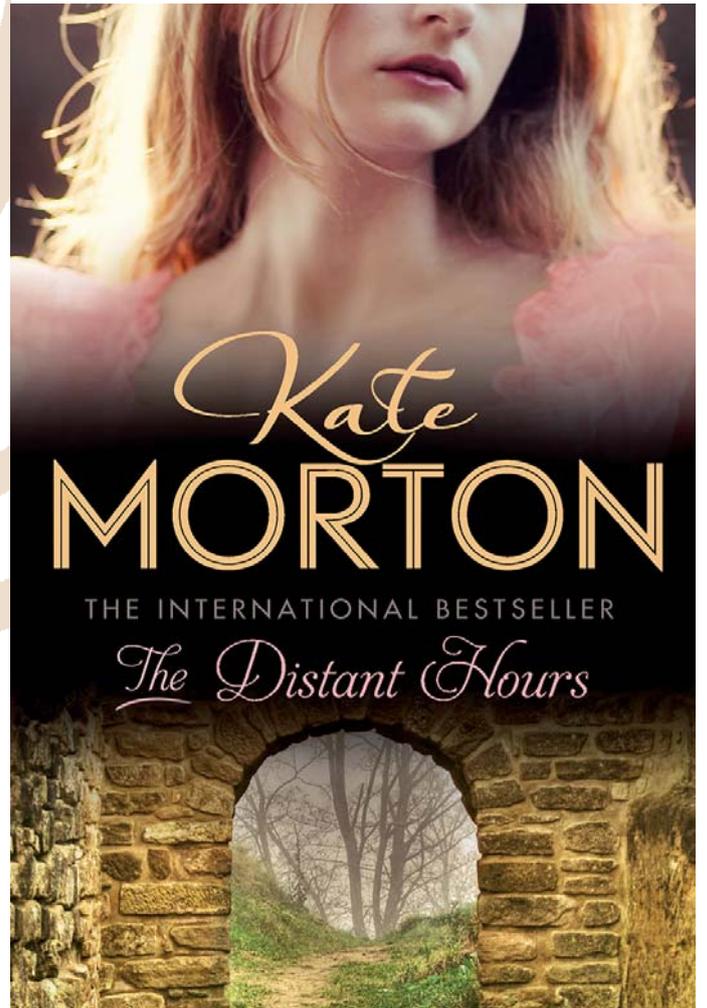


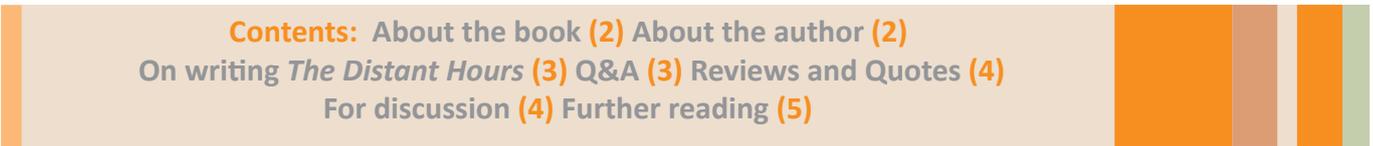


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING
GROUP NOTES

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About the book

It started with a letter. A letter that had been lost a long time, waiting out half a century in a forgotten postal bag in the dim attic of a nondescript house in Bermondsey ...

Edie Burchill and her mother have never been close, but when a long-lost letter arrives one Sunday afternoon with the return address of Milderhurst Castle, Kent, printed on its envelope, Edie begins to suspect that her mother's emotional distance masks an old secret.

Evacuated from London as a thirteen-year-old girl, Edie's mother is chosen by the mysterious Juniper Blythe, and taken to live at Milderhurst Castle with the Blythe family: Juniper, her twin sisters and their father, Raymond, author of the 1918 children's classic *The True History of the Mud Man*. In the grand and glorious Milderhurst Castle, a new world opens up for Edie's mother. She discovers the joys of books and fantasy and writing, but also, ultimately, the dangers.

Fifty years later, as Edie chases the answers to her mother's riddle, she, too, is drawn to Milderhurst Castle and the eccentric Sisters Blythe. Old ladies now, the three still live together, the twins nursing Juniper, whose abandonment by her fiancé in 1941 plunged her into madness.

