



## The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets

*Eva Rice*

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Set in 1950s London The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets centers around Penelope the wide- eyed daughter of a legendary beauty Talitha who lost her husband to the war. Penelope with her mother and brother struggles to maintain their vast and crumbling ancestral home while postwar London spins toward the next decade's cultural revolution. Penelope wants nothing more than to fall in love and when her new best friend Charlotte a free spirit in the young society set drags Penelope into London with all of its grand parties she sets in motion great change for them all. Charlotte's mysterious and attractive brother Harry uses Penelope to make his American ex-girlfriend jealous with unforeseen consequences and a dashing wealthy American movie producer arrives with what might be the key to Penelope's and her family's future happiness. Vibrant witty and filled with vivid historical detail The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets is an utterly unique debut novel about a time and place just slipping into history.

## The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets Details

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Author : Eva Rice

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## From Reader Review The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets for online ebook

### Kimz Zahour says

I can't say exactly what it is about this book that is so captivating... but it truly is. It's beautifully written, almost poetic, here is one of my favorite lines during a lull in an intense "duck supper" conversation; "Like the curious pause that takes place before blood seeps out from a cut finger, we all sat quite still...". Flipping through the pages was more like hearing the narrative of an actress like Emma Thompson with a wonderful British accent rather than reading. After a session, I was almost afraid to speak for fear I couldn't help myself from pretending I had an accent too. It was subtle in the sense that I was slow to realize that instantly and thoroughly I had fallen in love with the characters.

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### Bethany says

Before I read this book, I had a feeling that I was going to like it a *lot*. Whether it was the vintage dresses displayed on the cover or the numerous comparisons to "I Capture the Castle", I am not sure. But needless to say, I was not disappointed.

This book is neither suspenseful nor innovative but I couldn't put it down until I had finished it. I love the characters Eva Rice has created. They are undeniably quirky, but not so much as to make them unbelievable.

And I was enchanted with the description of high London society in the 1950's. A place and era I so desperately wish I could have been a part of.

I did not want this delightful book to end. Only a week after finishing it for the first time, I picked it up and read it again. (Which is something I rarely do.)

This is a book I know I will keep visiting again and again in the years to come. (Because, well... if I didn't, I would start to miss my friends Penelope, Charlotte, Harry, Inigo... &c.!)

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### Cristina Chaves says

It made me want to get a vintage Dior dress, put on some red lipstick and enjoy life a bit more. Very endearing <3

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### Lady Clementina ffinch-ffarrowmore says

The first of my 'theme' reads this month. This is a story of England in the mid-1950s, when rationing was coming to an end, Jazz ruled large, Elvis was first appearing on the scene (though not yet in England), but

the shadows of war still loomed large. Our ‘heroine’, eighteen-year-old Penelope Wallace, lives in her crumbling old ancestral home, Milton Magna, with her rather young mother, society-beauty, Talitha, and sixteen-year-old brother Inigo, who attends school but whose whole life is music and his guitar. Penelope attends classes on literature and art history, has a part-time job, and is preparing to spend some time in Italy the next year, and oh yes, she is besotted with singer Johnnie Ray. At home, the family is dealing with money problems, having to maintain Milton Magna (Penelope lost her father in the war, before her and her brother were even old enough to really understand it), each in their own way (her mother by wanting Penelope to marry money, and her brother wanting to make it big in the music world, much to her mother’s horror since that would inevitably involve him going away to America). Penelope and her family are pretty eccentric themselves but her somewhat uneventful life changes when one day at the bus stop she meets Charlotte, and through her, Charlotte’s aunt Clare, who’s in the midst of writing her memoirs (and happens to know Penelope’s parents though Penelope doesn’t immediately know how) and cousin Harry, a budding magician, determined to win back his ‘love’ Marina Hamilton....

