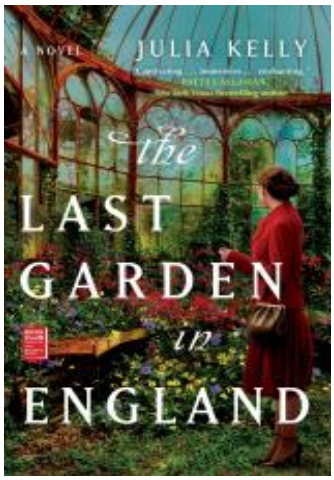
The Last Garden in England

by Julia Kelly



About the Book

From the author of the international bestseller THE LIGHT OVER LONDON and THE WHISPERS OF WAR comes a poignant and unforgettable tale of five women living across three different times whose lives are all connected by one very special garden.

Present day: Emma Lovett, who has dedicated her career to breathing new life into long-neglected gardens, has just been given the opportunity of a lifetime: to restore the gardens of the famed Highbury House estate, designed in 1907 by her hero, Venetia Smith. But as Emma dives deeper into the gardens? past, she begins to uncover secrets that have long lain hidden.

1907: A talented artist with a growing reputation for her ambitious work, Venetia Smith has carved out a niche for herself as a garden designer to industrialists, solicitors and bankers looking to show off their wealth with sumptuous country houses. When she is hired to design the gardens of Highbury House, she is determined to make them a triumph, but the gardens --- and the people she meets --- promise to change her life forever.

1944: When land girl Beth Pedley arrives at a farm on the outskirts of the village of Highbury, all she wants is to find a place she can call home. Cook Stella Adderton, on the other hand, is desperate to leave Highbury House to pursue her own dreams. And widow Diana Symonds, the mistress of the grand house, is anxiously trying to cling to her pre-war life now that her home has been requisitioned and transformed into a convalescent hospital for wounded soldiers. But when war threatens Highbury House?s treasured gardens, these three very different women are drawn together by a secret that will last for decades.

In this sweeping novel reminiscent of Kate Morton?s THE LAKE HOUSE and Kristin Harmel?s THE ROOM ON RUE AMÉLIE, Julia Kelly explores the unexpected connections that cross time and the special places that bring people together forever.

Discussion Guide

1. Each of our heroines --- Venetia, Beth, Diana, Stella and Emma --- is a transplant to Highbury. Discuss how each of them found ?home? in Highbury. What pivotal moments do they share? How do the relationships they form help them each finally put down roots?

2. Class plays a significant role in each of the time periods. How is Venetia?s relationship with Mr. and Mrs. Melcourt different from the relationship Beth and Stella have with Diana? How is it different from the relationship between Emma and Sydney and Andrew? How are the relationships the same? Are you surprised by how much or how little changed over the course of 114 years?

3. Venetia suffers a miscarriage, Diana loses her son in an accident and adopts another, Stella never wanted to be a mother but finds herself a de facto mother to Bobby, and Emma has a complicated relationship with her own mother. Discuss how each woman navigates motherhood and how expectations of motherhood shift from Venetia?s time to Diana and Stella?s and finally to Emma?s in the present day. Do any of their challenges remind you of your own mother or your experience with motherhood? How have society?s expectations around motherhood changed? How have they stayed the same?

4. All of the women in the novel work and have ambition. Venetia writes that she appreciates how Matthew ?doesn?t treat me as though I?m made of bone china or an oddity playing at being a gardener? (page 126). Stella expresses to Diana, ?I wanted to go to London. To work and then maybe do more? (page 304). Diana herself is counseled by Father Devlin, ?you are a woman of independent means. You may choose to live the life you want to lead. You could play the harp at every hour of the day, or you could run this hospital? (page 293). On Beth?s first day as a land girl, she ?felt vital and useful for the first time in a long time? (page 33). And in present day, Emma proudly runs her own business. Discuss how each of these women breaks from expectation in order to pursue her ambitions. How are their struggles the same, even a hundred years apart? How are they different?

5. Matthew and Henry (and Charlie, to some extent) support the creativity and ambition of Venetia and Emma as they craft the gardens of Highbury House. Compare these relationships, and how these men assume a role secondary to the women. How does their support further the visions of each woman? Can you think of moments of hindrance?

