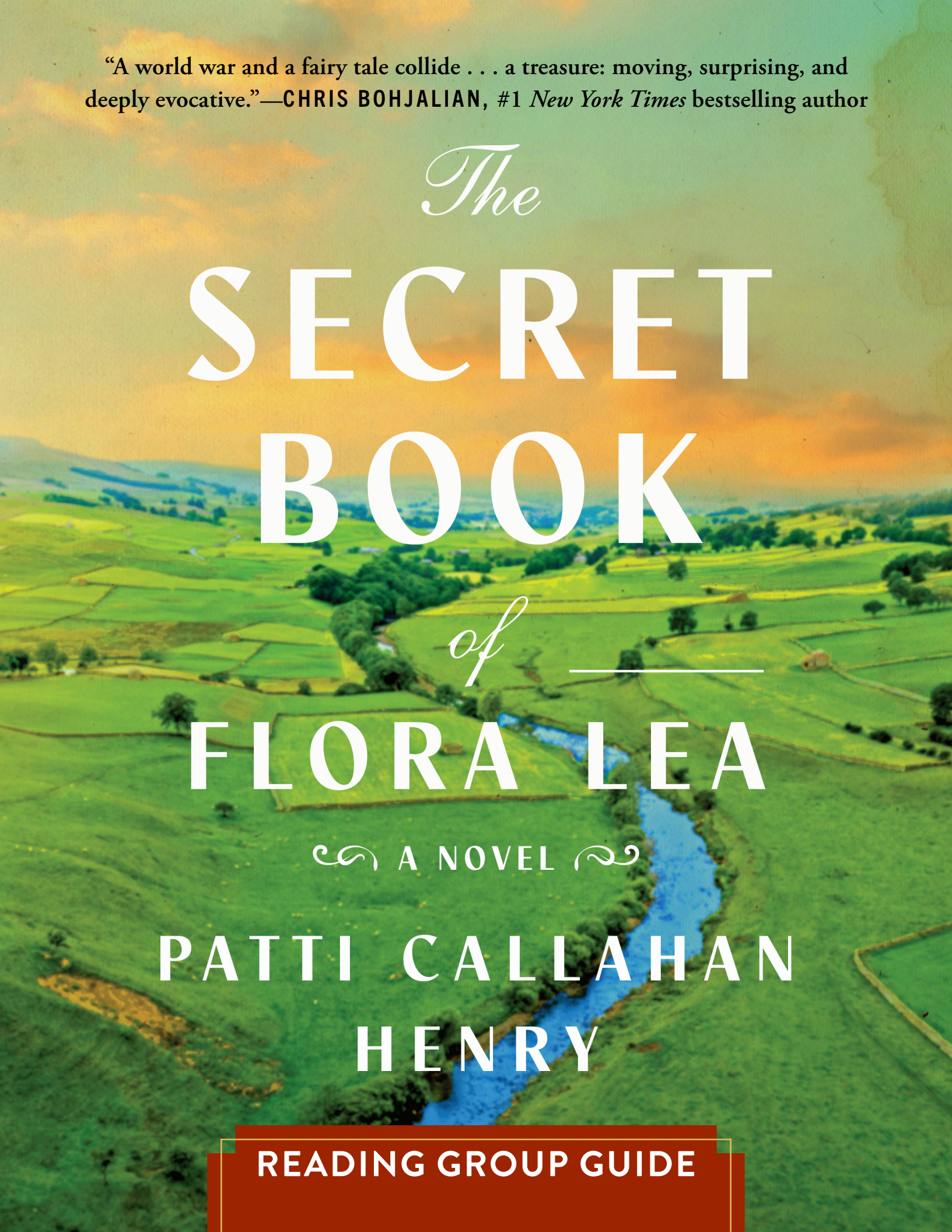
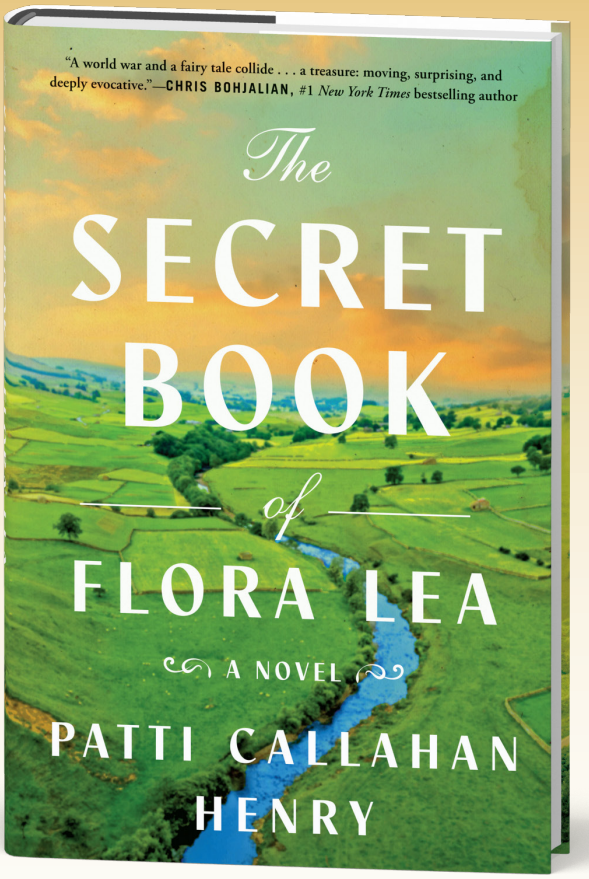

