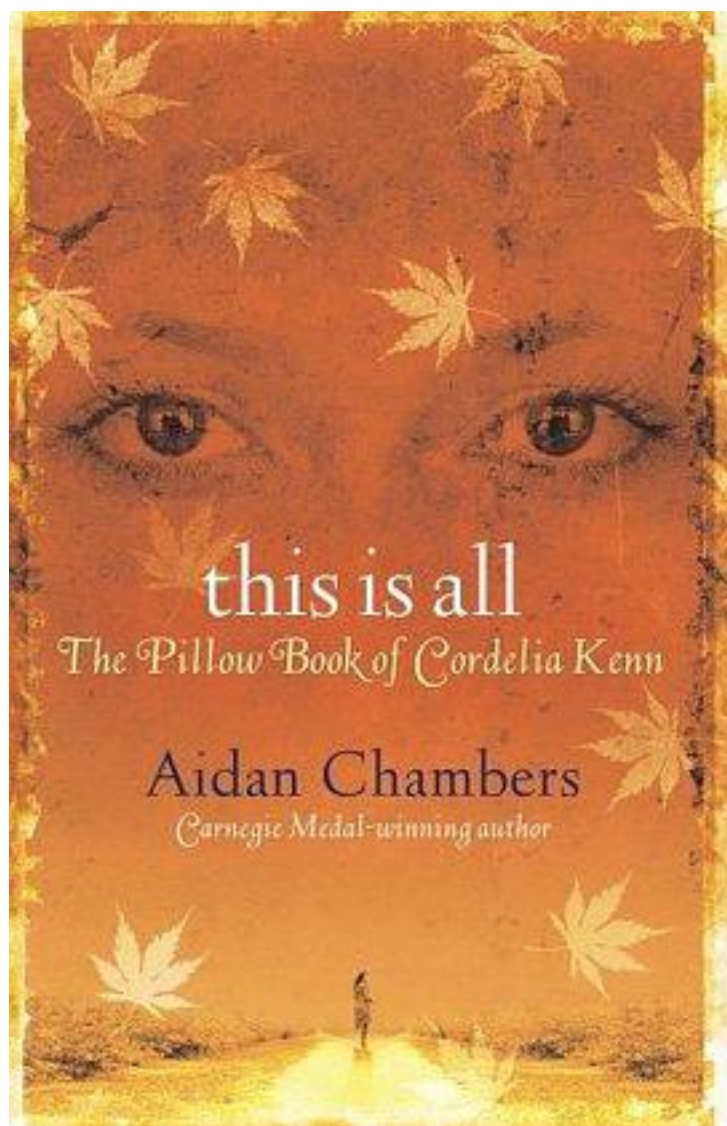


This is All



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This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn

The story of Cordelia Kenn, told by herself, covering her life from the age of fifteen until the birth of her baby when she is almost twenty. The Pillow Book is an ancient Japanese form: "A notebook or collection of notebooks kept in some accessible but relatively private place, and in which the author would from time to time record impressions, daily events, poems, letters, stories, ideas, descriptions of people, etc." [Ivan Morris in the notes to *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*.] Cordelia intends to give her book to her daughter as a sixteenth birthday present, so that in this way they can share their teenage years. She includes in her book not only her first love affair and her ambitions and thoughts and everyday events that are important to her, but all sorts of things not usually told in stories. She attempts to include all aspects of her life. Not surprisingly, her book is long.

