

## *Hard Copy* by Fien Veldman

### About this book

A young Dutch woman from a rough neighborhood has accomplished her life's goal: get out of there. To do so, she's gotten a customer service office job for a nondescript startup and lives alone in a studio apartment in a touristy town. Now, with little direction and a great deal of anxiety, she struggles to live in a world she feels foreign in, despite ostensibly speaking the language(s) and having the right color passport.

Over the course of *Hard Copy*, we meet this young woman's co-workers, city passersby, and greatest friend: the office printer that she gently coaxes to spit out the letters she mails for work. Despite her difficulty connecting with other human beings, the young woman has no trouble conversing with the creaking machine, and slowly divulges the awful, interconnected series of events that defined her childhood.

Unfortunately, her co-workers can also hear her . . . and that complicates things.

*Please note: Hard Copy delves quite seriously, though not graphically, into child sexual abuse and the lifelong consequences thereof, to both the abused party and the community the abuse takes place in. Please be mindful of other members of your group as you discuss!*

### For discussion

1. On page 5 of the physical book, the narrator says about tourists, "They should know: this city belongs to me." What does she mean by this? Do you have feelings like this about where you live (or about anything else)?
2. The primary narrator of *Hard Copy* is between twenty-five and thirty, and the book was originally published in 2023. How do you think that plays into her attitude about the world? Consider not just her age, but also what world events she would have experienced and the changes to work culture that have happened in her lifetime.
3. Discuss the narrator's allergy to stress. What do you think this allergy symbolizes?
4. The narrator turns to her printer as a source of connection in a white-collar world where she feels like an outsider. Do you ever feel alienated in this way? What do you look to for support when you do?
5. The narrator never uses names for herself or the other characters in her present-day life.
  - a. Did this make it more difficult for you to connect to her or the other characters?
  - b. What does it say about the narrator's ability to connect with other people?
6. There is an ongoing theme of natural disasters in *Hard Copy* at several layers of reality: the historical (volcano), the dreamed (tsunami), the real (lightning strikes).
  - a. How does author Fien Veldman use these disasters to set the tone of her story?
  - b. How do man-made disasters (both the acute, elemental car fire and the chronic, human sexual abuse of a minor) fit in with their natural counterparts?
7. During a meeting with a career coach, the narrator says she has to "put [her] most normal foot forward" in order to be reunited with her printer.
  - a. What does putting her most normal foot forward mean in this context?
  - b. Have you ever had to do the same thing? How did it feel?

8. On page 148, the narrator states, “I am much more decisive with other people’s problems than my own.” Have you experienced this? How and where?
9. In the third chapter, the story’s perspective shifts to a new character.
  - a. What does this shift in perspective tell you about the primary narrator?
  - b. Does it change how reliable you find her narration?
  - c. How did it feel to have it confirmed that the narrator’s relationship with the printer wasn’t just in her imagination?
10. Discuss the narrative and symbolic roles of some of the weighty but indistinct characters in *Hard Copy* (e.g., the garbage man, the narrator’s best friend, Marketing / the Invader, Product, the narrator’s neighbor).
11. What does it mean to you that the relationships the narrator’s feels most positively about (the printer, the garbage man) are with, respectively, an object and someone outside her corporate ecosystem?

**Recommended reading (or similar books!)**

- ***Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer**: A surreal sci-fi novel, similarly written in first person and without named characters.
- ***Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke**: A strange, magical exploration of identity and exploitation with a similarly slowly revealed history.
- ***Life Under “The Ghetto Law”* by Erlend Sandøy**: An essay comic about life and access in a low-income public housing neighborhood in Denmark. (Please note that this comic is about Denmark, *not* the Netherlands—but both countries are praised for their plentiful social resources in similar ways.) [[thenib.com/life-under-the-ghetto-law](https://thenib.com/life-under-the-ghetto-law)]
- ***No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood**: A meditation on human connection and creativity in the age of social media, written by a poet and X/Twitter-famous cat owner.