This was my first Eva Rice book and I simply loved it (well, technically it was my second but the first was *Who’s Who* by Enid Blyton, so it doesn’t count as a novel). Reviewers have compared this one with Nancy Mitford and with *I Capture the Castle* and they’re right—the book definitely, especially at the beginning, has a very Mitford feel about it and also feels a lot like *I Capture the Castle* (the eccentric family, crumbling old house), but that said, it’s also its own story. I really enjoyed the story and all the characters, and especially the craziness and humour. Each character is very individual, well drawn out, eccentric, and interesting—none of your ‘ordinary’ people here, and there isn’t one (except, may be Marina), that one doesn’t ‘like’ or one wouldn’t mind knowing. I thought Rice captures the 1950’s world and indeed, the atmosphere (the ‘feel’ of it) really well—the world of music particularly, which makes perfect sense given her background. The tone remains light-hearted and humorous throughout, but the book also does give one a glimpse of the issues teens of the day then had to face (besides being teens that is)—to come to terms with a life that wasn’t in the midst of war (“I guess the strangest thing about your generation is that you grew up with war as your normality.”) and though the war’s over and there’s a new-found freedom, it’s shadows and impacts still remain with them, and aren’t something that can simply be shaken off. And Rice manages to do this without losing that light-hearted tone. Of course, I loved all the literary allusions and references (from Blyton (she of course, *had* to be there) to Hardy, and Scott Fitzgerald) as I usually do. And I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the illustrations—the little illustrations, not of characters but things that appear in the book—a taxi, a teapot and cup, weather vane, and such—there is a human or two but not, as such, specific characters in the book, and these I thought were really cute and great fun as well. This was a perfect beginning for my June theme reads, one I really enjoyed. I definitely want to be reading more of her books!

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### **Lara says**

I think this book is going to find a spot on my list of favorite books of all time. I loved the characters, I loved the story, I loved everything about it. It reminded me a little of *Pride & Prejudice*, just set in a different era and with a different plot.

This snippet of conversation between two of the main characters pretty much sums up my love of this book:

Charlotte: "[My mother] hates having me at home - plowing through the books in her library and kicking my heels up at night. She thinks I'm lazy."

Penelope: "Are you?"

Charlotte: "Of course. Any sensible person is. Aren't you?"

Indeed, Charlotte. Indeed.

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### **Oodles says**

I picked up this book expecting a bit of fluff...and found myself wonderfully surprised. Not fluff at all but rather a poignant story of 18 year old Penelope of a formerly wealthy but now impoverished family in 1950's England, teetering on the edge of womanhood. The book is replete with marvelous characters, Penelope's beautiful, young widowed mother; her younger musically-inclined brother named after Inigo Jones; her friends, Charlotte and Harry; and Aunt Clare. Full of literary and musical references, this is the best book I've read in a long time. Five GIANT stars!

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### **CLM says**

Penelope is waiting for a bus in London when swept away by Charlotte, an impetuous young woman wearing homemade clothes, who needs someone to share a taxi. Charlotte brings Penelope home to meet her aunt Clare and cousin Harry, and Penelope is pulled into a more entertaining world than offered by the Wiltshire countryside where she lives with her mother and slightly younger brother. It is the 1950s, and on the one hand Penelope is still affected by the loss of her father in WWII but she and her brother also yearn for the energy emanating from America as demonstrated by singers such as Johnnie Ray and Elvis Presley. . .

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### **Amanda says**

What wonderful read in which nothing quite so amazing occurs until you're absolutely, positively addicted to the world of the novel and just don't know how it happened.

Penelope writes her story of the awkward turning point from girl to woman. The minimal tidbits which revealed her older and wiser voice do not overpower the present tense of main story, but rather added small insights about the future.

As characters moved in and out of her life I would mourn their departure, celebrate returns, and miss them dearly when many pages had passed since they were last heard from.

It is an easy, fun read, and clearly not the most cerebral of texts. However, the novel has more depth than it initially lets on. Based on the back cover I was afraid I was getting a typical mousy girl becomes socialite extraordinaire or poor girl finds rich boy. Not so. Its true, some of our favorite guilty pleasure plots are wrapped up in *The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* but it come along with so much more

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### **Hilary says**

Fluff, and badly-edited fluff at that, full of anachronistic cultural references. It makes no sense from the word go (a strange young woman asks the protagonist to come to tea with her, to run interference between her and her aunt and cousin in spite of the fact that she apparently interacts with them on a daily basis); even the title, which is also used as the closing line, seems to have little to do with the story, leaving one with the impression that the author thought of the phrase, then tried to write the book that went with it, but didn't quite make it. Tries to be a cross between 'I Capture the Castle' and 'Love in a Cold Climate', but doesn't quite manage that, either.

