

The Forgotten Garden by Kate Morton

Holy Cross Book Club Review September 2026

A tiny girl is abandoned on a ship headed for Australia in 1913.

Arriving alone with nothing but a small suitcase, 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 very little to go on, "Nell" sets out to trace her real identity. Her quest leads her to Blackhurst Manor on the Cornish coast and the secrets of the doomed Mountrachet family.

Nell dies before her search is realized and leaves an unexpected and mysterious bequest to her granddaughter Cassandra. Inheriting a book of dark and intriguing fairytales written by Eliza Makepeace (a Victorian authoress who disappeared mysteriously in the early twentieth century) as well as a cliff-top cottage on the other side of the world, Cassandra embarks on a quest to find out the truth about their history, their family and their past.

Kate Morton, an award-winning bestselling author of seven novels, was born in South Australia and now lives with her family in London. She has degrees in dramatic art and English literature and states that "A book is never one idea: it is thousands of tiny idea-fragments, carefully selected and polished, that fit together mosaic-like to form a complete picture." And so, it is with 'The Forgotten Garden'....

The Forgotten Garden was born, in part, from two images that haunted Morton. Her husband's family who migrated from Sweden to Australia in the early years of the twentieth century, and her mother-in-law – a keen family historian – often told them stories of their sea voyage carrying little with them beyond a change of clothing and hopes for the future. Because their mother was busy below deck with her infant son, her seven children were left to their own devices for much of the journey. As the ship crossed the equator, one of the four-year-old twins died from sunstroke.

The second fragment that combined to form *The Forgotten Garden* is when Kate learned of her grandmother's secret. When her grandmother turned twenty-one, her nana's beloved father told her that she wasn't his biological child. The impact of this news was a ground-shifting event. No matter that her father loved her just the same as he had always done, things had changed.

Another inclusion to "The Forgotten Garden" was of a dream Morton had of a woman hurrying down a narrow, cobbled lane. She could see only the hem of the woman's heavy skirts but could hear the rustling of fabric and the clip of the woman's heels hitting the stones as she hastened along. The scene had a sense of urgency and the woman a great seriousness of purpose: Morton knew that it was London in the early twentieth century and that the character of the little lost girl and the determined woman – belonged together in the same book.

"The Forgotten Garden", in excess of 600 pages, had mixed reviews from the Holy Cross Book Club members. One member loved the novel, another loathed it. Most agreed that they enjoyed the story line of "The Forgotten Garden". It is a tale full of secrets, and it is the unravelling of them that

connects the characters and the themes of this book. Spanning four generations, book club members found this family saga to be confusing with too many timelines and too many characters. The storyline skips back and forth in time and from person to person over 50 chapters, each one of them told from a different point of view and taking place in a different time period.

There are also three fairy tales embedded in the novel. I felt that their darkness and whimsy added intrigue to the book. Although the fairy tales book's significance is revealed later in the story, Book Club members had mixed reviews about the inclusion of the 'Fairy Tales' in the storyline.

The Forgotten Garden weaves a tangled tale of family secrets, kept hidden for generations and Kate Morton does an excellent job of creating mystery and intrigue that spans generations as one woman searches for her identity and finds her family in an unexpected place along the way. The Forgotten Garden has all kinds of promise: it includes a mysterious illustrated book of fairy tales, a child found abandoned on an Australian pier, a forgotten walled garden and a glorious English estate that includes an abandoned cottage.

It could be argued that "The Forgotten Garden" is a tragedy, it is also a kind a love story and ends on such an uplifting note.

Respectfully submitted by Wendy Dickin