

ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About Kate Morton

Kate Morton is the eldest of three sisters. She was born in South Australia and moved with her family numerous times before settling, finally, on Tamborine Mountain. There she attended a tiny country school and spent much of her childhood inventing and playing games of make-believe with her sisters.

She fell avidly in love with books very early, learning to read before she started school. Her favourites were those by Enid Blyton, and Kate escaped many times up the Faraway Tree or with the Famous Five into smuggler's cove. It was a love deeply felt, for it is still mysteries and secrets that dance around the edges of Kate's mind, keeping her awake deep into the night, turning or typing pages.

When she finished school, Kate studied and earned a Licentiate in Speech and Drama from Trinity College London. After an ill-fated attempt to 'do something sensible' and obtain an Arts/Law degree, she went on to complete a summer Shakespeare course at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and for sometime believed her future lay in theatre. Until one day, quite simply and clearly, she realised that it wasn't performing she was in love with. It was words.

Although she'd read and scribbled from before she could remember, it hadn't occurred to Kate, until that time, that real books were written by real people. She began writing in earnest and completed two full length manuscripts (which lie deep and determinedly within a bottom drawer) before settling finally into the story that would become *The Shifting Fog*.

Concurrently, Kate enrolled in a degree in English Literature at the University of Queensland, graduating with First Class Honours. On that basis she won a scholarship and proceeded to complete a Masters degree focusing on tragedy in Victorian literature. Kate is currently enrolled in a PhD program researching contemporary novels that marry elements of gothic and mystery fiction.

Kate is married to Davin, a composer, and they have a young son. All three live together in a nineteenth-century home replete with its own ghosts and secrets.

The Shifting Fog has been published in many countries around the world and, as *The House at Riverton*, was a number one bestseller in the UK. It will be published in the US in April 2008.

On writing *The Shifting Fog*—Kate Morton

The Shifting Fog is a story about a very old woman with a very old secret. She looks back across the twentieth century to recall a terrible event in her youth, an event to which she was the only witness and which history has remembered incorrectly.

People often say that you should write what you know, but I believe you should write what you love—there's always research for things you're not sure of. I despise being hot and yet I live in Brisbane—over thirty degrees Celsius

for most of the year—so escaping day after day into the wintry halls and rooms of my very own manor house in Edwardian England, with snow falling outside, kissing the window panes, and fire flickering in the grate, was sheer heaven.

For me, settings are as important to novels as are characters. Aside from providing vivid visual locations, I think settings should contribute to stories, reflect them in some way. In *The Shifting Fog* the house is a character. The book is set in a historical period of huge transition—Queen Victoria had died, and with her, old certainties were consigned to the grave: the aristocratic system began to crumble, the cash-strapped gentry was displaced by a new type of upper class made powerful by money rather than by birth, humanity suffered battle on a scale undreamt of, and women were freed somewhat from rigid pre-existing expectations of social function. Because my characters had to move in that sort of social quicksand, I wanted Riverton to reflect it. Therefore, the house is teetering on the brink, about to begin its slide from grandeur into decline. The wallpapers are getting shabby, the army of Victorian servants has been whittled to a trusty band of reliable domestics, the smaller fountain in the lower garden is losing the tiles from its rim...

Though *The Shifting Fog* revolves around an event that occurred in the past, it was very important to me to tether the past storyline to the present. Therefore, the novel isn't situated abstractly in history; its movement into the past is motivated always by the memories of its narrator. Ninety-eight year old Grace is a strong character, a survivor; clear-thinking, unsentimental, independent and intelligent. And though the nation's larger history of aristocratic decay, world war, and cultural imperialism is implicated in Grace's story, it is her private drama of duty, betrayal, and guilt that takes the fore.

The character of Grace came to me fully formed. She was real to me from the beginning and I missed her incredibly when I was finished writing. Though Grace isn't based on any one person, I was fortunate to spend a lot of time with my Nana Connelly (whose talent for shorthand inspired part of the story) and my husband's grandmother in the final years of their lives. I noticed how invisible the elderly sometimes become, and was constantly amazed at the way people with such great wisdom and experience, who have loved and lost and lived such a long time, are so often infantilized and dismissed in our society. I'm also lucky to have friends who are much older than I am, to whom I could speak, and from whom I could draw traits for Grace. For instance, I got the idea for Grace's taped letters to her grandson Marcus from my dear friend Herbert Davies whose handwriting is so completely indecipherable that he communicates with distant family members via cassette.