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### **Katie says**

[With the romance, of course, but also with Inigo! DID he succeed in music? (hide spoiler)]

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### **Finn says**

I really couldn't get on with this at all, to the point where I had to give up! I even tried reading another book and then going back to it, but I just found that I wasn't interested. It started well and got me hooked and then I just found myself drifting off and thinking about other things... I wouldn't even be able to say what it is about!

I have friends who have highly recommended it, so I'd like to try it again, but there are just so many books that I'd like to read!!

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### **Blair says**

Before I say anything else about this book, I'd like to state for the record that I am definitely not a fan of 'chick lit'; anything with a pastel cover promising a stereotypical romantic storyline usually sends me running for the hills. So when a friend recommended this novel to me, I was initially unsure; but the 1950s setting and glowing reviews persuaded me to read on. I'm very glad I did.

*The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* is a real treat - the literary equivalent of a huge slice of chocolate cake. It centres around Penelope, an enchanting but slightly awkward teenage girl growing up in a crumbling country manor in post-war England - and of course, ultimately, it's a love story. But to me, the plot is secondary to the beautiful writing and excellent characterisation. Eva Rice's characters are some of the most perfectly drawn I have ever encountered; even minor players in the story are depicted so exquisitely that they seem to leap off the page. Added to which, the protagonists are so eccentric and interesting that it's impossible not to care about them. The descriptions are equally brilliant - the book really brings the 1950s to life, and the settings (Penelope's grand house, her friend Charlotte's aunt's jumbled flat, decadent parties in London) are, without exception, vividly, entrancingly detailed. The dialogue sparkles with wit, vigour and intelligence; at several points I laughed out loud - and the last few chapters actually made me cry, which I very rarely do over a book.

The only criticism I have to make of this novel, and the reason I've given it four stars rather than five, is that the plot is completely predictable - it's obvious from the start what's going to happen, which makes the conclusion perhaps not as compelling as it might otherwise have been. The quality of the writing gives me the feeling that Rice is an incredibly accomplished author who deserves better than to be ranked amongst 'chick lit' writers. But if the predictability doesn't bother you (and it really shouldn't, because the book is good enough to overcome it), this is an absolutely delicious, highly enjoyable read.

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### **Josie says**

I knew I'd love this book when I opened it up and saw that the author had written (among others) a non-fiction book titled *Who's Who in Enid Blyton*. Classic.

It's 1954, and six-foot-nothing Penelope Wallace lives with her younger brother Inigo, and her beautiful mother Talitha in their enormous family 'home', Milton Magna. It is falling apart, yet they cannot afford to repair it, and their financial struggles are becoming concerning. (Sound familiar, Dodie Smith fans?)

Penelope studies English and Italian in London, and works one day a week in an antique shop in Bath, but her real passion is for singer Johnnie Ray. Inigo dreams of becoming a rock and roll sensation himself, whilst their mother moons around, trying to forget their money woes by spending what they have on Dior.

Then Penelope, quite by chance, meets Charlotte. And Charlotte introduces her to her cousin, would-be magician Harry, with his two-coloured eyes, and his mother, Aunt Clare. Harry has just lost his girl, Marina, to another, richer, man, and is determined to get her back. He sees Penelope as the perfect girl to help him in his scheme of driving Marina mad with jealousy, but Penelope's not sure she wants to participate...

Funny and charming, I read this book straight through in less than a day.

Every time I think of 'Julian the Loaf', I get the giggles!

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### **Mariel says**

This is another vaguely rip-offish version of I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith. Confession? I'm not original about selecting books to read. I was looking at different book sites on the web and putting in favorite books to see what came up when I came across The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets. I'd read all of the books that were like all of my other favorites, except for Dodie Smith's I Capture the Castle (I'm still planning on reading the others, as well. Bring on the Elvis impersonators!). I need to get out more. (That could be read that I need to get a life outdoors but what I really meant was that I need to read different kinds of books if I'd read everything considered similar to everything else I already like.) "I liked that! This is safe and probably won't make me feel bad," I said to myself.

