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warm and messy, bored and raging. . . . I LOVED IT."

—EMMA DONOGHUE,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of *Room*

WHAT

"Staggeringly good.  
Terrifyingly good."  
—Lisa Jewell

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"Powerful, poignant  
and funny!"  
—*Melbourne Age*

DID

*a novel*

*Christopher Wakling*

# What I Did

*Christopher Wakling*

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## What I Did Christopher Wakling

“This is family life today at its most believable: warm and messy, bored and raging....I LOVED IT.”

—Emma Donoghue, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Room*

*What I Did* by Christopher Wakling is a truly astonishing novel—the chronicle of a family crisis that is equal parts hilarity, poignancy, and horror, told in the singular voice of a most precocious youngster. *Room* meets *The Slap* meets *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Wakling’s tour de force concerns one rash act that pitches a six-year-old boy and his hapless parents into the center of a social services maelstrom. *What I Did* is contemporary fiction at its most enthrallingly original—poignant, powerful, and extremely funny—a miraculous work that prompted London’s *Daily Mail* to declare it “the novel that should have won the Booker prize.”

## What I Did Details

Date : Published July 17th 2012 by William Morrow (first published August 4th 2011)

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Author : Christopher Wakling

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Genre : Fiction, Literary Fiction, Contemporary

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# From Reader Review What I Did for online ebook

## **Mona Bomgaars says**

Chautauqua week 3 book and CLS longest thriving book club selected book for 2014! A very enjoyable read about a difficult social family problem through the thoughts of a 6 year old boy.

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## **June says**

I could not put this down..I was so desperate to see what would be the outcome of official intervention in this family after their child runs into the road and is subsequently smacked by his angry and incredibly scared father, an event witnessed by a passer-by and reported to the authorities.I watched sadly as innocent remarks made by the child unwittingly lead to a rapid chain of events, not helped by the father's disinclination to co-operate with the system .

I have ,unfortunately, some personal experience upon which to draw in rating this novel..and I can say that I recognised only too well the various reactions of all the grown ups, both personal and professional.

The story is told from the point of view of the six year old boy involved, and the writer does well to keep it realistic while imparting enough information to let our adult experience of life fill in the blanks about what the grown-ups are discussing...

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## **Dana says**

Billy is six. Billy tells us this story from his point of view, and right off the bat we are told "nobody is bad or good here, or rather everyone is a bit bad and a bit good".

Billy is out with his father one day in the park. His father calls to him, but he is playing a game, so he starts to run off. The more his father tells him to stop, the faster he runs until he runs right into the street. Amidst honking horns and screeching brakes, his father gets angry and punishes Billy. A woman gets angry, Billy's father gets angry right back. Things escalate from there.

This book is about unintended consequences, as well as a critique on hyper-sensitivity in our society. We as the readers, get frustrated watching what happens, as we see Billy's innocent commentary misinterpreted by well-meaning adults all trying to help.

This is the type of book to keep you thinking and discussing for a long time after finishing. Billy as the ultimate unreliable narrator leaves us needing to interpret exactly what is happening. We see each character only in the framework of Billy's mind.

While I recommend this book to anyone, I believe this would make a stellar book club pick.

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## **Ruth says**

This book is told entirely from the perspective of a six year old boy. It was, at times, very frustrating to read, but certainly held my attention. I was disappointed with the ending. It was abrupt and could have been much more detailed.

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## **Jonkers Jonkers says**

Once I'd got over the way that the book is written (through the 6 year old boy in the book) I actually thought it was a good read. Quite thought-provoking and not going for the easy answers or making the characters 1 dimensional.

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## **Dawn says**

"What I Did" chronicles an everyday family in an unanticipated crisis. Written from the viewpoint of six year Billy, we hear how connections are made and misunderstood. At times his musings become laborious and the plot needs to pick up speed, but perhaps that is where the genius of the story lays. Tangled amid the scattered thoughts is the truth that social services is trying to unravel but in the effort to protect the innocent, the entire family is threatened and brought to the brink of total destruction. Preconceived assumptions hinder the listening process of professionals and is a reminder to all of the devastating consequences and lives that can be ruined by not searching/listening for the truth. I read this book through the Goodreads Giveaway Program.

