



The forgotten garden

By Kate Morton

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Genre & subjects

Domestic Fiction

English and Australian Fiction

Synopsis

A tiny girl is abandoned on a ship headed for Australia in 1913. She arrives completely alone with nothing but a small suitcase containing a few clothes and a single book - a beautiful volume of fairy tales. She is taken in by the dockmaster and his wife and raised as their own.

On her twenty-first birthday they tell her the truth, and with her sense of self shattered and with very little to go on, "Nell" sets out on a journey to England to try to trace her story, to find her real identity. Her quest leads her to Blackhurst Manor on the Cornish coast and the secrets of the doomed Mountrachet family. But it is not until her granddaughter, Cassandra, takes up the search after Nell's death that all the pieces of the puzzle are assembled. At Cliff Cottage, on the grounds of Blackhurst Manor, Cassandra discovers the forgotten garden of the book's title and is able to unlock the secrets of the beautiful book of fairy tales.

Author biography

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 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Literature degree at the University of Queensland, during which time she wrote two full-length manuscripts (which are unpublished) before writing the story that would become the 2006 novel *The Shifting Fog* (The House at Riverton).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.

Discussion starters

- On the night of her twenty-first birthday, Nell's father, Hugh, tells her a secret that shatters her sense of self. How important is a strong sense of identity to a person's life? Was Hugh right to tell her about her past? How might Nell's life have turned out differently had she not discovered the truth?
- Did Hugh and Lil make the right decision when they kept Nell?
- How might Nell's choice of occupation have been related to her fractured identity?
- Is it possible to escape the past, or does one's history always find a way to revisit the present?
- Eliza, Nell and Cassandra all lose their birth mothers when they are still children. How are their lives affected differently by this loss? How might their lives have evolved had they not had this experience?
- Nell believes that she comes from a tradition of 'bad mothers'. Does this belief become a self-fulfilling prophesy? How does Nell's relationship with her granddaughter, Cassandra, allow her to revisit this perception of herself as a 'bad mother'?
- Is *The Forgotten Garden* a love story? If so, in what way/s?
- Tragedy has been described as "the conflict between desire and possibility." Following this definition, is *The Forgotten Garden* a tragedy? If so, in what way/s?
- A 'plait' motif threads through *The Forgotten Garden*. What significance might plaits have for the story?
- In what ways do Eliza's fairy tales underline and develop other themes within the novel?
- In what ways do the settings in *The Forgotten Garden* represent or reflect the characters' experiences?

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