(I love I Capture the Castle because it is about paying attention to people you care about and trying to understand them as they are, no more or less. It's also about daydreaming and hoping you are more than you are. I know this feeling. I shouldn't read books that think the appeal was living in a run down castle. I shouldn't... but I've got one that's hugely popular in Iran to read next!)

[Side note: I've had unselected for quite a long time of my goodreads life the box "Share your reviews with partners of goodreads". Somehow, my reviews kept haunting me elsewhere on the internet like a pornography photo a teenager in a Lifetime movie took. Her '80s celebrity mama does her best but the picture just won't ever die. Will her foolishness haunt her forever?!]

So I started reading Eva Rice's The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets before I logged on to goodreads to check it out... Wait, chicklit?! I'm not a snob or anything, it's just that the books I personally associate with chicklit are what I associate with bad young adult novels that don't aspire to aim higher than Twilight. An assumption that the audience doesn't care and you don't have to do your best, I mean. I know there are tons of great young adult books out there, not just from my own teen days, and because I'm a fantasy fanatic and for a long time that was where you got new fantasy novels with kickbutt heroines. I don't know where to look in chicklit so if there are bastions of quality in there I'm not reading them. (I've already admitted to not looking far outside my favorites anyway.) I probably read a couple that were loaned out to me from a friend and then wasn't interested enough to ever peek into the genre again. (That's a shame because it means I hardly ever get to use my "Missjacksonifyou'renasty" shelf that is my "chicklit" shelf.)

Okay, so if The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets was a young adult novel I would whine that the author gave up making it all that it could be because it was for a young adult novel and teenagers (apparently publishers believe this) don't care if important parts are rushed. "They are young and have their whole lives ahead of them!" I imagine they say as they pen a nonending. Chicklit= brick wall ending and no whole life ahead of them? Twenty was adult in the '50s.

So I have prejudices against chicklit that I don't really understand. I suspect it has something to do with genres. All genres may have these. Romance novels recycle plots like every reader read their first romance novel that day. Fantasy novels often read like their readers never heard of The Lord of the Rings, Earthsea or Star Wars (where were they living?). Anyway, I was kinda annoyed because I had the feeling the book was not what it could be because of genre laziness. It's an historical! Pack on the setting! Who cares if it distracts from the story? Sighs.

Penelope is an eighteen year old girl in London in 1955 (before my mom was born! Sorry, that's my timetable of "really old"). She lives in a decrepit mansion that is far beyond its past glory. Her mom is still young (she married and had her first child at seventeen) and obsessed with her own beauty. She's one of those women that hate other women. That said it all to me. I felt that Rice could've left it at that and didn't need to go on and on about how gorgeous Talitha was, or that she scorned her daughter when it counted (once in a great white whale doesn't cut it when you're a young woman who needs her mother). She spends the money they don't have on Dior. Like in 'Castle', they don't do anything real to help out the money situation. It was difficult to feel sorry for them when they had food to eat, a servant and Penelope only worked one day a week (in an antiques store). She didn't protest too hard when her mama bought her new party dresses, either. I guess the author wanted to evoke the lost great houses tragedy of post-war England. I didn't give a crap in Atonement and I didn't give a crap here. It isn't that romantic to live in a freezing house (I've lived in a house with no a/c during Florida summers). The reason to save the house should have been more compelling than it has always been there.

Penelope's life gets some excitement when Charlotte barrels into her life at the bus station (she's so poor that she takes the bus twice a year! Penelope, that is). I sorta liked Charlotte. She was mostly sweet, in a selfish way, and loved life. However, there were times when I felt like I was watching movie montages of characters having fun and getting closer in a movie to save on time and convince you of great feeling that happened too fast. Only it didn't save on time and it was constant mentions of how easy going Charlotte was, how everyone liked her, how she turned offbeat behavior into charm, grace, charm, good looking, soooo charming constantly until I wanted to scream: OKAY, I GET IT! CHARLOTTE IS THE PERFECT SOCIETY GIRL! It reminded me of when my mom would sigh over how charming and what a big user my father was. Like the using people part wasn't important at all. It was annoying as reading Sherlock Holmes tell Watson he had the answer the whole time, when she did her superior act. Charlotte is like that about life stuff. Oh, you don't love him. Oh, that wouldn't work out. What makes her so special? No, I didn't mean that. Please don't tell me again! If only at some point Penelope had stood up for herself it would have been okay.

