

READING GROUP KIT

Adelaide Hills, Christmas Eve, 1959

At the end of a scorching hot day, beside a creek on the grounds of a grand and mysterious house, a local delivery driver makes a terrible discovery. A police investigation is called, and the small town of Tambilla becomes embroiled in one of the most shocking and perplexing murder cases in the history of South Australia.

Many years later and thousands of miles away, Jess is a journalist in search of a story. Having lived and worked in London for nearly two decades, she now finds herself laid off from her full-time job and struggling to make ends meet. A phone call out of nowhere summons her back to Sydney, where her beloved grandmother, Nora, who raised Jess when her mother could not, has suffered a fall and been raced to the hospital.

At Nora's house, Jess discovers a book that chronicles the police investigation into a long-buried crime: the Turner Family Tragedy of Christmas Eve, 1959. It is only when Jess skims through the pages that she finds a shocking connection between her own family and this once-infamous event—a murder mystery that has never been resolved satisfactorily.

An epic novel that spans generations, *Homecoming* asks what we would do for those we love, and how we protect the lies we tell. It explores the power of motherhood, the corrosive effects of tightly held secrets, and the healing nature of truth. Above all, it is a beguiling and immensely satisfying novel from one of the finest writers working today.

KATE MORTON

ANSWERS BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS



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KATE MORTON is the award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The House at Riverton*, *The Forgotten Garden*, *The Distant Hours*, *The Secret Keeper*, *The Lake House*, and *The Clockmaker's Daughter*. Her books are published in 34 languages and have been #1 bestsellers worldwide. She is a native Australian, and holds degrees in dramatic art and English literature. She lives with her family in London and Australia.

katemorton.com

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IN CONVERSATION WITH KATE MORTON

Q: *Homecoming* is partially narrated by Jess, a London-based journalist, who makes a homecoming to her native Australia and uncovers family secrets when she arrives. Australia comes alive through the pages as Jess comes to terms with coming home. What drew you to writing your new novel about Australia? Why write about the themes of arriving back home?

A: I was writing a different book in early 2020, but when the pandemic took hold, my family and I returned from London to Australia for what we thought would be a short period. As the weeks (and then months) went by, living near my extended family, in the landscape of my childhood, I found myself thinking about home and belonging and especially what it means to “come home”; I kept landing on the T.S. Eliot quote about “the still point of the turning world.” Past and present, and the site where the two meet, is a constant theme within my novels; similarly, place is of utmost importance. It became very clear, as events kept spinning faster in the world beyond, that I needed to set aside my manuscript and write instead about the place that I was in, here and now, and about people across time seeking the (sometimes elusive) safety and security of “home.”

Q: At the heart of *Homecoming* is a mystery from 1959 with unanswered questions in the present day timeline. Not only is the reader immersed in a dual timeline with the action from 1959 and Jess searching for answers in the present day, but a true crime book is also inserted throughout the pages. What was it like to not only write dual timelines but to add another element of a book within a book?

A: The relationship between the present and the past is central to my understanding of the world—and of people, too. To an extent, we are all present day interpretations of our own backstories. All of my books contain multiple timelines, but in

Homecoming, one of the historical threads takes the form of an embedded text: a true crime novel published in 1961. I loved writing Daniel Miller's book, *As If They Were Asleep*. It was a great challenge to find and maintain a different narrative voice from my own, and I enjoyed the puzzle-like element of making sure that Miller's novel was written by him in good faith, while also coming into conflict with some of the information that we—and Jess—uncover in the present. The problematic nature of truth and the mutability of stories are key themes in *Homecoming*.

Q: Family and family secrets are reoccurring themes in your novels, and *Homecoming* also delves into motherhood and how it affects generations. What drew you to write about motherhood in this novel? Why do these themes of family run through your novels?

A: I've been a mother for as long as I've been a writer; I'm also a daughter and one of three sisters. My experience of the world is filtered through these identities and relationships, and I don't know that I'd ever be inspired to write a book where family didn't take a central part. For one thing, character is fundamental to my storytelling, and all identities are shaped to some degree by one's family. Families also provide ideal, intimate theaters through which to examine the great themes of human existence: love, envy, pride, betrayal, truth, and lies.

Q: *Homecoming* involves scenes set throughout England and Australia and digs back in time to different eras in these countries. What does that research entail, especially when set in a different time period?

A: One of the pleasures of writing *Homecoming* was setting the book in the places that I call home: Jess's North London neighborhood, the towns, gardens, and paddocks of Adelaide Hills, and Polly's weatherboard workers' cottage on the slopes of Paddington in Brisbane. The historical setting required more traditional research: I wanted Tambilla and its residents to ring true, and spent a lot of time exploring in person and reading about the first Lutheran settlers in South Australia and the establishment of various Hills towns. I also studied unsolved

crimes from the mid-twentieth century, including the infamous Somerton body case, compiling every contemporaneous newspaper article I could find and following the investigation via its coverage in the press. This process was very helpful in terms of understanding police procedure of the time, but also in gaining a sense of the language and other storytelling conventions useful for Daniel Miller's true crime novel.

Q: The novel is not only fantastic historical fiction, but also has an element of mystery. How did you create such a gripping thriller in between historical detail? Were there any books or movies that helped to inspire you along the way?

A: I like to write novels that balance a strong narrative pull with an exploration of character and place. There is a tradition in Australian fiction of the lost child: in the nineteenth century, it was a way of exploring colonial anxieties about an unfamiliar, unforgiving landscape. Such stories have an eerie overtone, a sense that unseen danger lurks "out there," beyond what can be seen; I sought to capture a hint of this atmosphere in my prologue. More broadly, the characters in *Homecoming* reference many books and narrative traditions: from Thomas Turner's infatuation with the folklore and bush poetry of Australia to the English classics favored by Percy and, later, Jess—books that make a faraway time and place feel like "home" by forming landscapes of imagination in the reader's mind.