"A world war and a fairy tale collide . . . a treasure: moving, surprising, and deeply evocative."—CHRIS BOHJALIAN, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author
The
SECRET
BOOK
of
FLORA LEA
A NOVEL
PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY
READING GROUP GUIDE



This reading group guide for *The Secret Book of Flora Lea* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Patti Callahan Henry. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

When a woman discovers a rare book that has connections to her past, long-held secrets about her missing sister and their childhood spent in the English countryside during World War II are revealed.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Hazel and Flora Lea's childhood experience was inspired by Operation Pied Piper—a real life event in British WWII history in which over three million children were evacuated from their homes to live with volunteer families throughout the English countryside. Were you familiar with this piece of history prior to reading the novel?

2. Hazel takes great care of the rare books while employed at Hogan's Bookshop, wearing white gloves and logging items meticulously. In passing, the owner, Edwin, has mentioned the enormous value original illustrations can add to a book. What is revealed about Hazel's character in the decision to take the copy of *Whisperwood and the River of Stars* along with the illustrations? What about when her initial denial of taking them is factored in?

3. When Hazel makes the phone call to Peggy Andrews seeking information about the book, she gets an unexpected answer about the origin of *Whisperwood and the River of Stars*. What does this broadly say about the creation of storytelling and mythmaking? Can someone ever own a story?

4. Bridie Aberdeen, as a character, is presented as extremely warm and nurturing yet with some eccentricities. The town gossips about her practices and the "mysterious" disappearance of Henry's father. What was your first impression of Bridie? Did that change at any point during the book?

5. Hazel and Flora's mother had several opportunities to take her daughters back to London but ultimately made the decision that they were safer and better served in Binsey with Bridie and Henry. Do you have a positive or negative opinion of their mother? Would you have made a different choice?

6. Only through an honest conversation years after the fact do Hazel and Henry discover their shared guilt over what happened to Flora. Would that silence have lasted as long if Hazel and Henry were older when Flora first disappeared?

7. Barnaby is supportive of Hazel's desire to reach out to Peggy Andrews and even encourages her to get in touch with Dorothy Bellamy, thinking a reporter may be able to help, yet he eventually struggles with Hazel's never-ending quest and its effect on their relationship. Does Barnaby's ultimatum change your view of the character? Did Hazel take her quest too far?

8. How did you feel about the reveal of Dorothy Bellamy's past? Did Dorothy's Aunt Imogene have justification in her decision to remove the child the way she did?

9. How do the specific time periods—World War II and 1960—affect the way in which the case of Flora's disappearance was handled? Would the outcome have been different if set in present day?

10. At the end of the story, Dorothy (Dot) is coming to terms with two versions of herself. What are the broader implications of childhood memory? Why do we so clearly remember some things and not others, regardless of importance? Can you think of your earliest childhood memory?

11. Hazel's character displays many different emotions in the 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?

12. *The Secret Book of Flora Lea* weaves an ode to stories and, ultimately, how we carry them with us throughout our lives. Is storytelling a universal way for humans to connect? How has storytelling affected your life?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Seek out a map of England and chart the train journey of Hazel and Flora from London to the real-life village of Binsey in Oxfordshire.

2. Enjoy a tea service: a selection of English breakfast, Earl Grey, or green tea with sugar and milk options on the side. Add it some tea biscuits or scones with butter and jam as a food option.

3. As children, Hazel and Flora become enraptured with the story of Whisperwood. In the spirit of the novel, share a memorable book or story from your childhood.

4. Learn what else Patti is up to online at **PattiCallahanHenry.com**

Photo © Bud Johnson Photography

A Conversation with Patti Callahan Henry

Q: You speak in the author's note about your discovery of Operation Pied Piper—a piece of history lost to time for many people. Were there other bits of history you discovered in your research for this novel?

A: Before I started writing this novel, I knew that British children had been sent to the country during World War II for their safety, but I'd been unaware of its operational name. As I dug a little deeper, curious about the impact of exile on the children of war, I discovered that this scheme had been given the title of a German legend about a piper who lures children away from their homes and town. Those children were never seen again. As I read and conducted my research, I wondered this: Why would the British government name a scheme to keep children safe after a legend of lost children? Curiosity often leads me to story, and this time was no different. Children weren't just sent to the country—they were also sent to America, Australia, and Canada by ship (sometimes with fatal results). WWII is full of untold stories, and in *The Secret Book of Flora Lea* I try to bring some of the Operation Pied Piper tales to light—from the small facts about how children sat in town halls while hearing the ringing voices of "I choose this one" to the larger narrative of bombings and exile. I wanted to know about the children's experiences of this time, and Hazel and Flora Lea were the ones to tell it.

Q: You've written both contemporary and historical fiction novels. What do you enjoy most about writing historical fiction?

A: The thing I love most about historical fiction is the thing that thrills me about any research, which is finding the one small fact that gives me pause, that causes a tingle at the back of the neck, that tells me there is something more to the story. I love finding a line or an event or a lost voice that changes what I *think* I know about a story, that flips the known narrative on its head, and that brings me to new understanding of a time, a person, or an event. I once heard this phenomenon described as "emancipating the truth" and I think about that phrase over and over as I do my research: How can I bring a fuller or more interesting truth to this story?