6. Diana and Cynthia have a tense relationship. Cynthia is critical of Diana?s grief, and Diana strains under Cynthia?s attempts to seize control of her home and hospital in spite of Diana having once ?been convinced that her future sister-in-law was perfect? (page 263). Discuss how this relationship differs from the other female relationships in 1944 (Diana and Stella, Stella and Beth, Beth and Ruth) and what you think it reveals about each of them. Where does their contempt come from, and how do they each use it to compensate for frustrations they have? Is their tension ultimately productive?

7. Which time period do you wish you could visit? Who from the novel would you most like to meet? Why?

8. Highbury House and its gardens is the only constant through each of the timelines in the novel. How is the house a character in its own right? What does it teach and give to all of the people who call it home --- temporarily or otherwise? How is the pull of it the same or different for each of the characters? Are there any characters for whom it is more a prison than a sanctuary? Is there a place in your life that you feel has given you purpose, or perhaps driven you to look for more?

9. As Venetia is designing Highbury House gardens, Matthew discovers her theme for each of the garden rooms, remarking: ?Each room represents the life of a woman. The tea garden is where polite company comes to meet, all with the purpose of marrying a girl off. The lovers? garden speaks for itself, I should think, and the bridal garden is her movement from girl to wife. The children?s garden comes next. I would guess that the lavender walk represents her femininity, and the poet?s garden stands for a different sort of romance than the lovers? garden.... Aphrodite, Athena, Hera. All of the pieces in the statue garden will be depictions of the female form? (page 149). And Venetia reveals that the winter garden represents her death. Discuss how each of our heroines --- Venetia, Beth, Diana, Stella and Emma --- fulfill each of these seasons of a woman?s life. How do their embodiments of these stages differ? How are they the same? Is there a universality to their experiences of womanhood that are reflected in the garden plans?

10. The book is divided into four sections, one for each season. Do the lives of each narrator fit with each season? Discuss Venetia?s, Beth?s, Diana?s, Stella?s and Emma?s transformations from winter to spring to summer to autumn. How do each of their character developments mirror what each season represents?

11. At the outset of the novel, Venetia, Beth and Emma are all single, and by the end, each of them has fallen for a man in the gardens of Highbury House. They are all quite stubborn and, like the flowers in the garden, take time to ?bloom.? How are these romances similar? How are they different?

12. While Venetia?s career was exceptional for her time period, World War II forced many women in 1944 to work when they otherwise might not have had the opportunity to pursue a trade. How did the war impact the lives Beth, Diana, Stella, Cynthia and Matron were able to lead? How did their lives pave the way for women like Emma? How did the war change the lives of women the world over? If you were a woman in 1944, which job would you have liked to have had to help with the war effort?

13. Although Venetia is an independent career woman in 1907, and proudly states, ?I have talent and artistry? (page 284), Mrs. Melcourt snaps back, ?And I have a husband. I hold all of the cards, Miss Smith? (page 285). Discuss the ways in which female power has evolved over the last century. Was Mrs. Melcourt correct? How does female power and agency shift by 1944? By 2021? Does the ?husband? standard still give women power today?

14. Beth accepts when Colin asks her to be ?his girl? (page 182), but once she meets Captain Hastings, she chooses his hand in spite of Colin?s expectations of her. Later, Colin confronts her and questions her decision. He?s angry, and she retorts, ?You just wanted a woman waiting at home for you, and that might have been enough for me in Dorking, but it isn?t enough for me now? (page 247). Do you think Colin was fair to Beth? Do you think Beth was fair to Colin? Have you ever felt pressure to commit to a relationship when your heart wasn?t fully in it?

15. Diana suffers a great deal of loss during the war, losing both her husband and her son. Her grief is acute, and it becomes clear that she also felt she lost a part of herself when she married and became a mother. What do you think of Bobby?s adoption? Of her choice to call him Robert, the given name he shared with Robin? Of the choice to bury the

adoption papers and keep his true ancestry a secret? Do you think she ultimately finds peace? If so, do you agree with how she found it?

Author Bio

Julia Kelly is the internationally bestselling author of emotional historical fiction about extraordinary women and intriguing historical whodunnit mystery novels. Her books have been translated into 13 languages. In addition to writing, she?s been an Emmy-nominated producer, journalist, marketing professional and (for one summer) a tea waitress. Julia called Los Angeles, Iowa and New York City home before settling in London with her husband.

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