In *The Shifting Fog*, Grace's tapes take a confessional form as her recorded letters becomes increasingly focused on the time she spent as a servant at Riverton Manor: in particular, her relationship with the Hartford sisters, Hannah and Emmeline, and the terrible event she witnessed by the Riverton lake in 1924. It seemed plausible to me that a woman nearing the end of her life, who was at a stage of laying ghosts to rest, might be induced, finally, to give up a life-long secret. However, I knew the trigger would have to be something quite strong—after all, Grace has managed to keep her secret for a very long time.

Then one morning I came across a newspaper article by Al Alvarez in which he spoke about the surreal experience of having an aspect of his life represented on film. He had been a friend and peer to Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, and had been invited to look at the film set of Sylvia and meet the actor playing him. The article gave me great

insight into how strange it would be to see a scene from one's past re-created in such a way: Al Alvarez said it was as eerie as reading one's own obituary.

The more I thought about it, the better I liked the idea of a filmmaker contacting Grace. The film itself seemed possible: my character Robbie was a well-known poet (like Plath) who had died by his own hand (also like Plath) and around whom, it seemed reasonable to presume, a cult of mythology might have formed. It was also a convenient way of showing things that Grace couldn't possibly have seen (like the boys going to war.) Most importantly, it seemed plausible that the chance to visit the set of such a film would prove irresistible to most people, even someone like Grace who had tried so hard to escape the past. It seemed the perfect way of bringing Grace's ghosts back to haunt her. And those ghosts were beginning to take shape in my mind...

The writing itself took about a year. I'm a dedicated plotter and planner: I don't mind changing my mind as I go, but I like to know what I'm writing towards. The advantage to plotting, is that when I sit down at the computer I always know what I have to do. A plan isn't always a guarantee that the words will flow, but it does cut down the hours spent gazing at a blank screen, and the frustrating false starts. Also, because I wrote *The Shifting Fog* with a small baby, I was necessarily disciplined: it's incredible how only having an eighty minute nap cycle in which to write focuses the mind and discourages procrastination!

Q&A with Kate Morton

How did you come up with the idea for *The Shifting Fog*? We're assuming there isn't an autobiographical element to the story... or is there?!

Well, there was that time... no, you'll have to wait for the memoir to know the truth!

The first part of the story that came to me was an image: a young man on the edge of a dark lake on the night of a grand 1920s English country party. In the background a jazz band is playing, people are laughing, fireworks are exploding in the sky. The young man closes his eyes, a gun sounds, and then the image fades to black. The only witnesses are two sisters whose loyalties and envies drive the narrative. I knew this scene was the climax of the story; I also knew there was more to the young man's death than met the eye.

Rather than set my entire novel in the past, I really wanted to tether it to the present. I heard Grace's voice in my mind very early on, and I knew she was going to be my narrator: someone who had seen what really happened on the lake and knew what history had forgotten. I love reading confessional narratives and have always wanted to write one. I'm drawn to the idea that a person might keep a secret their entire life only to have the memories triggered quite unexpectedly. In fact, when my grandmother died and we were packing away her house, we came across an exercise book full of shorthand (Nana was a shorthand champion during the 1930s). Obsessed with mysteries and secrets as I am, I was certain the coded notebook must be a confession. Something she hadn't been able to tell any of us when she was alive. What could it be, I wondered? What could be so terrible? My mind raced ahead, concocting all manner of exciting, dreadful, shocking possibilities... So even though Nana's shorthand translated as various pages from the television guide (she'd wanted an activity to keep her mind nimble!!) it had, at

least, given me some ideas for my book!

It took me weeks to figure out what really happened to Robbie, my young man on the dark lake edge. When I realised I was shocked, and yet I knew it was the truth. That's when I was finally ready to let Grace start telling her story.

The novel is part of a fine tradition of English country house romance and mystery novels – were there specific authors or books that particularly inspired the story?

