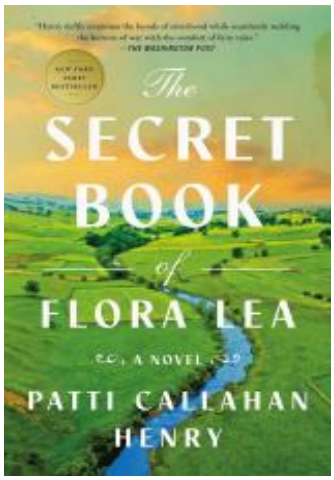
The Secret Book of Flora Lea

by Patti Callahan Henry



About the Book

When a woman discovers a rare book that has connections to her past, long-held secrets about her missing sister and their childhood spent in the English countryside during World War II are revealed.

In the war-torn London of 1939, 14-year-old Hazel and five-year-old Flora are evacuated to a rural village to escape the horrors of the Second World War. Living with the kind Bridie Aberdeen and her teenage son, Harry, in a charming stone cottage along the River Thames, Hazel fills their days with walks and games to distract her young sister, including one that she creates for her sister and her sister alone --- a fairy tale about a magical land, a secret place they can escape to that is all their own.

But the unthinkable happens when young Flora suddenly vanishes while playing near the banks of the river. Shattered, Hazel blames herself for her sister?s disappearance, and she carries that guilt into adulthood as a private burden she feels she deserves.

Twenty years later, Hazel is in London, ready to move on from her job at a cozy rare bookstore to a career at Sotheby?s. With a charming boyfriend and her elegantly timeworn Bloomsbury flat, Hazel?s future seems determined. But her tidy life is turned upside down when she unwraps a package containing an illustrated book called *Whisperwood and the River of Stars*. Hazel never told a soul about the imaginary world she created just for Flora. Could this book hold the secrets to Flora?s disappearance? Could it be a sign that her beloved sister is still alive after all these years?

As Hazel embarks on a feverish quest, revisiting long-dormant relationships and bravely opening wounds from her past, her career and future hang in the balance. An astonishing twist ultimately reveals the truth in this transporting and refreshingly original novel about the bond between sisters, the complications of conflicted love and the enduring magic of storytelling.

Discussion Guide

1. Hazel and Flora Lea?s childhood experience was inspired by Operation Pied Piper --- a real life event in British WWII history in which over three million children were evacuated from their homes to live with volunteer families throughout the English countryside. Were you familiar with this piece of history prior to reading the novel?

2. Hazel takes great care of the rare books while employed at Hogan?s Bookshop, wearing white gloves and logging items meticulously. In passing, the owner, Edwin, has mentioned the enormous value original illustrations can add to a book. What is revealed about Hazel?s character in the decision to take the copy of *Whisperwood and the River of Stars* along with the illustrations? What about when her initial denial of taking them is factored in?

3. When Hazel makes the phone call to Peggy Andrews seeking information about the book, she gets an unexpected answer about the origin of *Whisperwood and the River of Stars*. What does this broadly say about the creation of storytelling and mythmaking? Can someone ever own a story?

4. Bridie Aberdeen, as a character, is presented as extremely warm and nurturing yet with some eccentricities. The town gossips about her practices and the ?mysterious? disappearance of Henry?s father. What was your first impression of Bridie? Did that change at any point during the book?

5. Hazel and Flora?s mother had several opportunities to take her daughters back to London but ultimately made the decision that they were safer and better served in Binsey with Bridie and Henry. Do you have a positive or negative opinion of their mother? Would you have made a different choice?

6. Only through an honest conversation years after the fact do Hazel and Henry discover their shared guilt over what happened to Flora. Would that silence have lasted as long if Hazel and Henry were older when Flora first disappeared?

7. Barnaby is supportive of Hazel?s desire to reach out to Peggy Andrews and even encourages her to get in touch with Dorothy Bellamy, thinking a reporter may be able to help, yet he eventually struggles with Hazel?s never-ending quest and its effect on their relationship. Does Barnaby?s ultimatum change your view of the character? Did Hazel take her quest too far?

8. How did you feel about the reveal of Dorothy Bellamy?s past? Did Dorothy?s Aunt Imogene have justification in her decision to remove the child the way she did?

9. How do the specific time periods --- World War II and 1960 --- affect the way that the case of Flora?s disappearance was handled? Would the outcome have been different if set in present day?

10. At the end of the story, Dorothy (Dot) is coming to terms with two versions of herself. What are the broader implications of childhood memory? Why do we so clearly remember some things and not others, regardless of importance? Can you think of your earliest childhood memory?

11. Hazel?s character displays many different emotions in the decision making throughout her life --- hope, fear, guilt, love. Which one do you think is the dominant driver? Would it be the same if you were in her shoes?

12. THE SECRET BOOK OF FLORA LEE weaves an ode to stories and, ultimately, how we carry them with us throughout our lives. Is storytelling a universal way for humans to connect? How has storytelling affected your life?

Author Bio

Patti Callahan Henry is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of several novels, including SURVIVING SAVANNAH and BECOMING MRS. LEWIS. She is the recipient of the Christy Award, the Harper Lee Award for Alabama?s Distinguished Writer of the Year Award, and the Alabama Library Association Book of the Year. She is the cohost and cocreator of the popular weekly online live web show and podcast "Friends and Fiction." She lives in Alabama and South Carolina with her family.

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