Q: *The Secret Book of Flora Lea* is set in dual time periods and places—the World War II English countryside and 1960s London. Did you know from the start that those would be the settings for this book?

A: I only knew a few things when I sat down to write this novel: that the story would be impacted by Operation Pied Piper, that there would be two sisters who loved each other dearly, and that the older sister would create a fairy-tale world for just the two of them when they are sent away from home. The rest of the novel grew from those seeds. As I made my way into the story and placed it in the landscapes I love (London, Oxford, Binsey, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts) the settings and time fell into place. 1939 is the year of Operation Pied Piper and 1960s London is a fascinating period in history, and I wanted both the city and Hazel to be on the cusp of great change.

Q: This book is a real ode to storytelling and how we can carry it with us for years. Are there particular books or stories from your childhood that you carry along as an adult?

A: The everlasting refrain from my childhood was this: "Get your nose out of that book and join us." I loved books, the library, stories, and other worlds. I believe we are made from bits and pieces that stick to us, and for me, a lot of those bits are made of books I read. If I'm to choose the most influential from childhood they would be The Chronicles of Narnia, the Little House on the Prairie series, Nancy Drew, *Old Yeller*, and *Little Women*. It's an odd combination of influence, but somehow, they all seem to define my childhood reading in a time capsule.

Q: What are some of your favorite places or things to pull from for inspiration when writing a novel?

A: Inspiration is mysterious, elusive, and refuses to be looked at directly in the eye. I try not to pin it down for fear that it will never visit me again! But I do know that inspiration comes when I stay curious. I often write about the origins of stories, and as

you'll read in *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*, there is the overarching question of "Where did Whisperwood come from? What are its origins?" If I notice something, or my curiosity is peeked, there is usually a story hidden inside that framework. My work is inspired by poetry (as evidenced by the Mary Oliver poem at the start of this novel), by nature, and by reading, conversations, and dreams. In other words, my work is inspired by anything and everything that gives me a little tingle of wonder. When I pay attention, the world offers me small and large moments of inspiration. When I traveled to England for research, I had so many moments of synchronicity around the characters and setting that's it is entirely possible for me to believe that the story was working with me to appear in the world as a novel. Now, that is inspiring.

Q: The relationship of Hazel and Flora weaves a beautiful thread about sisterhood. Were there certain elements of sisters you felt were essential to this story?

A: Sisterhood is complicated—I know; I am the oldest of three—and I wanted to show the tug and pull of both loving closeness and the need for independence that is often inherent in sibling relationships. While Hazel loves and feels responsible for her little sister, as she creates a fairy-tale land for just the two of them, but as she shares a bed in the small cottage, she also yearns for something of her own. This dissonance leads to what she believes is a terrible mistake, and her sister disappears, preserving Flora Lea as a six-year-old in Hazel's mind instead of the woman she might have become. I wanted to explore all those facets of being an older sister: the reality versus the fantasy, the imagining versus the reality, and the guilt that follows Hazel into adulthood, keeping her from her true aspirations until she knows the truth.

Q: You're a founding member of Friends and Fiction with authors Mary Kay Andrews, Kristin Harmel, and Kristy Woodson Harvey. How has being a part of that group informed your path as a writer?

