal journey.

Mandy and Rob married young, and had kids. They live amongst family and friends and Rob followed the rest of his family to work down the pit. Mandy has secret dreams, she wants to learn to type, she regrets her wasted schooldays, and knows that she could do more. Mrs Thatcher threatens to shut the pits, the men go on strike and Mandy uses her love of cooking to head up the soup kitchen. It's not long before she's the spokeswoman for the Action Group - travelling to London, giving talks, being interviewed by the newspapers - using her brain.

What should have brought her and Rob together seems to have pushed them further apart, and when Mandy's old school friend Ruth moves back into town, with her ex-soldier husband Dan, relationships seem to deteriorate even more.

Ruth seems to have it all. A good job, nice clothes, a great figure, money to spend, but Mandy senses that things are not all that they seem between Dan and Ruth.

Laura Wilkinson is great with words. Her fictionalised town of Fenley could be any of the small pit towns in South Yorkshire, her characters have real Northern grit, the language is spot on. This story is authentic and the setting is excellently portrayed.

I particularly enjoyed the fact that whilst Public Battles, Private Wars is set around the miner's strike, it is not wholly consumed by it. The story is more about the people, especially the women, and how they coped and how they grew during the twelve months that the men were out.

A well-written, compelling story with some great characters. Public Battlers, Private Wars is a story that looks at friendships, community, love and jealousy.

Jo says

I came across this book via the author's Facebook page. I was intrigued as it was set during the miner's strike

in the early 1980s. I was a student back then and the period holds a special place in my heart. I was pleased that Laura captured both the era and the setting of a mining community under threat so well. Her heroine, Mandy is a wonderful character. She's strong; she's flawed; she's hard working. I was rooting for her all the way. Laura Wilkinson focuses on the women in the mining community and how they supported their men folk by attending rallies, running feeding stations and raising funds for miners' families. Don't be put off by the opening chapters, which I didn't think matched the quality of the rest of the book (far too many characters introduced too quickly resulted in this reader feeling confused!). I also find the title rather off-putting, but that's personal taste. If you remember the 80s, then be prepared for a nostalgia fest.

Shirley Golden says

Set during the 1980's in Fenley, a Yorkshire mining town, 'Public Battles, Private Wars' is the story of Mandy Walker, a miner's wife, who gets involved in the struggle to try and prevent pit closures. As the title suggests, it's also the story of her personal journey of self-growth. Pregnant with her fourth child, Mandy's life revolves around day-to-day chores and caring for her kids. When her childhood friend, Ruth, returns to town married to a war hero, Mandy can't help but feel in awe of her. But as Mandy is encouraged to participate in fund-raising campaigns and public speaking, she realises that all is not quite as perfect in Ruth's world as she was first led to believe.

The characterisation is strong, and the tone is realistic. The setting is extremely well drawn. It deals with themes of friendship, love, loyalty, jealousy, misplaced perceptions of self and others, and it shows the cultural shift from tight-knit communities to a more individual way of life. Oh, and there's lots of cake along the way! Another accomplished novel from this talented author. Recommended.

Tracy Terry says

Having witnessed the destruction of a mining community first-hand I knew this was going to be more of a personal read than most and as such was probably going to be either a big hit or a huge miss.

Thankfully a hit, the story of a community and in particular one woman's public battles and private wars this is a novel with a big heart.

Though essentially the story of one young woman's journey of self-fulfilment Public Battles, Private Wars intertwines the story of the struggle against pit closures, of one veterans struggle since returning from the Falklands War. Mixing fact with fiction at a time when Margaret Thatcher was regarded by some as a feminist icon whilst for many women like Mandy 'feminism' was still a dirty word. Though politics is the backdrop of the story it in no way intrudes into what is a very human tale of very real people.

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Thorne Moore says

I really enjoyed this book, although enjoyment was tempered – I wallowed in angry nostalgia. It's an historical novel, dating all the way back to the time when Britain had industry, mines, ship-building, car manufacturing, and workers had real jobs, real wages and real contracts. Or rather to the moment when it all came to an end.

A very well-written story about Mandy, a miner's wife who has had babies in the narrow mining community where she's grown up. And that's about it for Mandy. Whatever else she might have been or done, she's now not even capable of completing a typing course that might increase her opportunities marginally.

Then the miners go on strike and even if her community is doomed, Mandy discovers she's a fighter. She unearths talents and with them comes a more perceptive understanding of those around her, family and friends.