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## **Anne says**

The central storyline of What I Did could happen to any family. Imagine, you are out in the park with your six year old son. Both of you are in a bad mood - it's early, you have work worries, you'd rather be in bed. Suddenly your son runs off, over the park, through the trees and makes his way towards a busy road. You chase him, shouting for him to stop. You see him run out between parked cars, you see the traffic, your heart thuds. He's lucky, he stops, he's unhurt. You grab him - you smack him. You are so relieved that he is OK, but so damn angry too.

And so, that is the beginning of the story. Narrated by six year old Billy, and seen purely through his eyes, with his kind of mixed up feelings about his angry Dad and his pure innocence and honesty, that only cause the family more and more heartache.

Billy is a wonderfully drawn character, bright as a button, intelligent, obsessed with David Attenborough and wild animals and the attention span of an ant. At first his voice is a little difficult to relate to, he often muddles his words and at times he goes totally off-track, into random observations and information relaying. This only adds to his character, and makes him more lifelike. Six year old boys are like that, this is real life. Somebody saw Jim (Billy's Dad) smack him, she confronted him and Jim told her where to get off - that was his second mistake, after the mistake of smacking Billy. Soon the family are visited by Social Workers and so begins a round of examinations, case conferences, meetings and accusations.

Throughout all of this, Billy's voice is loud. He answers the questions in his honest way - but it is the adults who get things wrong, they interpret his answers to mean different things, and Billy, in his innocence does not realise this.

Jim loves Billy, there is no doubt of that. Jim is also stubborn, short tempered and at times very angry. He swears, works too hard and drinks beer. He will not co-operate with the agencies involved, he makes things worse - for himself and for Billy.

This is a clever, entertaining, sad, funny and heart warming story. It is about real life, about mistakes that are made and about the innocence of childhood. I loved every page!

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## **David Hebblethwaite says**

Chris Wakling's latest novel is narrated by six-year-old Billy Wright, who runs off one day while he's out with his dad Jim. Eventually catching up with Billy as he runs out into a busy road, an exasperated Jim smacks the boy; a passing woman sees this, intervenes, and reports Jim to social services – and so the Wrights' ordinary family life begins to unravel.

Billy's narrative voice is a mixture of rambling, malapropisms, and references to the natural world (he loves watching David Attenborough programmes). For example:

I also have to warn you that nobody is bad or good here, or rather everyone is a bit bad and a bit good and the bad and good moluscles get mixed up against each other and produce chemical reactions.

Did you know cheetahs cannot retract their claws? (p. 2)

Over the course of a whole novel, this can be endearing and infuriating by turns; but it works both as a means of establishing Billy's character, and as a screen between us and the real action of the story. Through that screen, we see that Jim is a loving father, but also that he can have a quick temper, without necessarily even realising. It's a combination of these factors which makes the situation so difficult for Jim, because as far as he's concerned, he has done nothing wrong; but it's not easy for him to see how to present himself in a way that will convince the authorities of that. In its own way, the social-care system which Jim encounters seems just as opaque to him as the adult world is to Billy. *What I Did* is an effective portrait of innocently-intended actions spiralling out of control, and the difficulties of responding to that.

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## **Elena (For Books that Matter) says**

### **A Gone Bookserk Perspective**

I'm going to get right to not so likable feature of the book. Let's get that reservation out of the way. I felt like this novel had a quirky sense of direction. As I was reading it I often got lost in what the message behind some of the stories was. I kept saying to myself 'huh?', 'ok, now what's going on all of a sudden?' This will make sense to some readers, or it might not. What I mean to say by this is that the novel has a 'hit or miss' kind of feel. You'll either get it or you won't because of its unique and quirky style. It can be a good thing, or it can fall short for some people, like me, even though I took away quite a lot even against this feature of the book.

Now, let's get down to the best things about novel, of which there are many. Right from the get-go I want to say that the novel reminded me of 'A series of Unfortunate Events' series, where there is an introduction or explanation of key terminology of concepts - in the form of 'this is called...' What's great about this feature

of the book stems from the fact that this is literary fiction structured to introduce both adults and the youth to its message. I thought that if I had a child, I'd want to read it together or choose the book as a family book club book. It's definitely one that crosses age boundaries, and absolutely a book that can be shared across generations.

