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Opal Plumstead by Jacqueline Wilson

Publisher: Random House Childrens

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Opal is a clever, outspoken young Edwardian woman who, as a result of winning a scholarship, is studying at a posh school. She doesn't fit into the privileged world of her wealthy classmates, but she is determined to do well and continue on to university - which is unusual for women living in the early 1900s.

Unfortunately, Opal's dreams are crushed when her respectable father commits a crime and ends up in prison. Although her proud mother takes on menial work it is poorly paid and Cassy, her older sister, doesn't earn wages as a milliner's apprentice.

To support the family, fourteen-year-old Opal leaves school to work in a sweet factory which she loathes. As the newcomer, she is bullied by some of the other girls who resent her education. However, she does admire the factory manager who is a strong supporter of the suffragette movement and an advocate for women gaining the right to vote.

The years prior to the First World War are a time of change as people begin to shrug off restrictive social behaviour and moral constraints.

Many women are eager to assert their rights and be seen as equal to men. Opal grows up quickly when she finds herself caught up in the excitement and contradictions of the new society.

This is the 100th book by the much-loved UK author. It's a fascinating glimpse into the turbulent years prior to the First World War and its sobering aftermath. How plucky Opal Plumstead copes with the challenges and changes in her life will intrigue young teenage readers and give them an understanding of Edwardian times.

Reviewed by children's author Jean Bennett

Author's website:

www.jacquelinewilson.co.uk