Q: How did your process or approach to writing change during the pandemic?

A: Like everyone, I suspect, I had to fight against distraction. Staying focused can be difficult at the best of times, but during a period of consequential change and uncertainty, with so much to absorb and understand, it was extra challenging.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: Perhaps it's time to take that shelved manuscript out of storage and see whether I can still find life in it!

HOMECOMING

SCRAPBOOK



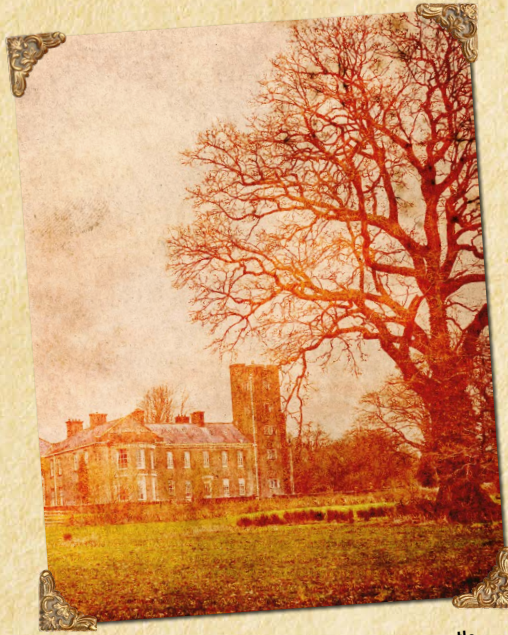
The gum trees were giants, and although the faraway sky continued blue, and late sunlight was turning the trunks silver, evening had already arrived in the cool, shaded underbrush at their base.



The black cockatoos were in the walnut tree again. They traveled as a group, swooping down in pairs.



Swaddled in white cotton, a sleeping baby.



Looming above him was not so much a house as a castle.



Jess made herself jam on toast and sat at the kitchen bench with both her notebook and laptop open.



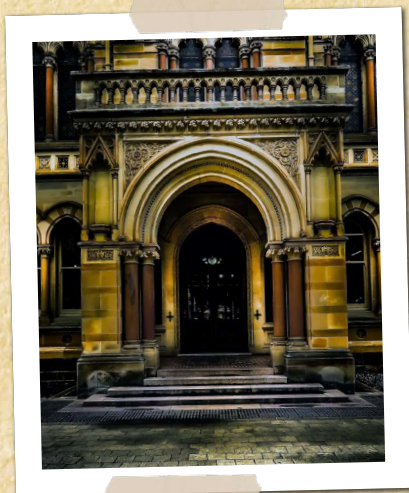
On this summery day, they had set up camp beneath the shade of an old willow that grew on the edge of the bank where the creek widened to form a waterhole.



She felt a heavy wave of deep familiarity: the smell of eucalyptus and sun-baked dirt.



The pewter sky was heavy with intent.



He and Kurt had gone down to Adelaide together to see the campus some months ago.



As Jess watched, a blue-breasted fairy wren flew down to perch upon the edge of the bowl; after observing Jess for a moment, the little bird made a graceful dive across the surface of the water, skimming himself clean before disappearing once more into the folds of the garden.



Jess was reminded of the houses in fairy tales, hidden and then forgotten, ignored by the human world only to be reclaimed by nature.



With a broad yawn, Jess plugged her phone in to charge and nestled back against her pillows. Picking up Daniel Miller's book, she opened to the next chapter. She smoothed the page, enjoying its powdery age against her fingertips, and paused, just for a single anticipatory instant before letting her gaze find the first words.

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. The title Homecoming holds significance for Jess's story – does it have meaning for any other character's journey?
2. "Home, she'd realised, wasn't a place or a time or a person, though it could be any and all of those things: home was a feeling, a sense of being complete. The opposite of 'home' wasn't 'away', it was 'lonely'. When someone said, 'I want to go home', what they really meant was that they didn't want to feel lonely anymore."
3. Do you agree with this statement?
4. What did you originally think happened to the Turner family? Did your theory change as the story progressed?
5. If you could ask a question of any of these characters, what would it be and to who?
6. Motherhood is an ongoing theme throughout the book. Did you judge Isabel, Meg, Polly or Nora based on your own opinions on what it means to be a mother?
7. Who was your favorite character and why?
8. Do you believe that Nora was justified in keeping secrets from Polly and Jess? Did you understand her motivations?
9. Do you believe keeping secrets from your family is ever a good thing?
10. Many characters in the story feel guilt over their actions following the Turner family tragedy – are any of those characters guilty of a crime?
11. 'Reading shapes a person. The landscape of books is more real, in some ways, than the one outside the window. It isn't experienced at a remove; it is internal, vital. A young boy laid up in bed for a year because his legs refuse to work and a young girl on the other side of the globe, sent to boarding school because her parents had both died, had led completely different lives – and yet, through a mutual love of reading, they had inhabited the same world.'
12. Do you agree that reading can shape a person- perhaps more than the world in which they live?
13. 'Percy had observed that Polly was shy. He knew nothing about the rest of her life, but he wondered whether her tendency to blush, the diffident way she had of speaking, the nervous habit of playing with the pendants on her necklace, were consequences of having grown up, even unwittingly, in tragedy's shadow.'
14. Do you think Percy was right in his assumption that tragedy had shaped Polly's life?
15. The secret of the Turner family tragedy is finally revealed but after so many years is it too late or can it change things for those left behind?