But she really doesn't. She's LUCKY that someone like her could attract their attention. Riiight.

Charlotte's cousin, Harry, was an asshole. I prayed that he was not the love interest. "I know he's probably the love interest but I really hope he's not," I said. I wanted Penelope to tell him off for being an asshole. Other characters telling Penelope that he loved her was not doing it for me. He's obsessed with this American society chick, Marina. He liked feeling good that a pretty girl paid him attention. Even better, he got attention because she paid him attention. She dumps him because he has no money and connections. Somehow, Penelope is roped into pretending to be his girlfriend to make the other girl jealous. He's pretty insulting about the whole deal. He's an asshole. Who cares if he has one blue eye and one brown one? David Bowie will not make me forgive Never Let Me Down with his one green and one blue eye.

And the namedropping was ridiculous. Marina knew Ari Onassis! Have you heard of this guy, Elvis? He's gonna be big. James Dean times fifty mentions! Hey, why didn't you say this was set in 1955? C.S. Lewis? Check. Penelope and Charlotte are obsessed with Johnnie Ray. I had actually heard of him. I have no idea why I had heard of him.

My favorite part of the book was how Penelope pretended to like jazz. Before she discovered Johnnie Ray who made her feel alive and colorful, she'd collect jazz records and fake it about jazz. She's still nervous to admit she likes Johnnie Ray and doesn't like jazz. This said more to me about Penelope being afraid to live outside of shadows than anything else. It's too bad her "new life" was living in other people's shadows. She doesn't admit it, though, which was a huge failing of the book. It was a better book when I pretended it had the potential for that to happen.

It also killed me the mentions of teddy boys (I know, I complained about namedropping! I can't help it. I find the teddy boys to be so amusing. I love how John Lennon pretended he was one when he wasn't!).

I liked reading about rations after the war. Since Gravity's Rainbow I'm perversely fascinated by nasty foods they ate during post war England to compromise for the lack of good treats (and English food is supposed to be bad anyway, right?). My favorite aisle in the shopping market is the foreign food aisles. I like looking at the wine candy and wondering if it came about like that nasty gin marshmallow from GR.

I wish that Penelope had lived outside of someone else's shadow. Her new friend Rocky, the music producer, was a red herring. I saw it coming that he'd end up with her mother. Her change of heart and will to live in the new age was not entirely believable. If she had found love in a way that didn't read like a loose end being tied up, maybe. C'mon, he was initially her daughter's love interest! Yuck! And a music producer come to town to meet her music and America obsessed brother, Inigo?

Rice should have stuck to the initial story of a girl stifled by 1950's England who doesn't admit she wants a change. And earned it.

Okay, I admit I felt more kindly towards the book after this evening when I watched An Education about a girl who felt stifled by 1960's England. What a shallow mess THAT was.

It was a real memoir from a woman who wanted to point the finger at her parents for her messed up love life (they didn't stop her) AND talk about how special her teenaged self was 'cause she could speak French. Penelope's relationship with her mother felt real to me until it was tied up too neatly. I believe a girl will take what she can get, but I also believe that she'll feel sad about the wasted years and wonder why she wasn't enough to snap her out of it. Penelope should have asked more of Harry, too. She should have asked more of

Charlotte. Why else write in the form of a memoir? Isn't it YOUR life?

Maybe that's where the "chicklit" tag comes in. It's not personal enough. I didn't get mad until the ending. Three stars for being an enjoyable enough read until the ending and she never tells anyone off.

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### **Nat K says**

*"We were young and the world revolved around this."*

Delicious. Utterly delectable and delightful. I adore this book ?

What a beautiful story. From the opening page where Penelope and Charlotte meet while waiting for a bus, I fell in love, and read blissfully on.