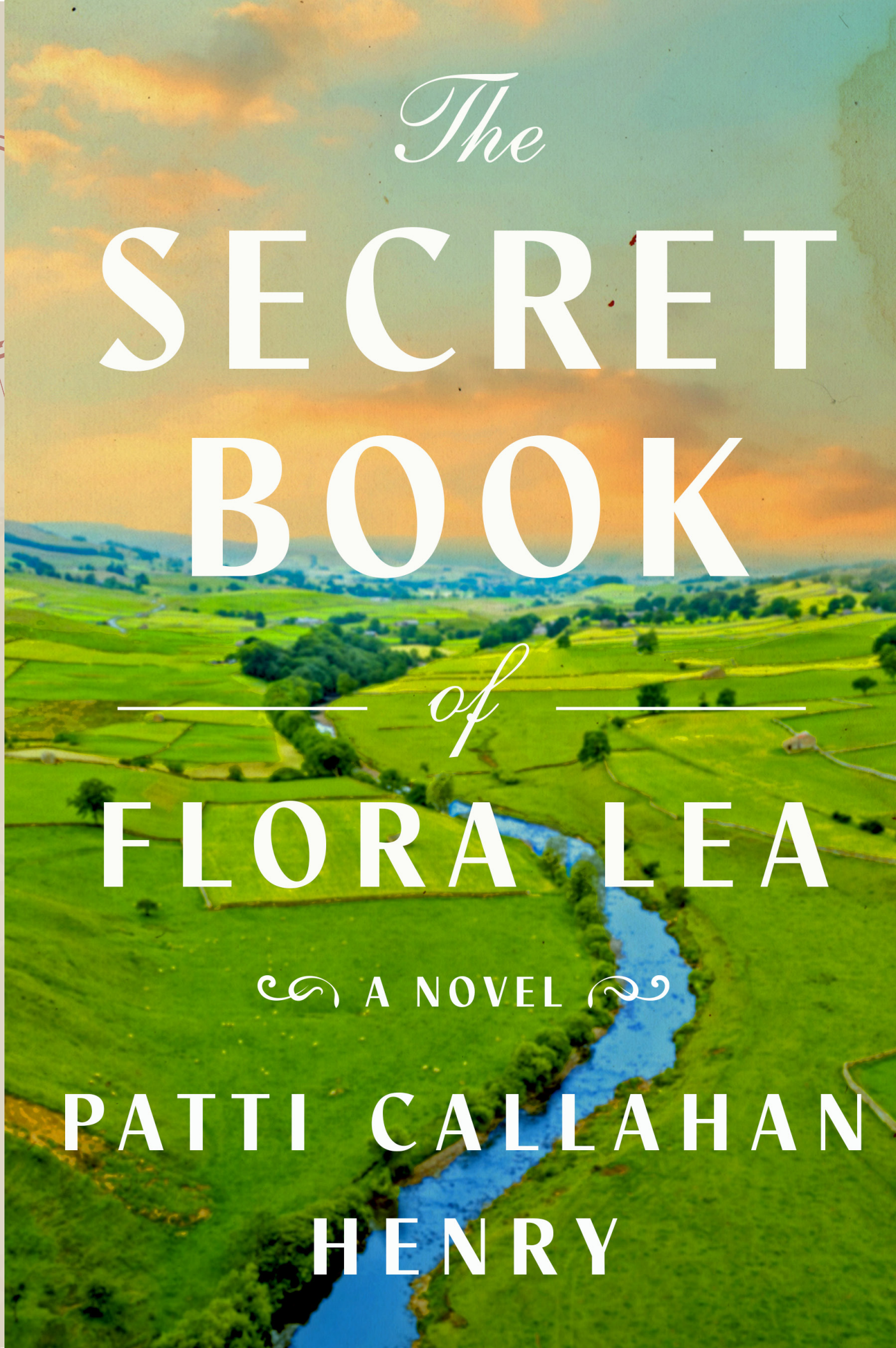
A: We founded Friends and Fiction during the pandemic when all our book tours had been cancelled. We were worried about how to reach our readers, ones we wouldn't see on tour. We were lonely and locked down, and we were concerned about bookstores. This led to a Zoom gathering where we talked, brainstormed, laughed, and shared our lives and work. It was Mary Kay Andrews who said, "Let's take this conversation *live* on Facebook." And that was the beginning of an unintended and extraordinary journey, and the seed of one of the most vibrant communities on the internet and now in the real world: a reading community of well over a hundred thousand members on Facebook, a show on YouTube, a podcast, a book club, and now live events. With weekly author interviews, this show and community has changed our lives. We are part of something so much bigger than ourselves, and we know how important it is for writers, readers, librarians, booksellers, and published authors. As for how it has

informed my path as a writer? I know that my writing life isn't just about my story or my work, but instead it is an integral part of a thriving literary community.

Q: What inspired you to write a novel centered around a bookstore? In what ways did this aspect of the narrative contribute to how the story unfolded?

A: I knew that a book of illustrated fairy tales solves the mystery of Flora Lea's disappearance. I didn't know what those answers would be, but I knew they'd be exposed by this book's existence. So what better place for Hazel to find this book than in the very bookstore where she works? I am also fascinated by the idea of a "shadow artist"—meaning someone who works adjacent to the work they want to do but area somehow blocked from doing. Hazel wants to write stories again. She hoards notebooks and works in a bookshop, but she also believes that the story she created took her sister. I wanted her to heal from that guilt. And then on a personal note, bookstores and libraries have been, as for most of us, sanctuaries. This novel is partly an ode to stories and bookstores, to their power and their importance, and so I created a bookstore I'd want to work in, one that you, the reader, would want to visit.

travel journal



The SECRET BOOK of FLORA LEA

A NOVEL

PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY

Post Welcome Card

As a writer, I found that sometimes my imaginary and real worlds collide. Imagination and reality met in a space we often call a "thin place" where one can seem to walk in two worlds at the same time.

That collision is exactly what happened when I embarked on my trip to England to research some of the places in my novel, *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*.

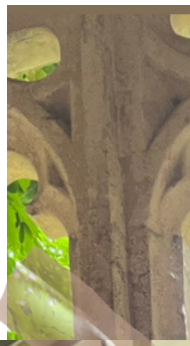
Join me on my magical journey and hear about the synchronistic things that happened as my life and my imaginary sisters, Hazel and Flora's lives met, in the countryside and cities of England.

Some places shine so bright in the imagination that they could never live up to expectations if you actually visit there. The places in my novel - Oxford, Binsey, London, and Cornwall - are not some of those places. Instead, I found the lyrical voices of the people, the green of landscape, the feeling that behind every door lies a mystery, and the sense that a thousand years of stories are deep in the stones.

On July 28th, I landed in London and immediately departed for Oxford where my imaginary sisters, Hazel and Flora, were sent when the evacuation decree went into effect in September of 1939.

After flying all night, I arrived in Oxford mid-day and ate breakfast with a friend before setting out. This restaurant, the Old Parsonage, is in a 700 year old building, and my sisters would have passed it on their way to the Towne Center.