One last thing I want to mention is the fantastic nature of the cover of the book. At first I didn't understand it just by looking at the book. As you begin to be more immersed in the book, in fact from the very beginning, the reason for the choice of cover becomes more and more clear. I think the cover is fantastic and the novel does a beautiful job of representing it and vice versa. There are multiple stories in the book that provoke the reader to look at life from a creative and innovative sense, in particular that of animals and nature. It expands of realm of reality. You see people and events in brand new ways. For example, just to name a few: a seatbelt coiling back like a snake, a personality like that of an owls who doesn't speak but observes and looks at you with an all-knowing stare, and even camouflaging (vs lying).

I definitely recommend this book to ANYONE who is looking to see life with fresh eyes.... to get an unexpected perspective that broadens their horizons....possibilities.... and even lessons of life.

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### **Coleen says**

It could happen to almost anyone -- imagine your 6-year-old child running out suddenly into oncoming traffic, though you know he knows better. You're so distraught with fear that you spank him publicly -- an emotional response to an emotional situation. This is witnessed by a passerby, who reports it to social services. And thus begins a long string of out-of-control consequences, miscommunications, and family trauma. However, in this instance, the story is told through the eyes of the child himself, 6-year-old Billy, which puts things in an interesting perspective.

I enjoyed this book, although it took some intense concentration at times to filter through Billy's run-together subconscious thoughts. I thought the story was interesting on two levels: one being the situation itself & how things can steamroll quickly out of control; secondly, although this was never mentioned & I've not seen a single reviewer note anything similar, to me, Billy's character screamed Asperger's Syndrome, which would certainly complicate a situation such as this.

Overall, this was a well-written book. It's simple yet complicated, sad but funny, and one that would really prompt some good discussion about discipline and how our society views it.

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### **Jess says**

Very interesting and honest book about how things can be misconstrued from the perspective of a 6 year old. Hold on to your hat as the narrator loses you, being able to pluck the important information from the rubbish makes this a larger challenge. The words the little boy uses incorrectly will give you a chuckle.

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## Biogeek says

Ever wondered what a novel written by a 6-year old boy would read like? Well, wonder no more, as Wakling has successfully channeled the thoughts, confusions and wildlife obsessions of a slightly precocious elementary schooler, Billy. The question is, do you really want to spend 300 pages with a 6-year old boy? I discovered that I have the same impatience with the fictional character as I have with actual kids.

The premise of the novel is simple, and brilliant, because it could happen to virtually (a word that Billy miswrites as "vertically") any parent in some parts of the world. During a stressful morning, Jim's son dashes across a road, Jim gets scared/loses his temper and spansks him right there, a "busybody" sees him and reports him to social workers, in whose over-caring hands the situation spirals out of control.

Billy's amusing malapropisms kept me interested for a while, but after enough of them (molluscles for molecules), I no longer cared if they were directly causing the problems the family was facing. Recommended for people who loved *Room* but did not want to disturbing parts.

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## Melinda says

While some people may have found this book charming, as it attempted to be written from a child's point of view, and the "kid logic" was sometimes reminiscent of how my children saw things when they were younger, there were times when it just came across as smarmy and uncaring - an adult trying to be a kid and not succeeding. I found that the tragedy that was stirred up by this book was too PC for me. We allow corporal punishment in Texas. It is okay to spank your kids. You do not get sent to jail for having your kids have a bruise and blaming it on you to Child Protective Services. I got part way through this book, and was so disgusted by what was happening, that I couldn't finish it. A kid turns his parents in to CPS because he says they hurt him. He is a kid and doesn't understand the ramifications of what he is doing. The consequences are harsh and as I read more I was just glad that I didn't live in California or New York, where this type of thing happens. I know they want to protect children, but then there is going overboard. I didn't read the rest of the book, it is supposed to be heartwarming, but I never really liked the child very much in the book, and sympathized with the Father more. He was trying the best he could, and to have this result from his efforts was like a slap in the face. I'm sure things were resolved, and the family became close from what they'd been through, but what a subject to write about. I couldn't waste my time reading any more. It just makes me sick thinking about it - having the government have such control over peoples lives on the word of a child who can't even put his own shoes on his feet and doesn't know back from front. Does it happen? Yes it does. It happened to a friend of mine whose child fell at preschool, and some nosey teacher called in CPS and tried to have the child taken away and the parent jailed. Luckily, another teacher was there and saw the child fall, or that would have happened. I don't understand the attraction to this book for the people who sang its' praises. Maybe they don't have children, or haven't seen the system in action. Anyway, it's not my cup of tea.

