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THE SECRET KEEPER

Kate Morton
Allen & Unwin

For fans of historical fiction, there's nothing better than a thumping new book from Kate Morton. They are the Sunday night bonnet dramas of the book world, and their following, as for their screen counterparts, is loyal, passionate, and largely female.

Morton – who wrote *The Shifting Fog*, *The Forgotten Garden* and *The Distant Hours* – is good at weaving tales of past and present together, usually with a hidden family secret at the place where the two timeframes overlap. It is not giving too much away (yes, it's in the title) to say that this story also has a secret at its centre.

It begins in 1961, when 16-year-old Laurel lies dreaming in the family treehouse, hidden from the garden. From there she silently watches a strange man confront her mother, who then stabs him with the family birthday cake knife.

The killing is deemed to be in self-defence but the incident, immediately covered up and long-buried in Laurel's mind, resurfaces for her as an adult when the family gather to celebrate her mother's ninetieth birthday.

Laurel has become one of England's most loved actresses, but she feels compelled to set aside her latest project and discover the identity of the man in the garden and why he approached her mother with the words, "Hello, Dorothy. It's been a long time."

This is the sort of story described by publishers and readers alike as "spellbinding", "enchanted" and "mysterious". While that may be gilding the lily, there is no doubt *The Secret Keeper* is a well-written, expertly plotted, jolly good read. While aficionados of the genre will spot the ending coming from half-way through, much of the enjoyment is in seeing how it all unfolds, in its likeable, easy-to-read prose. It has the same pleasant appeal as a romantic Hollywood movie – nothing will really surprise you, but it is a nice way to pass the time.

MICHELLE THOMAS



BURNING BLUE

Paul Griffin
Text

Nicole Castro is the most beautiful girl in school, until someone tips acid on her face in a seemingly random attack.

Was it her possessive boyfriend? Or a jealous classmate? Loner and genius hacker Jay Nazarro, who was barely noticed by teen queen Nicole before her accident, wants to find out.

As his friendship with Nicole develops, his own prejudice is challenged by her, and later by his hacker buddy Angela.

Always on the periphery are the parents, Nicole's over-involved mother and Jay's absent dad. This is a tale of teenagers figuring out who they are as they disentangle themselves from their parents' narratives.

A meditation on beauty that is more than skin deep, *Burning Blue* hits the right note for teenage readers.

MT

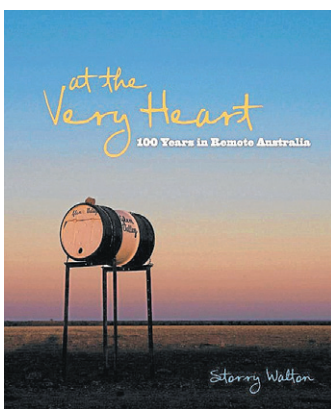


AT THE VERY HEART

Storry Walton
Wakefield Press

Set up in 1912 by John Flynn, the Australian Inland Mission, now Frontier Services, is celebrating its centennial this year. Apart from the Royal Flying Doctor Service which he also established, Flynn left another legacy – a magnificent collection of hand-tinted photographs documenting life in the outback. There are shots of a car driving on matting to cross sand, a hollow tree big enough to shelter a man on horseback and makeshift buildings – such as one built of timber and cane grass. As well as many of his photos, this book also tells the story of an organisation that reached out to an Australia many of us have never seen.

FRANCES RAND



Fantasy makes enemies of lovers

DAYS OF BLOOD AND STARLIGHT

Laini Taylor

Hodder and Stoughton

Fans of Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* will have had an anxious year. The novel cut a swathe through urban fantasy book blogs last December and went on to become an instant classic, with readers waiting impatiently for instalment number two in what will be a trilogy.

Well, they can breathe easy now. *Days of Blood and Starlight* is out and ready for your Christmas stocking.

This is perhaps a darker tale than the first one (if that's possible, considering the first was about monsters who stole teeth to resurrect dead bodies).

We last met human/chimaera Karou flying through a rent in the universe into a world ripped apart by a war between her people and the seraphim – angel-like beings, not notably angelic in their manners. Warlike and dangerous, they have subjected the diverse chimaera peoples (all of whom have beastly aspects incorporated into their bodies ... so maybe a deer's antlers coupled with hoofs and bat wings) to relentless persecution and

colonisation.

Sadly for Karou, her lover Akiva is one of them, and she has only just learnt about their relationship in her previous chimaera incarnation (trust me, it all makes sense in context). Unfortunately, she has also learnt about his destruction of her beloved adopted family, and this episode finds them on opposite sides of the conflict. Karou must team up with the dreaded White Wolf to save her people and honour the memory of father-figure Brimstone.

Having read the first book a year ago, it took me some time to get back up to speed with who did what to who, but that aside, this is as gripping and endlessly fascinating as the first book.

Although sometimes carried away with the grandeur of her created world (the language is sometimes portentous language and the emotional pitch intense), Taylor has a gift for characterisation and a nice line in black humour.

Some fantasy novels are strictly for fans of the genre only, but Taylor's book is a weird and wonderful story, beautifully told, regardless of category.

MT

A SHORT HISTORY OF RUGBY LEAGUE IN AUSTRALIA

Will Evans
Slattery Media Group

Will Evans takes us on a great journey through the history of rugby league.

From the birth of the code with the split with rugby union through to the modern day it is a fascinating and well researched journey.

All the highlights are there – the epic encounters including grand final deciders.

The players, the coaches and officials, many who changed the game are also featured.

For all those statistically minded fans he provides heaps including in-depth analysis of the past and present clubs, comprehensive coverage of the State of Origin – something to keep the most ardent fan enthralled.

He looks at the game's high achievers as well as the game's many individual award winners.

Evans even looks into the other major nation's contribution to the Australian game's history particularly our intense rivalry with Great Britain and New Zealand.



The game's presence in Papua New Guinea, South Africa, France and the United States is also explored.

Great escapes, incredible comebacks, thrilling finishes – they are all there – players who have switched codes, positions, club journeymen, courageous performances, try and pointscoring freaks and the cult heroes.

Enforcers, firebrands and hitmen, while those special signature moves like Matt Gidley's famous flick pass, John "Bomber" Peard's bombs, The Parramatta Eels innovations in the '70s like the wall and the flying wedge, Phil Blake's chip and chase, Andrew John's famous banana kick and more.

He also names his best 50 players and interestingly he puts the game's latest Immortal Andrew Johns as the best ever player ahead of fellow Immortals Clive Churchill, Wally Lewis and Reg Gasnier.

Daren Lockyer comes in at number five, ahead of another Immortal Johnny Raper, the great Dave Brown, Immortals Bob Fulton, Graeme Langlands and the man who started it all Dally Messenger at number 10.

ROBERT CRAWFORD

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