From a review by Peter Hollindale in *School Librarian*, Autumn 2005, Vol. 53 No. 3, pp 165-6:

[...] This is all is the most daring of Chambers' experiments so far. Cordelia Kenn, his first-person narrator, is 19 and pregnant. Because her vocation is poetry and writing is necessary to her life, she compiles what she intends to share with her unborn daughter when the child is 16: the narrative of her own life from just before her 16th birthday to the present, interspersed with the 'pillow book' she has assembled in these years. A 'pillow book', on a Japanese model, is defined here by Ivan Morris as a 'notebook or collection of notebooks...in which the author would from time to time record impressions, daily events, poems, letters, stories, ideas, descriptions of people, etc'. The narrative thread is thus accompanied by abundant deviations, digressions, interruptions, pauses, during which we gather insights into the hidden, true, complex Cordelia, in whose house of self are many rooms. What Cordelia the young writer intends as a way of being contemporary with her child is also in practice a kind of teaching and initiation. This story shall the woman teach her daughter. Cordelia loves her Shakespeare, and allusions to him are recurrent and plentiful: the novel is about many things besides Cordelia, one of them that a life lives on in language and writing and is recoverable. Which, as things turn out, is just as well.

The book is immense, in size, ambition, scope and reach. The torment, joy and intensity of sexual learning can rarely have been caught so vividly. Here is not only Cordelia's sexual, emotional and mental history in these years, recorded in intimate, self-interrogating detail, but also the life behind the life, where language quarries deeply to bring private order out of turbulence. This is 'all' of Cordelia, and only a vast book can contain it.

Every bit of Cordelia's long tempest-tossed journey is worth following with her. Just occasionally she seems briefly to make way for an authorial cadenza, a homily or joke, which even Cordelia could not believably achieve in her stormy youth. For instance, the elaborate displacement activities that mark school exam revision are not so perfectly or amusingly known at the time to those who perpetrate them! But for nearly all its length, this is Cordelia's book. Here is her space. This is all is a huge and wonderful act of imaginative empathy, for which all 16 year olds who might be Cordelia's daughters, or sons, have cause to be grateful, as does the art form of young adult fiction.

From a '*Star*' review by Michael Cart in *Booklist*, USA, Autumn 2006:

Arguably, the book offers the most complete character study in all of young-adult literature, showing readers the life, mind, and soul of a teenage girl, while also giving readers full-dress portraits of her baby's father, her friends, her family, and - most satisfyingly - her English teacher and mentor, Julie. Cordelia records not only her love for these people but also for Shakespeare, for poetry, for words. Unsparingly honest and candid, she never flinches from exploring the physical realities of her body (it appears that girls are flatulent - who knew?) or from recounting the sexually explicit details of her affair with an older man and her terrifying ordeal when she is kidnapped and threatened with rape. Cordelia records it all, because she wants to understand it all; she wants to know everything about herself, and her way of understanding is writing. Thus, she explores the why of things as well as the what and the how. In so doing, she is by turns captivating and maddening, for she loves to analyse and to discover ambiguities. And so her story challenges - but it will grow richer and larger with each reading. Ultimately, this novel is more than a mere *pièce de résistance*; it is the masterpiece of one of young-adult literature's greatest living writers.

From a *star* Kirkus Review, September 2006:

With profound respect for readers, Chambers again stretches the YA genre to its edges and beyond.[...] Characters are intricate and sometimes infuriating. Moments of horror stunning and unforeshadowed. Ambitious, imperfect, challenging and powerfully affecting.

From Dinah Hall, journalist, in John McLay's on-line 'Children's Books of the Year 2005':

Once I'd got over my initial queasiness at the idea of a seventy year old man writing about sex in the voice of a sixteen year old girl (sorry: ageism and sexism in one line) I couldn't - to coin a cliché - put Aidan Chambers' *This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn* down: and given that the book is bloody heavy at 800 pages that is quite an achievement. I loved the characters. I loved the pontification. I loved the story (though I wasn't quite so keen on the ending) and I loved the fact that soon after reading it, my sixteen-year-old daughter dumped her boyfriend. Thank you, thank you, Aidan Chambers.

From Robert Dunbar in *The Irish Times*, 12 Nov. 2005:

...a fascinating depiction of what Cordelia at one point designates 'the uneasy, vulnerable, blossoming years of the early teens'. Its ambition, its complexity and its length demand a slow, close reading, but one which will be more than repaid by the power and depth of its insights.

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