That day, I wandered around Oxford imagining what the sisters Hazel and Flora, who were fifteen and five-years-old and had just been evacuated from London, had seen when they first arrived in town. With other evacuated children, they were scared and feeling so alone. They saw the cobbled streets, and the pinnacled towers of Oxford, where their parents met, and the ancient feeling of continuity offered them the same comfort that this offered me that morning as I wandered around.



where Hazel and Harry first met

A few days later, it was time to visit the village of Binsey where Flora and Hazel lived with the Aberdeen family in a small stone cottage. I wanted to walk the paths the sisters would have walked as they passed through the meadow, over the bridge and into Binsey on the River Thames.

The ancient beauty of Port Meadow took my breath away. Cows and horses fed on the sweet grasses of a meadow that has not been plowed in at least 1,000 years. This is a meadow where soldiers camped after the Battle of Dunkirk, it is the meadow of St. Frideswide mythology (more on that coming up!), and it is also the meadow that inspired parts of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

The River Thames glinted in the distance, and I felt untethered from 2022. It might be the year 1939 when Hazel and Flora walked the same path.

BINSEY, OXFORD ENGLAND

After walking the tow path along the river and hearing stories about Frideswide from my tour guide, Tabby, we crossed what is called “the rainbow bridge” and reached the medieval hamlet of Binsey.

When we arrived at the end of the dirt road that led toward Binsey, I felt as if I had walked into my novel.

BINSEY, OXFORD ENGLAND

Binsey is a hamlet where the street sign at the crossroads points two ways: The Church; The Perch (a pub). In Binsey, the light feels like you are underwater, the stones hum with ancient stories, thatch roof houses nestle next to garden gates, the River Thames runs through like a silver thread; cows nuzzle a pasture, healing wells produce stories of saints and legends of rogue princesses, Lewis Carroll drew inspiration for his dormouse and treacle well, the medieval Church of St. Margaret looks as if it sprouted from the earth, and a pub serves cider.

We made our way down the long road toward the church. Wild Queen Anne's lace, purple clover ,and ox-eye daisies grew along the path just as they do in the novel.

We soon reached the stone wall that surrounded the church grounds and Tabby told me something that took my breath.

She pointed above Binsey to the woodlands and said, "They are called Wyckham Woods."

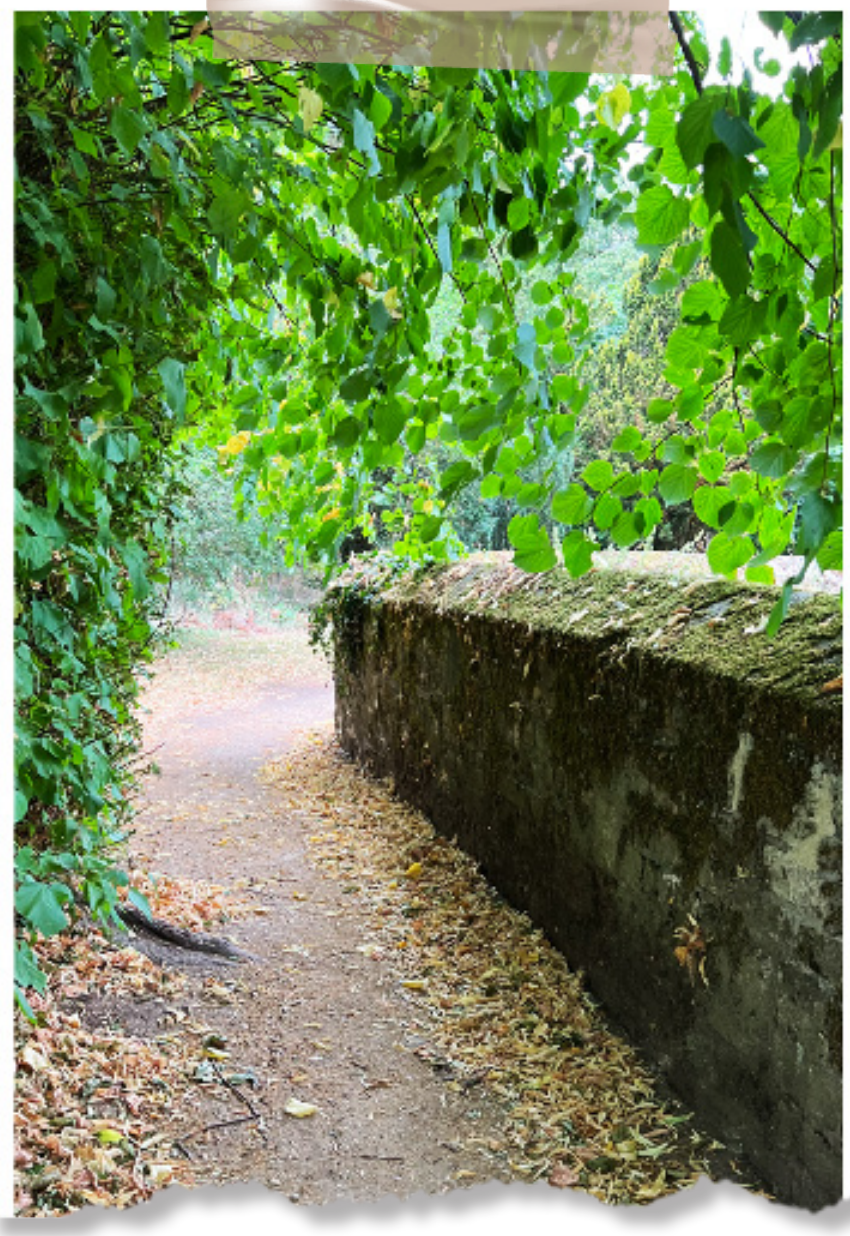
"Whisperwood," I said with tingles running up and down my arms.