Inside the decaying castle, Edie begins to unravel her mother's past. But there are other secrets hidden in the stones of Milderhurst Castle, and Edie is about to learn more than she expected. The truth of what happened in the distant hours has been waiting a long time for someone to find it.

About the author

Kate Morton is the eldest of three sisters. She was born in South Australia and moved with her family numerous times before settling, finally, on Tamborine Mountain in the Gold Coast Hinterland. There she enjoyed a rural upbringing, attending a tiny country school and spending much of her childhood inventing and playing games of make-believe with her sisters. She fell avidly in love with books very early, teaching herself to read before she started school. Her favourites were those by Enid Blyton, and Kate escaped many times up the Faraway Tree or with the Famous Five into smuggler's cove. It was a love deeply felt, for it is still mysteries and secrets that dance around the edges of Kate's mind, keeping her awake deep into the night, turning or typing pages.

Kate's family enjoy a dysfunctional closeness. Her father, an engineer, taught her the importance of structure and planning; her mother, an artist and antique-dealer, gave her a love of the past and showed her how to glimpse its secrets. When Kate was thirteen, her parents moved a dilapidated timber church onto the family's avocado property because they couldn't bear to see it torn apart for development. They were soon inundated by prospective brides begging that they might be allowed to marry there. Demand for receptions meant that the antique barn was converted and family-life grew to incorporate strains of "Here comes the bride" and regular rides on other people's emotional roundabouts. Kate was thus afforded frequent insights into the lives and relationships of strangers: from the glossy anticipation preceding events to the clean-ups afterward, where tenderly sketched notes for a groom's speech lay often discarded amongst the spent confetti.

When Kate was fourteen, having exhausted the local library's selection of books, she discovered a small, dimly-lit second-hand book-store tucked behind the local shops. Its owner, an elderly Welsh gentleman, emerged from the shadowy office, as wiry and white-haired as if he'd slipped from the pen of Quentin Blake. He was Herbert Davies, one time director of BBC drama. By and by, Kate grew to know Herbert and his wife Rita, an ex-English stage actress, and was drawn into their salon of eccentric ex-pat artists who told stories of forgotten times in faraway places. With Herbert and Rita, both qualified drama teachers, Kate studied and earned a Licentiate in Speech and Drama from Trinity College London. After an ill-fated attempt to 'do something sensible' and obtain an Arts/Law degree, Kate went on to complete a Shakespeare course at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and for sometime believed her future lay in theatre. Until she realised—very simply and very quietly—that it wasn't performing she was in love with. It was words.

Although she'd read and scribbled from before she could remember, it hadn't occurred to Kate, until that moment, that real books were written by real people. That they didn't just appear, magically, from a great warehouse somewhere. Thus, she began writing in earnest at the age of 23 and completed two full length manuscripts (which lie deep and determinedly within a bottom drawer) before settling finally into the story that would become *The Shifting Fog* (*The House at Riverton*). Concurrently, Kate enrolled in a degree in English Literature at the University of Queensland, graduating with First Class honours. On that basis she won a scholarship and proceeded to complete a Masters degree focussing on tragedy in Victorian literature. Kate is currently enrolled in a PhD program researching contemporary novels that marry elements of gothic and mystery fiction. She has taught literature and creative writing at various universities.

Kate is married to Davin, a musician who trained as a jazz pianist at the Conservatorium of Music and now composes soundtracks for film and television. They have two young sons. Kate's first novel, *The Shifting Fog*, published internationally as *The House at Riverton*, was a number one bestseller in 2007. *The Forgotten Garden*, her second novel, was also a bestseller in Australia, the UK, the US and in many European countries.

On writing *The Distant Hours*

I was a third of the way into writing a different story when the Sisters Blythe began whispering in my ear. I tried to ignore them but they were insistent, and eventually I agreed to give them a week. I set aside my other project – temporarily – in the hopes that I'd make the sisters see reason; confident that they would that way be appeased and silenced until it was their turn.

I wrote the first chapter of *The Distant Hours*, in which the letter arrives and Edie learns the name 'Juniper Blythe', in a single night, and by the time I went to bed I knew I wouldn't be returning to my other project. I couldn't. It was clear to me that this was the story I had to tell. That happens, sometimes, and I've found it's best not to ask questions, rather just to follow the story's thread.

