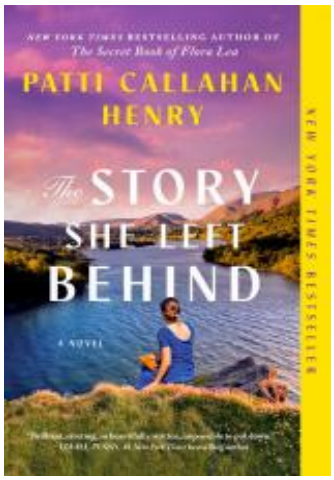
The Story She Left Behind

by Patti Callahan Henry



About the Book

Inspired by a true literary mystery, the *New York Times* bestselling author of the mesmerizing THE SECRET BOOK OF FLORA LEA returns with the sweeping story of a legendary book, a lost mother, and a daughter?s search for them both.

In 1927, eight-year-old Clara Harrington?s magical childhood shatters when her mother, renowned author Bronwyn Newcastle Fordham, disappears off the coast of South Carolina. Bronwyn stunned the world with a book written in an invented language that became a national sensation when she was just 12 years old. Her departure leaves behind not only a devoted husband and heartbroken daughter, but also the hope of ever translating the sequel to her landmark work. As the headlines focus on the missing author, Clara yearns for something far deeper and more insatiable: her beautiful mother.

By 1952, Clara is an illustrator raising her own daughter, Wynnie. When a stranger named Charlie Jameson contacts her from London claiming to have discovered a handwritten dictionary of her mother?s lost language, Clara is skeptical. Compelled by the tragedy of her mother?s vanishing, she crosses the Atlantic with Wynnie only to arrive during one of London?s most deadly natural disasters --- the Great Smog. With asthmatic Wynnie in peril, they escape the city with Charlie and find refuge in the Jameson family retreat nestled in the Lake District. It is there that Clara must find the courage to uncover the truth about her mother and the story she left behind.

Told in Patti Callahan Henry?s lyrical, enchanting prose, THE STORY SHE LEFT BEHIND is a captivating novel of mystery and family legacy that captures the profound longing for a mother and the evergreen allure of secrets.

Discussion Guide

1. The story at the center of this novel, that of an author acclaimed for a novel written in her childhood, who then

disappeared at the age of 25, is one based on the true literary cold case of Barbara Newhall Follett. Had you ever heard of Barbara before reading?

2. Our protagonist Clara is an award-winning artist who has great sensitivity to her physical surroundings. As the novel progresses, we learn just the extent of how Clara's artistry exists in conversation with her mother's. What do you think the book says about generational artistry and how love impacts how we see and perceive the world?

3. When Clara and Charlie have their initial phone call, Clara is overcome with conflicting emotions. She finds herself torn between her lingering hope to learn what happened to her mother and her obligations as a mother and teacher. With two very opposed paths set in front of her, were you at all surprised by the fervency in which she sets off for England?

4. Upon arriving in London, Clara and Wynnie are met with the Great Smog of 1952, conditions brought about by the industrial nature of the city. The extremity of the conditions, impossible though they were to predict, are based on historical fact. Have you ever heard of conditions like these? How might you have reacted to them yourself?

5. Clara's identities --- as a parent, a daughter, an artist, an individual, etc. --- seem to be in conflict with one another as the story progresses. For example, her dedication to her mother leads her to London, where she unwittingly puts her daughter's health at risk and finds herself, for the first time in years, connecting romantically. Have you ever felt the various aspects of your life in conflict in such a way?

6. Throughout the book, Clara must reckon with the impact her mother has had on the world and on others, all outside of how she impacted Clara as her parent. How does Clara seem to cope with coming to terms with her mother as an individual and not just as someone beholden to her child?

7. Wynnie, a wonderfully precocious child, makes a notable impact on every adult she encounters, and yet she has connected most powerfully with Emjie, her imaginary friend spawned from the protagonist of her grandmother's book. What purpose does Emjie serve in Wynnie's life?

8. Bronwyn's uniquely complicated past and personhood are what ultimately lead her to leave her daughter and husband after an unfortunate fire. Her actions are drastic, and yet, as the story unfolds, we understand why Bronwyn feels her actions to be necessary. Do you think that there could be a situation in your own life that would lead you down a similar path?

9. Do you feel that Bronwyn is justified in her actions? Do you think that, should this story be set in present day, the outcome might have been different?

10. The ideas of language and communication are omnipresent throughout the book. Have you ever felt, like Bronwyn, Clara and Wynnie, the need to share something that your spoken language is unable to communicate? Outside of devising an entirely new language, how might you communicate these nuances in your experiences?

11. At the end of the story, Clara is coming to terms with her past, present and future. What are the broader implications of childhood trauma? Why do we place so much importance on what was lost in the past? Can you think of anything noteworthy that you have hung onto since your childhood?

12. Clara's character displays many different emotions in 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?

13. THE STORY SHE LEFT BEHIND weaves an ode to language and, ultimately, how we connect and love one another in life. How do you feel like your styles of communication have changed throughout 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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