Is it love that will save Mandy, or her own strengths? I was delighted that it didn't end the way I was suspecting it would.

Tom Williams says

Laura Wilkinson and I share a publisher, but that shouldn't disqualify me from reviewing her book.

'Public Battles, Private Wars' starts off like a chick lit romance and ends up as a committed look at the politics and sociology of the miners' strike with some Guardian feminism thrown in for good measure. The shifting between genres can be a bit confusing, but surely it's good to make readers concentrate sometimes? Sometimes I found it irritating (like the Guardian Women's Page) but I thought that it was a worthwhile read. As the Miners' Strike fades into history, it's worth remembering what it was about and what we lost. Mining was a horrible job, but this book captures the sense of pride and community that has vanished with those coal mining jobs. I can't see a book like this about the closure of a call centre.

'Public Battles, Private Wars' is (for the next few hours) the National Museum of Wales' 'Book of the Month'. The fact that a book set in England has attained this honour says something about its quality.

Tara says

This month marks the thirtieth anniversary of the most rancorous industrial dispute in modern history. The Miners' Strike began in March 1984, ending twelve months later. 'Public Battles, Private Wars' takes us to a fictional Yorkshire village, home of Mandy Walker, a mother of four. On the same day that her husband is injured in an accident at the coal mine where he works, a familiar face reappears – Mandy's best friend from her schooldays, Ruth. As the strike begins, she persuades Mandy to join an action group headed by her formidable mother-in-law.

At first, Mandy puts to use her natural flair for cooking at rallies and meetings. But when a journalist interviews her for the local newspaper, she becomes a plain-speaking, if reluctant, voice for the miners and their families. For Mandy, who had lost much of her youthful spark amid the pressures of child-rearing, this proves to be a lifeline.

Mandy's story is based on the experience of many others like her, in what quickly became a national movement. Women Against Pit Closures – as these groups were collectively known – offered miners' wives like Mandy the opportunity to make their voices heard in what was primarily a male-dominated sphere.

Laura Wilkinson does not ignore the many hardships suffered by mineworkers and their families in a struggle to preserve a way of life that would ultimately vanish. Most crucially, the lives of women like Mandy and Ruth were changed beyond recognition. The days of housewives unquestioningly standing by their men were numbered. 'Public Battles, Private Wars' recalls this turbulent time in a direct, unpretentious style, bringing women's experience to the fore where once it was marginalised.

Kay Jaybee says

The events of the miner's strike were etched in my mind as a child, having seen it in every paper, and on every news bulleting for so long- but as a young person coming from a non mining area, the daily 'living with the situation' obviously never affected me. Public Battles gives a wonderful (if that is the correct word) description of what life must have been like for those women who simply had no choice but to 'get on with it' I took to the lead character, Mandy straight away, and applauded as she fought her own battle, to make friends. A well written read, this is a must for anyone who likes a little social history with their fiction.

Judith Barrow says

Public Battles, Private Wars is a novel is right up my street. I mainly chose to read it because of its setting in Yorkshire. I remember the miners' strike in 1983 so well and I knew someone on both sides of the conflict; My uncle was a policeman who was sent to one of the mining villages, and the father of one of my friend's was a minor on strike.

It was a hard time and Laura Wilkinson expertly captures the politics and tension within this community, the roles expected of women both in the home and in society and, equally, the personal battles between friends and families.

Told from the protagonist's point of view, Mandy Walker, the narrative moves steadily and is threaded through with many themes: of loyalty, love, relationships, political divisions, disillusionment. Even knowing the final outcome of this fiction built on fact book, the reader is pulled along: from the buoyant belief that the minors will be able to fight the decisions made by Margaret Thatcher's Government, through the physical pain of grinding poverty and to the villagers' gradual realisation that the life they have always known is gone for good. Until finally, there is a reluctant acceptance for what cannot be changed.

The characters are rounded and each, in their own way, grows within the story. Mandy is initially revealed as a fraught, insecure wife and mother, a woman at the end of her tether. But one who, through the adversity, is forced to confront the truth of her life and find the inner strength to go in a new and unexpected direction. And the sub plot, the life-long friendship between Mandy and Ruth Braithwaite (held up by the protagonist as someone to aspire to emulate) reinforces the main plot and is used to strengthen that change in Mandy. She sees the weakness in Ruth and the balance of their friendship is inevitably tipped. It is through Mandy we see the hope of the future.

The sparing dialogue, although not in dialect (thank goodness!) brilliantly places the novel in Yorkshire and underlines the portrayal of the characters: the tough Braithwaite family, Mandy's sulky, hard-drinking husband, Rob and even minor characters such as their next-door neighbour, Doug..

The author writes brilliantly evocative descriptions of each setting that the characters move through; the village, the moors surrounding, individual houses and the community hall. All bring such a sense of place that I was able to picture each setting, imagine the atmosphere, feel the stress. Yet there is always the humour, both in the dialogue and in the narrative.

What a treat this book was for me. I have no hesitation in recommending Public Wars, Private Battles. Well worth five stars.

Sonya Alford says

I read and reviewed Laura Wilkinson's first book, 'BloodMining' a while back and so was delighted when she asked me if I would like to review her second novel 'Public Battles, Private Wars' which was published by Accent Press on the 9th March 2014. Set in Yorkshire, Fenley Down in the 1980's, 'Public Battles, Private Wars' tells the story of the miners' strike.

Mandy is 23 years old, married to Rob who works in the mines, and has children. Mandy feels as if she is stuck in a rut and wants to do more. However, a life as a housewife and bringing up the children seems inevitable. Mandy's childhood friend, Ruth, who left Fenley years ago, returns with her Falkland's war hero husband, Dan. But something just doesn't add up and Ruth isn't the person she appears to be.

Conflict with the Coal Board turns to war and the men go out on strike. The community and its whole way of life is badly threatened and Mandy finds herself joining the Fenley Action Group (FAG) which gives her a whole lot of confidence. As the strike goes on relationships are tested and Mandy discovers just who her true friends are.

The first thing I want to say is that this book is so different from Laura Wilkinson's first novel. I really enjoyed it and I liked her writing style. I could actually hear the Yorkshire accent. Whilst this story was about the miners' strike it also took a good look at the people affected by it and their families, bringing with it a couple of interesting plots.

Mandy was one of my favourite characters. She was of strong character no matter what life threw at her and a woman to be admired. The cakes she baked and the descriptions throughout the book are enough to make anyone's mouth water.

Kirsty (Book - Love - Bug) says

I read (and enjoyed) Laura's first book a few years ago, and so thank you to Laura for offering me the chance to review her latest novel which was released by Accent Press on 9 March 2014.

As the name suggests, the book follows Mandy as her family and friends struggle to cope during the miners' strike of 1984 to 1985. Mass walk-outs and strikes took place following Thatcher's long term plan of mine closures was announced. However, the book also focuses on Mandy's private battle - as a mother of four young children, with a husband who drinks heavily, she turns to her best friend who has just returned to the village.

Wilkinson really captures the sense of community that existed during those difficult times, and the story follows Mandy as her confidence grows as she becomes more heavily involved in the public protests against the government. However, this puts a different kind of strain on her private life, and it's only a matter of time before things begin to unravel in a way Mandy never imagined.

Whilst the miners' strikes sets the background for Mandy's story, it isn't overwhelming and allows the characters to shine.

Told thirty years on, *Public Battles, Private Wars* captures the unstable time from the miners' wives perspective and illustrates the impetus for change which radically altered so many people's lives.

Kenneth says

OK let's get the first bit out of the way. I'm a man and this book was not written for me. I don't understand about girlie best friends and all that stuff. That made it more difficult for me to get into the two characters. A lot has been made, in other reviews, about the coverage of the miners strike. In truth it is only the backdrop to the story.

Being someone who lived through that period in an area with three pits I can say that the plight of the women was quite accurately portrayed, what was missing, however, was the little bright spots without which they couldn't have carried on. Things like trying to work out what was in the tins, sent in food parcels from miners on the continent, and pickets building a snowman around a steel bollard so that when the police driver tried to knock it down with his van, the van got wrecked. little things that gave them a lift and enabled them to carry on. I would have thought that the appearance of Maureen McGibbon as a miners wife (actually paid infiltrator) at the Tory party conference would have set off the Ladies at the Miner's Institute.

However, as I say that isn't really what the story is all about. It was a story about love, betrayal and the recovery of self belief, and it did that very well. I'm glad Laura didn't go for the cliche ending, it made it all the more believable.

Holly says

Public Battles, Private Wars sounded a bit different to the sort of story I usually go for and I was unsure how I'd find it. I wasn't around during the miner's strikes when Margaret Thatcher was in power so I thought that I might learn one or two things about what went on and the experiences that the people involved went through. I am so glad that I got the chance to review this novel as I absolutely loved it. I feel as though I have learnt so much about the struggles and difficulties that the miners and their families faced during the early 1980s. I was shocked at how hard life was for the residents of Fenley, how impossible the economy and

work situation was (Mandy being frankly advised that she would be better off staying on benefits than looking for a job and that 'she'd be lucky' if she could find anything) This novel is so thoroughly researched and I love a story like this; where you're reading and enjoying the storyline but learning so much new information too.

Saying all that in no way did the political side and the mining situation overshadow the story of the characters. It was just an event that happened, whilst people's lives played out along side it, which I really liked. It's a realistic novel and you'll find yourself placing and identifying with the characters easily, especially Mandy who was fantastic. She's such a strong character and also really believable. Caring and loyal she also makes a mean cake...what's not to love? Ruth was a brilliantly drawn character too who you never quite know what to make of. Whilst I disliked her and her behaviour towards Mandy I couldn't help but feel sorry for her too.

What makes *Public Battles, Private Wars* so great is how fact is written alongside fiction. It's a story that will keep you guessing, there are plenty of twists and turns and things don't necessarily end up as you think they will.

I loved Mandy's journey of self discovery that took place alongside all of the events in the story. You'll be amazed at her transformation towards the end of the book, and I found her tale to be really inspirational. The Yorkshire setting was fantastic and the community spirit in Fenley really shines through which makes for really enjoyable reading. There's a sprinkling of humour too, usually courtesy of Ethel.

The story flows really well and you can't help but be swept up by the battles facing Fenley. A hugely enjoyable, fascinating and emotional story. If you lived through those difficult times in the early 80s then you'll definitely be able to identify with this novel and if not you'll definitely be able to learn something from it, I know I have.

Terry Tyler says

4.5 stars

Well, what a nice surprise this was! It was in the reviewing list for Rosie Amber's Review Team, of which I am a part, and I failed to pick up on it, but then I read a review of it by another team member, and decided to buy it anyway. Guess what? Book blogs work!! Read them!! :)

This is so good, I read it in one day (yep, couldn't put it down!). It's written in the first person narrative of Mandy Walker, a miner's wife during the strike of 1983-5, in a Yorkshire village. Running through the real life events ~ the public battles ~ are the private wars of the title; the strain on family life that these events caused, coupled with love wrangles, painful memories and marital disharmony.

What I liked about this book: it's very well written, flows beautifully (probably goes without saying, as I read it in a day!). The story is so realistic; I am the same age as the fictional Mandy (I was 24 in 1983, too), but my life was so different ~ middle class, in the south, with a husband and a small business rather than four kids. The conflict was something we saw on television, something for which we put money in buckets, then went on with our lives. This brought it all home to me ~ BUT (and it's a big 'but') it wasn't done so in a laboured way. It's written in such a way that I was aware of the north~south divide, the fact that they were a Yorkshire community, without everyone giving it 'ee-by-gum, he's worked down t'pit all his life, I'll take home a bottle of stout for the Mrs' every five minutes, like you see in some books that wish to be representative of a place and time, and neither did it cash in on the 1980s bit with loads of references to the

music and everyone wearing white high heels and padded shoulders (not that they would have done in a mining community anyway, perhaps). The characters were great; Mandy was very believable and likeable, and others I thought particularly good were the dragon-like matriarch of the community, Ethel Braithwaite, and Dan, the soldier who'd returned from the Falklands, something of an enigma.

I also liked the way the changing attitudes of the time were illustrated, especially when Mandy went down to London as part of her work with the wives' action group, and met people from areas of life she would not normally have done, had it not been for the strike.

I was a little disappointed that there was less drama than I'd have liked in the last twenty per cent, but that's only personal taste; the way in which it turned out was certainly realistic. I'd have liked to see the 'main baddie' get a satisfactory comeuppance (I hated this character from the start, but won't even say the sex as I don't want to give the plot away), but this person was so well drawn, too; it's good to have someone to hate in an emotional drama such as this! Aside from the fact that I felt let down by one particular revelation and its outcome ~ oh, okay, and that it didn't end up quite as I wanted it to! ~ I'd have given it 5*, but it's a definite 4.5.

I'd totally recommend this book, it's a cracker. I look forward to reading more by this author ~ and I mean that, it's not just a nice way of rounding off the review!