"No, Wyckham." She smiled. "One family has always owned it, and they left it to their daughter, Hazel."

"Hazel?" I asked.

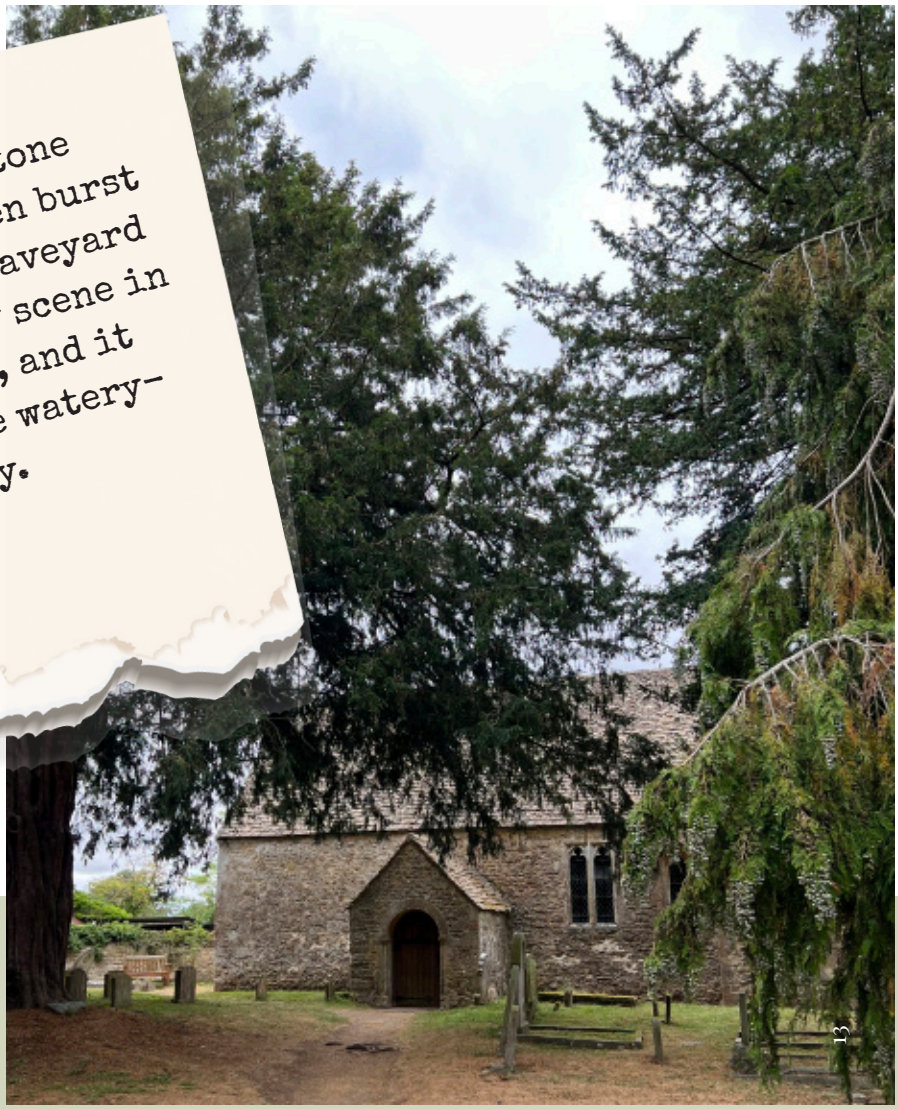
"Yes."

BINSEY, OXFORD ENGLAND



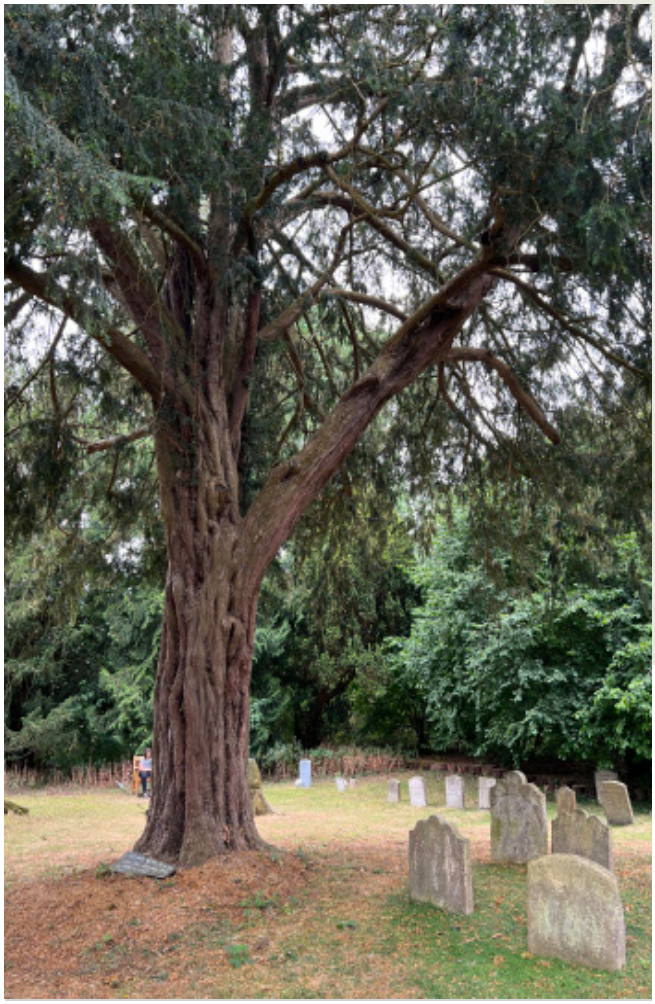
I explained to Tabby that my fairy tale land in *The Secret Book of Flora Lea* is called Whisperwood and that my main character was named Hazel. Her face broke into a wide grin. She too knew that land and stories can alchemize into something very near to magic.