Absolutely. Daphne du Maurier's novels and those by the Bronte sisters are great favourites of mine. I also love *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, *The Pursuit of Love* by Nancy Mitford, and *A Fatal Inversion* by Barbara Vine, to name but a few. Not all of those are mysteries, but they all take place in wonderful English country houses. I love stories in which the house is more than a setting, becoming a character in its own right.

In writing my own English country house mystery, I was keen to play with the conventions of the genre a little. That's why I made Marcus a mystery writer, and gave Grace a penchant for mystery novels, in particular those by Agatha Christie: the quintessential English country house mystery novelist! It was a lot of fun to have Agatha Christie come to dinner in my story!

I was inspired also by English country house non-fiction: in particular, I went through a great fascination with the Mitford sisters. Everything I read about the Mitford family seemed brighter than fiction. I was especially interested in the depiction of a great aristocratic family on the verge of decline. Their genteel poverty was a revelation to me and something I was very keen to incorporate into my story, and my depiction of the house at Riverton.

What kind of research did you undertake in the process of writing the novel?

It's amazing the disparate topics a writer needs to research in the course of writing one book: the early British film industry (what sort of studio might Philippe be working in?); river barges (what did they look like? How much room was there on board? How did people access the Thames?); society debuts (how might an aristocratic family without much money debut their daughters?); horticulture (what might be flowering in Essex in summer?); theatrical history (which play might Alfred invite Grace to attend in 1922?). Some research areas can be anticipated from the beginning of the project, other subjects crop up unexpectedly.

I believe there are two types of research that writers undertake: conscious and unconscious. The former is self-explanatory: you know the information you are looking for, and set out to find it. My favourite type of research is the latter. That's when I immerse myself in books/letters/memoirs related to the period and presume that some of it will become important to me later. The best thing about that sort of research is you're never wasting time because it all helps get a feel for the milieu, and you never know when a piece of information is going to solve a plot problem you haven't even encountered yet!

When I was researching *The Shifting Fog* I read all sorts of books: social, cultural and personal histories. My favourite types are autobiographies, memoirs and biographies. The best of those breathe life into a forgotten time. Two such memoirs are Frances Donaldson's *Child of the Twenties* and Beverley Nichols's *The Sweet and Twenties*. Nichols's

memoir not only brings to life the world of the 1920s society-darlings and literati, it is written retrospectively, giving additional insight into how someone who had lived through the time might perceive it from decades later, after the horrors of the second world war.

Personal letters are also excellent historical sources. One of my favourite anthologies contains the complete communication between Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh—two such sparkling wits—providing entertaining and vibrant evidence of the way certain people thought and spoke and behaved in the period. I also found resources like *Punch* magazine an excellent way of observing the social mores of the decade without having them filtered through the lens of twenty-first century scholarship.

As an author, what's your take on the reading group phenomenon, and why do you think your book holds such appeal to them?

I think reading groups give people the opportunity to do what booklovers enjoy more than anything else: first, to read books; second, to discuss, argue and enthuse about books. Reading is a solitary activity, but reading groups turn it into a shared experience. When I finished reading Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, no one I knew had read it. I was so desperate to speak to someone else who was privy to its wonderful, unexpected conclusion, that I ran straight up the road to my local book store so I could rave with the owner. That's the spirit that informs reading groups: reading is one of life's great pleasures, talking about books keeps their worlds alive for longer.

I think reading groups like to read books that make them think, but not at the expense of a strong story. Life is too short to read books whose cleverness makes them impenetrable. A good book should keep you awake at night, flicking through the pages as you promise yourself just one more chapter: they shouldn't put you to sleep as you tackle a paragraph for the fifth time.

Have you imagined who would play the main characters in *The Shifting Fog* if it were made into a film?

Of course!! Though it's actually very difficult to cast your own book: the characters become so real in your mind when you're writing, that it's hard to see them being played by anyone other than themselves! Hannah and Robbie, in particular, I have real difficulty casting. For old Grace, I'd be delighted to see any of the great English dames in the role. And I can't help but look for roles for Kate Winslet and Cate Blanchett in everything I write, because I think they're such wonderful actresses.