This is a gentle romp about manners, falling in and out of love, and growing up. Set in 1950s England, where the war is slowly being forgotten and rationing has come to end. Sunnier times are on the horizon. People can start to buy what they want, rather than only what they need.

Johnnie Ray is still making the girls scream, but Elvis Presley has just made his first recording. The world is changing...

I wish I could step into the pages to join Penelope & Charlotte for afternoon tea at Aunt Clare's place. Or cocktails and dinner at The Ritz. Or having tea in a caf with some coolly dressed Teddy Boys.

The chapters also have titles! Haven't seen that in a long time. It adds to the lovely eccentricity of the book. *"The Girl In The Green Coat"*, *"Five O'Clock And Later"*, *"Drama In The Dining Room"* et al. Fabulous.

Read this when you want to step away from the modern world for a little while.

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### **Trish at Between My Lines says**

I love books about female friendship and at the very heart of this book is a friendship that is exuberant, fun and full of life. Actually the whole book is full of that too.

First Line of The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets by Eva Rice:

*"I met Charlotte in London one afternoon while waiting for a bus."*

My Thoughts on The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets by Eva Rice:

The setting of this book is fab. It's set in post war England at a time of huge change. Teenagers are now a thing and they are ready to throw off the bad memories of the war and just grab life by the horns and shake it for all it's worth. They've had enough of rationing and death and bad news and now it's time to party and

enjoy being young. The moment is everything and that feeling is contagious while you read.

Penelope lives in a huge mansion that is falling down around her family's ears. I was picturing a house like Downton Abbey in my head, a few decades on, badly neglected and in need of a huge money injection. Penelope is slightly awkward, very English and desperately in love with Johnnie Ray, an early rock and singer from America.

And one day, she meets the zany, high-spirited Charlotte. Who flies in to her life like a whirlwind and stirs everything up. I loved the friendship of the two girls; it was sincere and supportive and brought fun and joy to both girls. And both girls just pulsate with youth and romantic ideas and their fandom of Johnnie Ray was hilarious.

So setting, check. Characters, check. But great as those two were, what really shone for me was the writing. It flowed from the page, it was thought-provoking and everything from the language used to emotions evoked just made me live, sleep and breathe the late 1940s and I loved it.

It is also a rollercoaster of a book and it made me laugh and swoon but it also choked me up at times. It has a charming, quirky feel but is well able to hit you in the feels at poignant moments too.

I do have to say, it was predictable and everything wrapped up very neat and tidy. But I had such fun along the way that I didn't mind that in the slightest. There were a few romances and they were sweet but not the main focus of the book. Mostly this is a story of friendship and family and is absorbing and entertaining. It might have a simple theme but it is also an unforgettable read.

So it gets a huge thumbs up. And I can't believe the book is 10 years old, how come no one ever told me about this one before? Peeps, if you know more books like this, shout now, I need them in my life!

Who should read *The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* by Eva Rice?

I'd highly recommend this to you if you like historical fiction, books about friendship and strong character development. Fans of *I Capture the Castle* should also enjoy.

Thanks to Bookbridgr and Headline for giving me a copy of this book in exchange for an honest, unbiased review.

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## **Beth says**

*The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* takes place in 1950s England, after the war is finally over and people are learning to live again.

That's what this book is about. This book is color and vitality and giddiness and euphoria. Life is an endless stream of thrilling, heady adjectives, a whirling mass of energy and joy and excitement; every occurrence is larger than life in a way that it *would* be had it been forbidden or impossible just years back.

For careful Penelope, the protagonist, learning to live again starts with accepting a tea invitation from a stranger. And then the stranger turns into a best friend named Charlotte. And then comes the hilarious

scheme to win back Charlotte's cousin's girlfriend, and the party invitations and the champagne - lots and lots of champagne - that come with the scheming. Or that seem to be a part of everyday life.

The frenetic pace of living (and of the book) does calm down eventually, but it gives way to a slower, richer appreciation of life. To thinking as opposed to merely living in the moment. To the recognition that life is meant to be lived in the moment *and* planned ahead, and that surviving a war doesn't make people immortal. That material possessions aren't enough to buy happiness. That love and friendship are found in strange places, and that the world is smaller and people closer than one might ever imagine.