We walked a pathway, crowded by a stone wall and overhanging trees and then burst into the sunlight of an ancient graveyard where St. Margaret's Church. A key scene in the novel unfolds in this church, and it felt nearly mystical to enter the watery-light of the candlelit sanctuary.



There is a well on the grounds of St. Margaret's, a well that is connected to the legend of Frideswide, whose name means "Strong Peace." Frideswide was a princess in AD 700's. A king of Mercia, named Alger, wanted to marry her and she wanted to be a cloistered nun; these two ambitions could not be reconciled. So she ran and Algers chased her. Frideswide sought divine intervention and Algar, was struck blind. It is said that Frideswide used the waters of this well to heal him, and he promised to leave her alone. Frideswide went on to build a community devoted to the healing arts and is now the patron saint of Oxford.

BINSEY, OXFORD ENGLAND

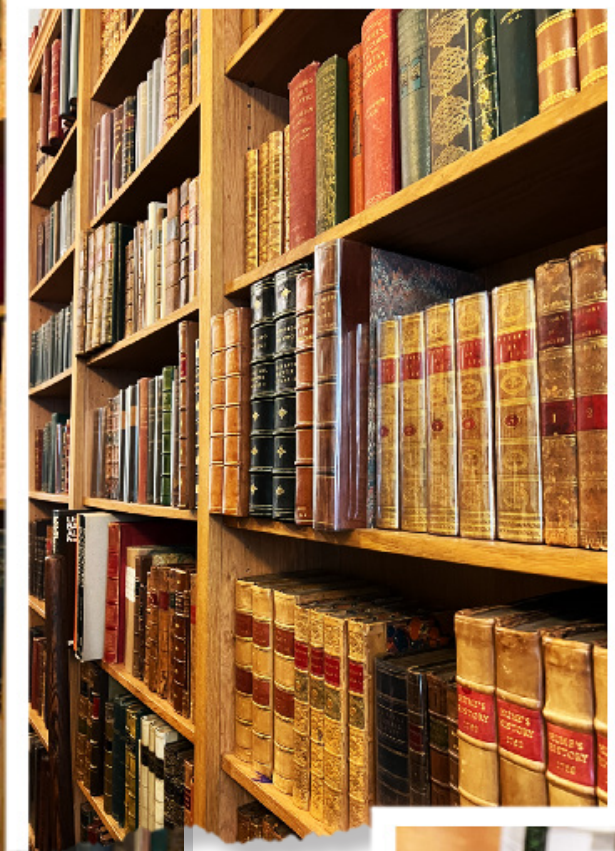


Lastly, we visited The Perch, a stone and low-beamed pub, which rests on a large expanse of green grass with wicker bowers and weeping willows. A garden path under wicker bowers leads to the River Thames. There are stories of the Irish poet, Dylan Thomas and Lewis Carroll, and the astounding poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, hanging out and creating stories in this place. I sat under a weeping willow where a pivotal scene in the novel occurs, and wondered what it would have been like to meet any of those men under these trees.


THE
PERCH
FREEHOUSE
BINSEY VILLAGE · OXFORD

MECKLENBURG SQUARE, BLOOMSBURY, LONDON

Next I went to London to visit Mecklenberg Square in Bloomsbury where my imaginary sisters lived with their parents. I saw the outside of the home where I imagined they lived and gazed into the secret garden across the street where my imaginary sisters spent so much of their childhood. It is also the very place where Hazel lives in the 1960's part of the novel, and where other pivotal scenes occur.



In *The Secret Book of Flora Lea* there is... obviously... a book. And an antiquarian bookshop and a bookseller named Tim in London. When I knew I was coming on this trip, I booked an interview. I wanted to walk into a little shop off Charing Cross, to smell and see and wander about. I walked into this shop and held out my hand, "Hello," I said. "I'm Patti." "Hallo," he said. I'm Tim."

When I asked one of his mates, Laurence, about antiquarian book-selling he said. "Glory of the trade is there are no two days the same."

The glory of the trade is how I would describe writing this novel and embarking on this journey.

By now I should be accustomed to these whispers from the story-world, but I was again floored and immediately told him of the coincidence.
We talked about books and maps and illustrations. His bookseller mates stopped by, and we poured a glass of wine. He allowed me into the basement, and I found myself over-whelmed by the wonder of books that are over 500 years old.