Can you tell us anything about what you're working on next?

I certainly can. I've just finished my second book which will be published by Allen & Unwin in 2008. Once again, I've painted with a palette of history, mystery and memory. It's about a girl called Cassandra whose grandmother, Nell, dies, leaving a deep dark secret in her wake: she was not the biological child of her parents, but a foundling, discovered on a coastal port when she was four years old. In Nell's will is concealed a second surprise: a mysterious cottage in Cornwall of which she had never spoken. Cassandra heads off to England, armed with the suitcase that was found with little Nell on the wharf, and a few clues—including an old book of fairy tales written by a Victorian authoress—in order to discover who her grandmother really was.

Reviews

'an extraordinary debut...written with a lovely turn of phrase by someone who knows how to eke out tantalizing secrets and drama.' – *The Sunday Telegraph*, July 2006

'A brilliant debut...a rich historical setting with a powerful emotional drama—and a gripping mystery...Full of lovely writing, grand houses, snobbery, cruelty and passion...utterly addictive.' – *The Australian Women's Weekly*, July 2006.

'an extremely accomplished mystery story spanning almost a century...a haunting and enthralling book...exquisite.' – *Good Reading*, Australia 2006.

'rich historical fiction with plenty of period charm' – *Australian Bookseller and Publisher*, 2006

'a compelling read' – *Good Morning Show*, TVOne, New Zealand

'A stunning must-read story that's set for stardom' – *Woman's Day*, Australia, 2006

'[an] accomplished murder-mystery...engrossing' – *Paradise* magazine, *Gold Coast Bulletin* newspaper, Australia, 2006

'an enthralling tale about the extremes people will go to for love and in the name of duty' – *Notebook*, Australia

Some suggested points for discussion

☞ Do you think of *The Shifting Fog* as a tragic novel? How are the characters' tragic outcomes caused by the incompatibility of what they want and who they are?

☞ How important to the novel's outcome is Grace's longing for a sister? Yet when Grace finds out about her true parentage she chooses not to tell Hannah. Why? Is it the right decision? Would things have ended differently had she done otherwise?

☞ Kate Morton has said that the novel's setting is as important to her as its characters, that Riverton Manor is as much a character of the book as its inhabitants. Do you agree? Does Riverton mirror the fates of the Hartford family and the aristocracy in general? If so, in what way/s?

☞ The first world war was a catalyst for enormous social and cultural change. Not a character in *The Shifting Fog* is left untouched by this event. Whose life is most altered? Why?

☞ Is there a heroine in *The Shifting Fog*? If so, who is it and why?

☞ Grace and Robbie are both illegitimate children of upper-class parents, however their lives and opportunities are vastly different. Why?

☞ Duty is very important to the youthful Grace. Did Grace's sense of duty contribute to the novel's conclusion?

If so, how? Would things have turned out better for the characters if Grace had made different decisions?

☞ One of the main themes of *The Shifting Fog* is the haunting of the present by the past. In what ways does the novel suggest that the past can never be escaped? Do you agree that our pasts are inescapable?

☞ Grace has resisted ever telling anyone about the events at Riverton. Why? What makes her change her mind? Is Grace a reliable narrator? Given her motive for recording her memories, can we trust her?

☞ The twentieth century was a period of great and accelerated social change. In particular, the historical years that make up the bulk of Grace's memories comprised a time of enormous transition. In what ways does Grace's life exemplify these social changes?

☞ Despite their differences, how might Grace and Hannah be seen as 'doubles'? How does Grace's relationship with Alfred mirror Hannah's relationship with Robbie?

☞ Another theme in *The Shifting Fog* is that of inheritance. The way we are bound to our families through various items that are passed between the generations. Along with material inheritances, we are also subject to physical, social and psychological legacies. These inheritances are important in making us who we are and are not easily escaped. In what way is this notion explored in *The Shifting Fog*? How do these various types of inheritance influence the lives of Hannah, Frederick, Teddy, Robbie, Grace, Jemima, Simion?

☞ What might the novel's title mean?

Further reading

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

Atonement by Ian McEwan

The Pursuit of Love by Nancy Mitford

Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh