

The Secret Keeper

Kate Morton

Author Background

- Birth—1976
- Where—Berri, South Australia
- Education—B.A., and M.A., University of Queensland
- Currently—lives in Australia

Kate Morton is the eldest of three sisters. Her family moved several times before settling on Tamborine Mountain where she attended a small country school. She enjoyed reading books from an early age, her favourites being those by Enid Blyton.

She completed a Licentiate in Speech and in Drama from Trinity College London and then a summer Shakespeare course at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Later she earned first-class honours for her English Literature degree at the University of Queensland, during which time she wrote two full-length manuscripts (which are unpublished) before writing the story that would become the 2006 novel *The Shifting Fog* (*The House at Riverton*).

Following this she obtained a scholarship and completed a Master's degree focussing on tragedy in Victorian literature. She is currently enrolled in a PhD program researching contemporary novels that marry elements of gothic and mystery fiction.

Morton's novels have been published in 38 countries and sold three million copies. *The House at Riverton* was a *Sunday Times* #1 bestseller in the UK in 2007 and a *New York Times* bestseller in 2008. *The House at Riverton* won General Fiction Book of the Year at the 2007 Australian Book Industry Awards, and *The House at Riverton* was nominated for Most Popular Book at the British Book Awards in 2008. Her second book, *The Forgotten Garden*, was a #1 bestseller in Australia and a *Sunday Times* #1 bestseller in the UK in 2008. In 2010, Morton's third novel, *The Distant Hours*, was released.

Kate Morton is married to Davin, a jazz musician and composer, and they have two sons.
(Adapted from Wikipedia.)





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Book Summary

The Secret Keeper

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Simon & Schuster

496 pp.

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From the *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author of *The Distant Hours*, *The Forgotten Garden*, and *The House at Riverton*, a spellbinding new novel filled with mystery, thievery, murder, and enduring love.

During a summer party at the family farm in the English countryside, sixteen-year-old Laurel Nicolson has escaped to her childhood tree house and is happily dreaming of the future. She spies a stranger coming up the long road to the farm and watches as her mother speaks to him. Before the afternoon is over, Laurel will witness a shocking crime. A crime that challenges everything she knows about her family and especially her mother, Dorothy—her vivacious, loving, nearly perfect mother.

Now, fifty years later, Laurel is a successful and well-regarded actress living in London. The family is gathering at Greenacres farm for Dorothy's ninetieth birthday. Realizing that this may be her last chance, Laurel searches for answers to the questions that still haunt her from that long-ago day, answers that can only be found in Dorothy's past.

Dorothy's story takes the reader from pre-WWII England through the blitz, to the '60s and beyond. It is the secret history of three strangers from vastly different worlds—Dorothy, Vivien, and Jimmy—who meet by chance in wartime London and whose lives are forever entwined. *The Secret Keeper* explores longings and dreams and the unexpected consequences they sometimes bring. It is an unforgettable story of lovers and friends, deception and passion that is told—in Morton's signature style—against a backdrop of events that changed the world..

(From the publisher.)

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Reviews

Classic Morton: 16-year-old Laurel Nicolson sits dreaming away in her childhood tree house when she spies her mother speaking to an unknown man. Later, Laurel witnesses a terrible crime. But it's not until 50 years have passed that she can ask her mother the pertinent questions—which leads to a story involving three strangers in wartime London. Morton's best-selling work is always classy and nuanced; great for reading groups

Library Journal

A daughter refuses to let her mother take a grim **secret** to the grave. In 1961, Laurel, a teenager sulking in a treehouse, sees her mother kill a man with a knife intended for her infant brother's birthday cake. During the ensuing investigation, the police question Laurel, who leaves out a crucial detail. Just before her mother stabbed him, the man had said, "Hello, Dorothy. It's been a long time." Dorothy is cleared--the man is presumed to be a wanted pervert whom she killed in self-defence, and the Nicholson family life goes on as before, with Dorothy, husband Stephen and their five children enjoying life in their bucolic farmhouse. An early flashback reveals that Dorothy may have had a shady past, which induced her to flee London in 1941, at the urging of her friend Vivien, who was subsequently killed in the Blitz. In 2011, Dorothy is close to death. Laurel, now a famous actress in her 60s, embarks on a quest to learn the truth about the homicide. First, she learns that her mother's victim, Henry Jenkins, had once been a prominent writer who fell from grace. Flashbacks from Dorothy's POV and Laurel's research reveal that during the war, Dorothy, whose family was killed by German bombs, attempts to befriend her fellow war-work volunteer, the somewhat aloof Vivien, an heiress who was also orphaned when a car crash claimed her parents and siblings in Australia. But Vivien is married to the controlling, jealousy-prone Jenkins, an author who's also involved in intelligence work for the government. When Vivien inexplicably insults her, Dorothy assumes that slander from Vivien also caused Lady Gwendolyn, Dorothy's late employer, to deny her a hoped-for inheritance. Together with her fiancé, the talented and sensitive photographer Jimmy, Dorothy plots revenge in the form of blackmail, threatening to give Jenkins evidence of Vivien's infidelity. Despite some improbable developments, the suspense mounts throughout, culminating in a shocking twist. **Morton's** finesse with family secrets increases with each novel.

Kirkus Reviews

Australian Morton's (*The Distant Hours*, 2010) latest will appeal to fans of Daphne du Maurier, Susanna Kearsley, and Audrey Niffenegger with its immensely relatable characters, passion, mystery, and twist ending. Laurel Nicholson is a teenager when she witnesses a shocking crime: her gentle, kind mother, Dorothy, kills a man. It becomes a family secret that Laurel never divulges or tries to fathom until five decades later, when Dorothy is on her deathbed, and Laurel finds a photograph of her mother with an old friend, snapped back in 1941, when Dorothy was barely out of her teens. As Laurel begins to dig, her burning questions become. Who was Vivien Jenkins, and why was she once so important to Dorothy? With the narrative

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Reviews (continued)

shifting between Laurel, Dorothy, Vivien, and Jimmy, a man who also profoundly affected Dorothy's life long ago, both reader and Laurel breathlessly hurtle into an astounding family secret that unfolds slowly and temptingly. Despite some loose threads and rather too leisurely pacing, this is likely to keep readers reading into the wee hours.

Booklist

Laurel Nicolson's life is forever altered one afternoon where she is hiding out in her family's treehouse. While hiding out, she observes her mother, Dorothy, speaking to a man that he has never seen before. What comes next is very out of character for Laurel's mother and in turn, Laurel witnesses a crime. Laurel has kept this secret for many, many years and she starts to remember that life-altering day at her parent's farm when she returns for her mother's birthday. She tries to figure out what exactly happened on that day, but her mother is slowly losing her wits and isn't giving her many clues. While visiting Green Acres Farm, she finds a photograph of her mother with someone she has never met before and Laurel knows that perhaps this could be a clue. Perhaps there is more to her mother's life than Laurel knows and she is determined to figure it all out. Kate Morton's *The Secret Keeper* is a page-turner which combines my favourite elements in a story: a good mystery, family drama, romance, and a dark secret.

Morton is a tremendous storyteller. I've come to really trust her as a writer and even though the first half part of the book may seem confusing or not related, readers must trust her as it will all make sense soon enough. Just as I did in *The Distant Hours*, I trusted her again and I am SO glad I did. Morton weaved a beautiful tale in *The Secret Keeper*; it was the kind of story that makes me LOVE reading.

Part of *The Secret Keeper's* plot is set during WWII, which makes for an exciting tale. The other part is present day and I loved how Morton expertly combined the two. The point of view also varies from Dorothy to Laurel and includes flashbacks, which also adds to the suspenseful plot. Readers will desperately try to piece together the mystery of what truly happened on that fateful day. However, Morton doesn't give us too much information all at once, which again, adds to the mystery.

It's not often that I am tricked when it comes to a good mystery. I can usually figure part of it out, but Morton fooled me and I was pleasantly surprised it. By the end of *The Secret Keeper*, I couldn't believe the outcome and was so impressed by Morton's skills.

With that said, I don't want to give away too much of the plot, but I'm sure you can tell I loved this book. Fans of Morton and a good mystery must pick up *The Secret Keeper* this fall. I guarantee you'll will be guessing what on earth happened that day at Green Acres Farm and will be thinking about the outcome long after you've closed the book.

Confessions of a book addict

The Secret Keeper

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Discussion Questions

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?
(Questions issued by publisher.)