*The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* does have flaws. But I'm giving it five stars anyway, because the flaws are minor, and because the book is so charming and full of life and color and joy that it diverts attention away from them. This is a book that tantalizes with the hope and promise of everyday living.

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### **Carrie says**

I suggested this as January's book club book because I was looking for something that was not too taxing, but still respectable, and this turned out to be the perfect choice. It is the story of Penelope Wallace (actually Lady Penelope, though not too much is made of that), an impoverished noblewoman (or rather an impoverished eighteen year old girl), whose family owns a stately home of England, but one that is falling apart since her father died in the war hot on the heels of her grandparents and the death duties were too much to take - particularly when the house was used by the troops during the War and was largely destroyed. She and her mother and brother are doing their best to keep afloat while she tries to figure out what to do with herself. On her way home from a wan Italian lesson she meets Charlotte, who introduces her to a more interesting type of society. In between she falls in love, moons over Johnny Ray (a precursor to Elvis), tries to ferret out the mysterious secret between her mother and Charlotte's glamourous aunt, and does her best to grow up in post-War England.

What I liked about the book was the way that that Rice made the time period come alive. She captured what it was like to be that first post war generation - to have grown up with depravation, and to be entering a world where rationing was finally ending, and where the first generations of teenagers were coming into existence. It was nicely done. What I didn't love was the plot, which either was so obvious you could have seen it from Mars, or so out of left field that it didn't really hold up for me. But the characters were fun, and so was the setting, and this was a debut novel, so if you're looking for light escapist reading that won't embarrass you (i.e., chick lit), I recommend this wholeheartedly.

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### **Julie Christine says**

This is a delightful confection of a novel by the daughter of lyricist Tim Rice. It's a coming-of-age story set in 1954-55 Britain- moving back and forth from London to the narrator's crumbling mansion home in the country. To call the novel "chick lit" would be to dismiss the wonderful characterization and detailed portrait of privileged young people in post-war swinging London- where Johnny Ray was king and war was a distant memory...for some...

But A.S. Byatt it isn't! It's a sweet, easy read with snappy dialogue and gorgeous clothes. The ending is a bit pat-- of course you knew who would end up with whom-- but it still made me smile and left me with a

serious jones for London, particularly the lost world of 1950's London...

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### **Elizabeth says**

I \*loved\* this book. The whole reading experience was self-indulgent. God knows why I picked it up - I liked the look of the cover, I think, after reading someone else's enthusiastic Goodreads review.

It is *I Capture the Castle* Lite. Or *I Capture the Castle* set 20 years later on, in a giddy 1954/1955 England gorging itself on butter and sugar and bacon and pop music after 15 years of austerity and rationing. The castle in question is the *wonderful*, decaying and doomed Great House Milton Magna, plundered for military accommodation during the war and never quite recovered. In this book it's the teenage narrator's ancestral home. Actually, it's safe to say that Magna, as the narrator fondly refers to it, is my favorite character in the book. ('*Nothing, not the dedication of Inigo Jones, nor the years of hard work from those austere, painted faces that lined the walls in the drawing room and the hall, made me anything other than the most important person ever to have lived at Magna, the one who understood and loved the house the most.*' As the precarious heir to a similarly decrepit building I SO UNDERSTAND THIS.) Out of all possible outcomes, my only desire was for some rich American bloke to come along and fall in love with the HOUSE and save its ~~butt~~ Long Gallery.

That didn't happen, but all the human characters ended up happy, which really is a much better outcome.

Also like *I Capture the Castle*, it's a book about writing and learning to write. In fact absolutely nothing happens in this book up until a dramatic event near the end, which ridiculously I didn't see coming but in retrospect is really the only right and proper thing to have happened. (And I am convinced HARRY DID IT.) Most of the book is parties and train rides and young people getting ridiculously drunk - all disguising some deep and beautiful truths about growing up.

I can't figure out why this isn't a YA novel. But it isn't. It should be; fifty years ago it would have been. But it isn't.

*'One would never write a single word if one knew the horrors that lay ahead,' agreed Charlotte.*

*'But if you sell copies by the sackload, you may well forget the horrors,' I agreed quickly.'*

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