The Distant Hours was a labour of love. I wrote intensively, coming up for air occasionally, before disappearing once more beneath the novel's surface. The characters – Percy and Saffy, Juniper and Tom, Edie and Meredith, and all the others, too – are real and dear to me, and the novel brings together many of my favourite things. A crumbling castle, a family of sisters, a love of books and

reading, the haunting of the present by the past, thwarted love, ghostly shivers, mystery and memory and secrets.

Q&A

How long did it take you to write THE DISTANT HOURS?

The Distant Hours took ten months to write, beginning to end, with another three months of intensive editing and rewriting. Thankfully I'd already done lots of research on Kent and the second world war for the poor, abandoned project that still lies at the bottom of my cupboard.

Why do you always set your books in England? What interests you about an English setting?

Because England makes my heart sing. The buildings, the history, the people, the countryside, the climate – real seasons! – the continuity, the graspable past: I love it all and it's a great pleasure to conjure my own fictional England in my books. I suspect, too, that the world of my imagination was colonised very early. The great majority of my 'first love' books were written and set in England – Enid Blyton, CS Lewis, the Bronte sisters, to name a few.

Is Milderhurst castle based on a real place that you have visited?

Milderhurst castle is an invention, however my love affair with old buildings means I visit and read about a lot of real places. Sissinghurst Castle was an inspiration to me, perhaps most clearly due to its tower, its location in Kent, and its link to the literary world through Vita Sackville West and the Nicolson family. One of my favourite parts of the writing process is creating the places in which my characters live and move and breathe. My settings become absolutely real to me and I hope to my readers, too.

Have you ever come across an old family letter that has revealed something to you?

I wish! In some part I suspect that's why I'm drawn to writing about confessions and lost letters, secret diaries and all those wonderful sorts of things – because it hasn't happened to me (yet – I haven't given up hope!). All families have secrets, though, and I drew on one of my family's for *The Forgotten Garden*. It concerned a secret love affair and an illegitimate child, and there were once letters that had passed between the lovers (one of whom was fighting in the Great War). The letters survived longer than the lovers but unfortunately were all burned some years ago in the hopes that no one would ever learn their secrets.

What do you hope readers will take away from your novels?

I want to make people feel about books the way I do. To spark in them that desperate yearning to be transported to a place as vivid and true as the real world, the inescapable urge to sneak away and devour just one more chapter, the sense of bereavement when the final page is turned. My favourite thing to hear from readers is 'I couldn't put it down but I didn't want it to end'. That's when I know that I've succeeded.

Reviews & Quotes

“A letter posted in 1941 finally reaches its destination in 1992 with powerful repercussions for Edie Burchill, a London book editor, in this enthralling romantic thriller...the answers will stun readers.”

Publishers Weekly – Starred review (20/09/2010)

For discussion

- 📖 Edie is passionate about reading and holds some novels close to her. Juniper, Saffy and Meredith are passionate about writing. What would you say about the power of words in your life?
- 📖 In *The Distant Hours*, Milderhurst Castle takes on a life of its own. You can almost hear the stones murmuring. Can an inanimate object work as an important character in a novel? Perhaps there are other novels you've read where this occurs? Examine the way in which the author builds the atmosphere to transform the stones of Milderhurst into a character with moods. Is it successful?
- 📖 Would you say that the mysterious Milderhurst Castle reflects its hoary inhabitants? Does it also repel outsiders?
- 📖 Juniper was afraid of only one thing --- following the emotional morass of her father's breaking sanity. What do you think of her story?
- 📖 What would you say are the major themes of *The Distant Hours*?
- 📖 Percy and Saffy both made it their lives' mission to protect their little sister, Juniper, from all outside influences. Was this the right thing to do? And for whom?
- 📖 World War II saw the introduction of large changes to English society across the class divisions. Can you imagine a life where, as a woman, it was controversial to be seen wearing trousers?
- 📖 There are many secrets being kept hidden away within the pages of *The Distant Hours*. Percy, particularly, has had many foisted upon her that she has spent much of her life hiding. But she wanted to tell Edie everything as Percy saw how her and her sisters' story would end. Is it harder to be a secret-keeper or to reveal everything?
- 📖 The bond between mothers and daughters seems significant in the relationship between Meredith and Edie. Discuss the way their relationship played out in *The Distant Hours*.

Suggested further reading

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

The Thirteenth Tale by Dianne Setterfield

The Forsyte Saga by John Galsworthy

Night Street by Kristel Thornell

Atonement by Ian McEwan

Lovesong by Alex Miller

Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier

The Little Stranger by Sarah Waters