

The Secret Keeper

By Kate Morton

Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **The Secret Keeper** includes an introduction, discussion questions, suggested reading and a Q&A with author **Kate Morton**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

1961: On a sweltering summer's day, while her family picnics by the stream on their Suffolk farm, sixteen-year-old Laurel hides out in her childhood tree house dreaming of a boy called Billy, a move to London, and the bright future she can't wait to seize. But before the idyllic afternoon is over, Laurel will have witnessed a shocking crime that changes everything. 2011: Now a much-loved actress, Laurel finds herself overwhelmed by shades of the past. Haunted by memories, and the mystery of what she saw that day, she returns to her family home and begins to piece together a secret history. A tale of three strangers from vastly different worlds—Dorothy, Vivien, and Jimmy—who are brought together by chance in wartime London and whose lives become fiercely and fatefully entwined. Shifting between the 1930s, the 1960s, and the present, *The Secret Keeper* is a spellbinding story of mysteries and secrets, theatre and thievery, murder and enduring love.

About the Author

Kate Morton grew up in the mountains of southeast Queensland and lives now with her husband and young sons in Brisbane. She has degrees in dramatic art and English literature, specializing in nineteenth-century tragedy and contemporary gothic novels. With just three novels published, Kate Morton has sold more than 7 million copies in twenty-six languages, across thirty-eight countries. The *Shifting Fog*, published internationally as *The House at Riverton*, *The Forgotten Garden*, and *The Distant Hours* have all been #1 bestsellers around the world. Each novel won the Australian Book Industry award for General Fiction Book of the Year. You can find more information about Kate Morton and her books at KateMorton.com or facebook.com/KateMortonAuthor.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Each of Kate Morton's four novels are securely anchored in their strong sense of time and place. In *The Secret Keeper*, World War II is a rich and realistic environment—close enough for memory but a long way from our twenty-first century lives—which allows the author to show both the frailty and courage of human nature. Discuss.

2. The rusted-on loyalties of family members to each other are key in this novel. Do you think Dolly's feelings of unease about her own family contribute to her love of playing make-believe?
3. Laurel had never thought to ask her mother about her life before Dorothy met Stephen Nicolson. And it's impossible for Dolly to imagine Lady Caldicott being young and beautiful wearing those glorious dresses now going musty in the dressing room. And Jimmy's dad loves to tell his stories of the past. How is ageing portrayed in *The Secret Keeper*?
4. Many readers have commented on how extremely likeable Jimmy is—how has Kate Morton developed his character to make him so?
5. Do you think that *The Secret Keeper's* characters live the lives they deserve? Were you satisfied and surprised at their various outcomes and their influences on each other?
6. Once you understood Dorothy's reasons for committing that violent action at the end of chapter one, did you find any moral ambiguity in her behaviour? Did she really have a choice?
7. Everyone has their secrets. *The Secret Keeper*, some more than others! Do you think Laurel is justified in upturning her mother's carefully laid secrets? When is keeping a secret within a family justified?

Suggested Reading

Jane Eyre - Charlotte Bronte

The Forgotten Garden - Kate Morton

I Capture the Castle - Dodie Smith

Few Eggs and No Oranges - Vere Hodgson

In Falling Snow – Mary-Rose MacColl

A Conversation with Kate Morton

Writers often say they've been writing since they were children. Is that the case for you?

I've always been a reader, but I didn't start writing until I was in my twenties. I read voraciously as a child and loved English class in school, but it didn't occur to me for a moment that an ordinary person could become a published writer. When I finished school, after a brief and ill-fated attempt to study law, I took up acting until a chance comment by a friend encouraged me to try writing a book. From the first instant, I knew I'd found the thing I was meant to do. Writing and acting are similar—they both involve telling stories and transporting other people to a different place—but as a writer I'm able to inhabit the whole of my fictional world, rather than

just one role, and I can do it whenever and wherever I choose. For an introspective person who enjoys observing more than performing, it was a much better fit.

What else are you passionate about?

Writing brings me enormous pleasure and affords me wonderful opportunities to travel and learn and express my ideas, so I don't have a great need for many other hobbies. When I'm not writing I love doing simple things: being with my close friends and family, enjoying good food, sunshine, rain, gardens, music, and laughter. I'm also interested in all forms of artistic expression—painting, sketching (I collect illustrations from children's picture books), dancing, filmmaking, photography, and, of course, music. My husband is a pianist, and my children both sing all the time, so I'm blessed to have a lot of music in my house.

What about books that have been influential on your writing?

As a child I fell in love with Enid Blyton and Trixie Belden books, so I spent a lot of time climbing the Faraway tree or solving mysteries with the Famous Five. Then at university I wrote my Masters thesis on tragedy in English Victorian novels, and when I look back now I consider that their complex structures must have influenced my own multi-layered stories. I've also always loved gothic novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, and my own work shares a certain sensibility with them (a focus on secrets, confessions, entrapment, old buildings that become a character in the novel). Today, I'm an eclectic reader, and have as much nonfiction (mostly about history and people) on my shelves as I do fiction.

Can you elaborate on how your novels draw from the Victorian gothic novels?

My books have similarities to Victorian novels: they are multi-layered with numerous characters and time periods and settings, and I put a lot of time into creating a very detailed fictional world. I always include a contemporary storyline, though, because I'm far more interested in the relationship between the present and the past—the idea that the past and its secrets are always with us—than I am by the historical aspect on its own.

When you are writing in your study, do you imagine what your very large audience will think about a character or an incident?

I'm enormously grateful that my books are read and enjoyed by other people, but I've come to believe that it's a mistake to write for anyone but myself: readers can tell whether or not an author's heart and soul is in the pages of their stories.

Storytelling is, by its nature, an inclusive enterprise though, and in genres like mine, in which the story revolves around tricks and mysteries and puzzles, it sometimes feels as if I'm playing a game with my reader. When I have a good idea, I catch myself smiling and thinking: "Yes! My reader is going to love that twist."

No matter how many readers I have, though, it's always a relationship of

two that I imagine: me with a single reader. One of the most astonishing and wonderful things about books is the way a writer gets to tell their story to one person at a time over and over again.

Do you ever think of writing novels that sit outside your genre?

That's an interesting question; indeed, my first success as a writer came only after I'd thrown away everything I knew about genres and what other authors were doing, every expectation of publication, and just wrote what pleased me.

When I started work on *The Shifting Fog*, I'd just had my first son and had already had two manuscripts turned down by publishers. I decided that I wasn't going to be a published author and wrote simply for pleasure. I didn't think for a moment there'd be anyone else out there in the world who was interested in the same eclectic mix of ideas as I was, and I'm still not exactly sure what genre it is that I write.

I don't think writers choose their genre, I think the genre chooses the writer. Long, multilayered novels, set partly in the present and partly in the past, with secrets and mysteries at their core, seem the natural way for me to tell a story, and I'm not sure I'd know how to do it any other way.

Your novels always have women as their protagonists—is that a conscious decision on your part?

I tend to write about women because that's a very natural way for me to tell stories. I grew up with two sisters and I'm very close to my mother, so the female character is one I understand well. I'm interested too, in the way women have operated historically as social creatures, their public behavior often masking their private worlds. For a writer, the opportunity to explore what lies beneath is irresistible! Further, in the historical strands of my novels, I enjoy being able to depict lives that are led largely in the domestic sphere because this arena has been less well-explored by historians who tend to favour the (traditionally male-dominated) theatres of war and politics and public life.