

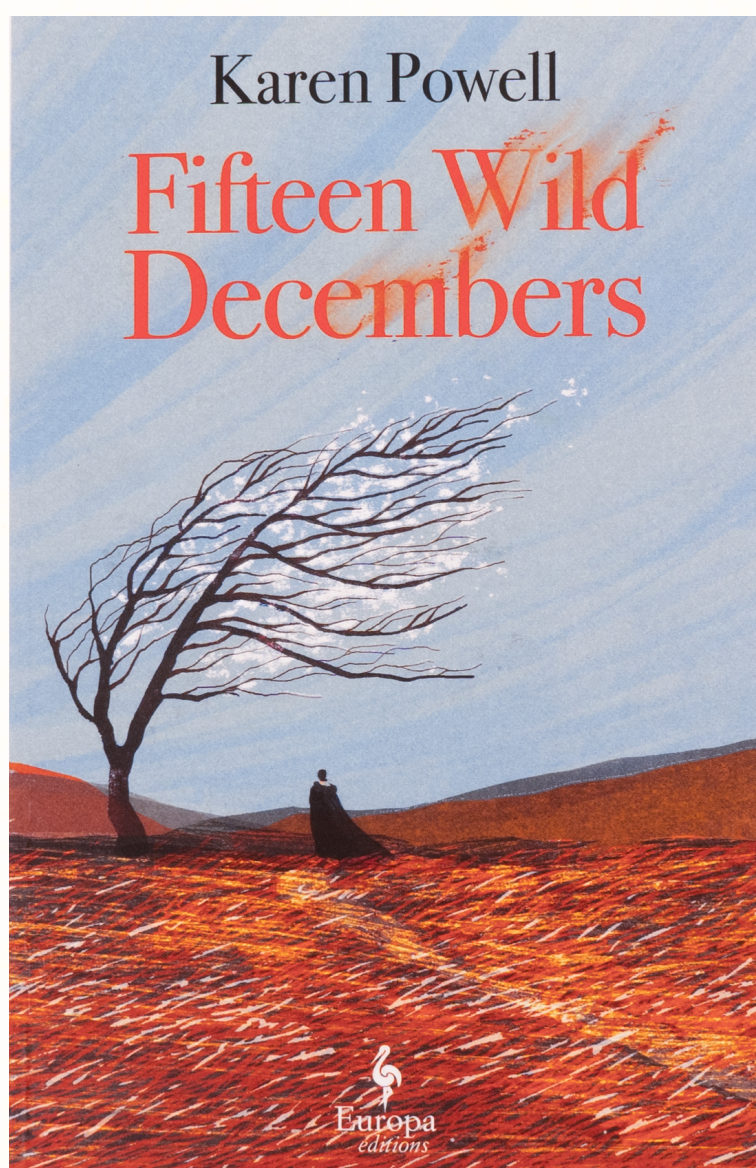
NERO

BOOK AWARDS

Reading Guides

Fiction Shortlist

Fifteen Wild Decembers by Karen Powell



Karen Powell grew up in Rochester, Kent, but now lives with her family in North Yorkshire. She works at York Minster Fund, an independent charity which raises money for the conservation and restoration of York Minster. Her novel *The River Within* won a Northern Writers Award and was published by Europa Editions in 2020.

'The passionate attack of the writing is remarkable, and the picture of Haworth as a volatile hive of creativity is wonderfully imagined.' - Fiction judges, 2023 Nero Book Awards

'I struggled to conceive of a world in which I no longer existed, every thought and feeling inside this me-shaped container of flesh and bones, gone. Life could end with the snap of a bone, one misfire of a heart, and yet mine had seemed unending, unbreakable.'

Emily Brontë, her sisters and brother live in isolation, grieving for their dead mother. Raised by their widower father in a parsonage on the edge of the village of Howarth, they pass their days roaming the nearby moors and inventing complex fictional worlds which, as they mature, evolve into poems and stories that capture the romance and desolate beauty of the wild heathlands they know so well. When the time comes for them to venture out into the world to earn a living, each of them struggles to adapt, but for Emily the change is catastrophic. Considered difficult and aloof, she struggles to make friends or to adapt to work as a schoolteacher. However, beneath the surface, her mind is in turmoil as she envisions the story that will eventually become *Wuthering Heights*, her one, extraordinary novel.

Poetic and melancholic, and echoing Emily Brontë's own literary voice, *Fifteen Wild Decembers* is an immersive reimagining of an extraordinary life.

Powell's descriptions of the breath-taking landscapes and elemental weather of North Yorkshire envelop the reader, allowing them to feel as if they are experiencing the world as Emily did.

Taking its title from one of Emily's own poems, *Fifteen Wild Decembers* explores the trauma of childhood grief and isolation while reminding us that we must look at what's hidden below the surface to really understand who someone is.

Discussion points:

- To what extent do you agree that Emily and her sisters wrote as an escape from living with their brother Branwell and his addictions?
- Has reading the book made you want to read *Wuthering Heights* yourself? If you have already read it, do Powell's descriptions of the Yorkshire Moors do justice to Emily Brontë's own?
- Why do you think that Emily was unable to hold down a job or function outside of her family home?