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## Doreen says

Billy Wright is publically spanked by his father after he runs out into the street. A passerby informs social

services and a child protection officer pays a visit to investigate. Things escalate and the suspicion of child abuse soon threatens to break up the family.

The strength and the weakness of the novel are the narrator, six-year-old Billy. At times the perspective and voice of a child are successfully achieved. Billy's childish logic actually makes some of his behaviour very believable. For example, his actions when trying to run his bath himself make perfect sense when viewed from his perspective. Billy focuses only on things that directly affect him and he is continuously going off on tangents. That self-centeredness and short attention span are appropriate for a child. His understanding of the world is incomplete, as he himself admits, and so his misunderstandings are also appropriate.

Billy's narration, however, also has problems. On the one hand, he constantly uses malapropisms; he doesn't understand words that others use and so he repeats them incorrectly. For example, *nuclear* becomes *new clear* (266); *molecules* become *moluscules* (2); *suspense* becomes *suspension* (1); and *primates* become *prime-apes* (11). These malapropisms result in considerable humour: "Prairie dogs are very copulative animals. They copulate together very well in hunts and that is why their hunts are among the most successful in the animal kingdom" (7-8). Such misuse of words makes sense, but there are inconsistencies; at times, Billy uses vocabulary and phrasing that seem too advanced: "I want to tell Dad about this development but I would be the one speaking first if I did so I don't" (28).

I got the impression that Billy has Asperger's. In his restricted and repetitive interest in the animal kingdom, he demonstrates one of the most striking features of Asperger Syndrome. He uses his knowledge of animals to interpret virtually (*vertically* in Billy's parlance) all human interaction. He compares people of animals: for example, his mother is a prairie dog because "She's never tiring" and his father is a leopard for a number of reasons, among which is that "you shouldn't ever get between a leopard and its cubs" (7). Some of Billy's comparisons are very astute, perhaps too astute for such a young child.

Jim, the father, earns the reader's sympathy. He finds himself in a situation that quickly spirals out of control. The novel clearly shows how things can easily be misinterpreted. I cringed when Billy tells of his father's lesson on the use of swear words (182 – 185) because I could well imagine the reaction if child protection services became aware of it. The way in which the relationship between father and son is developed is wonderful; in particular, Billy's constant repeating of what his father has told him indicates how close the two of them are. However, the way that Jim chooses to deal with the situation in which he finds himself is not convincing. He only makes matters worse for everyone. When one considers that he works in communications, his behaviour is all the more unrealistic, despite Billy's assertion that "Yes, communication is extremely hard" (145).

Although the ending is anti-climactic and the characterization of a six-year-old is not always credible, the book does examine contentious issues such as the spanking of children and the (over?)reaction of child protection officials in some cases.

**Please check out my reader's blog (<http://schatjesshelves.blogspot.ca/>) and follow me on Twitter (@DCYakabuski).**

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## Margi says

As a parent we all fear that moment our child runs out into traffic. Billy, the protagonist of this story is 6



years old and by running out into the street, he sets off a vicious cycle of consequences. Billy not understanding the situation, and being angry at his father for "telling on him", tells a social worker that his father "abuses him". This leads to involvement with social services and finally the father leaving the home. It is such a sad story of a small child miscommunicating what happened to adults. I did not love this book, but I did find it hard to put down for some reason. Billy is a compelling character and at times his story is sad and at times it is very funny. It is interesting being the adult reading this story from Billy's six-year-old perspective. Billy can't see the damage he is doing but we as the reader can certainly see it. It is similar to *One Foot Wrong* by Sofie Laguna and *Room* by Emma Donoghue both being written from the child's point of view.

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