I never want to forget that day.

...Forgive me if I use you in the pages of a story but you are too seductive to ignore.

Lastly, I visited Cornwall, which you'll discover is another important setting in *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*.

I had heard about Cornwall, of course. I'd seen the photos, perused the maps, but nothing can describe the beauty and the light and the sea and the air. Sublime is close but not close enough.

A place of myth and legend, of wind-swept cliffs and blue ribboned seas, of lichen covered roofs and wheat fields that echo the tawny sand beaches, of proper Tea at 330 and melodic accents, of long winding paths that lead to the top of cliffs and the setting for Daphne du Maurier novels I read while sitting on porches overlooking gardens, of clotted cream and raspberries. Cornwall, I will never forget you, and forgive me if I use you in the pages of a story, but you are too seductive to ignore.

We also visited the Lost Gardens of Heligan, which isn't in the novel, but still presented a beautiful moment of synchronicity.

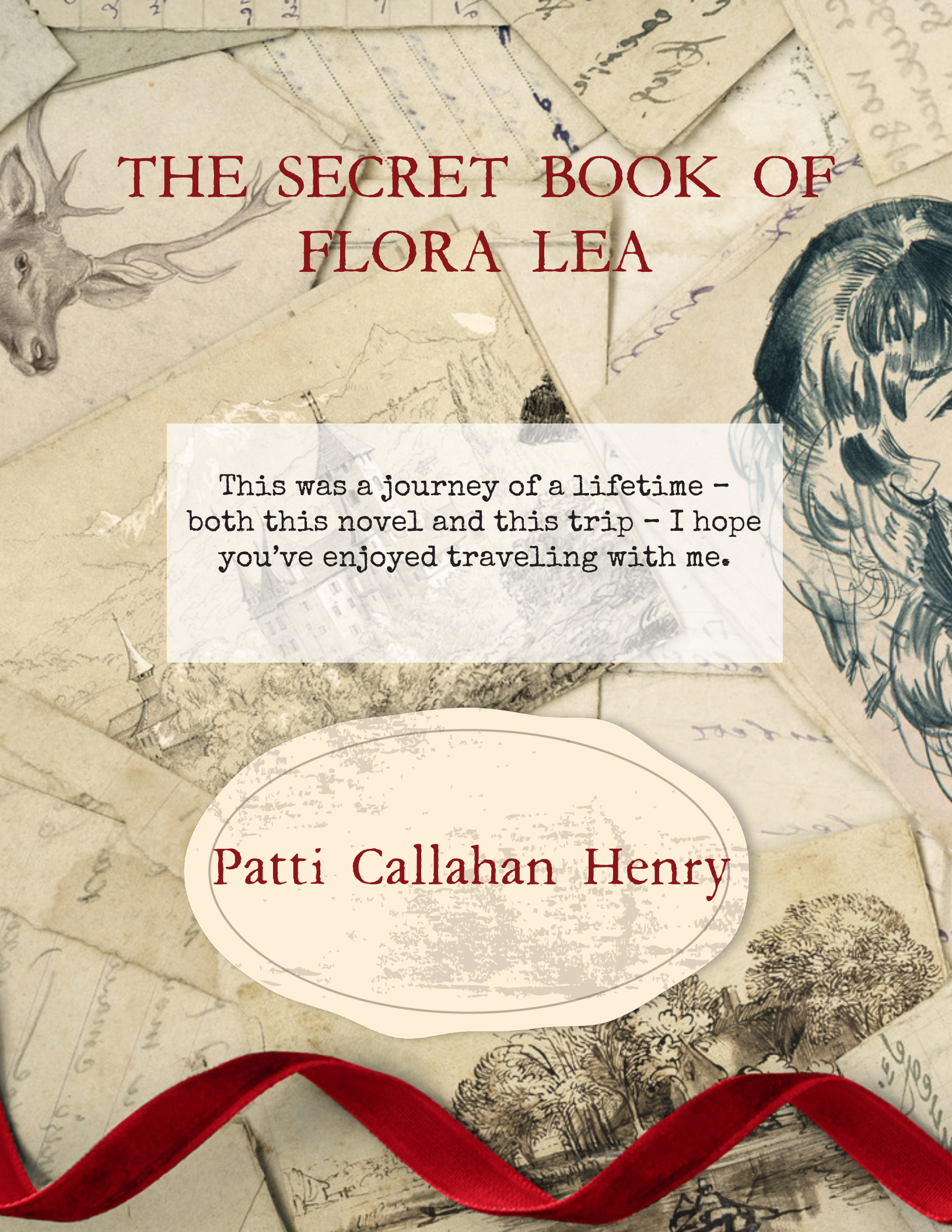
A long time ago, in the 1700s, there was a family named the Tremaynes. They had a thriving 200 acre farm and garden with a manor house to envy. Then the Great War happened. The garden gate was closed. The house was turned to flats. The garden was forgotten. But in the way of fairy tales, someone in the year of 1990 opened the gate. And the The Lost Gardens of Heligan were found.

Since then decades of overgrowth have been cut, priceless plants uncovered and buildings and walls restored. Now it is a wonder. A beautiful enchanting area with a wide expanse of green acres.

Who doesn't want to open a gate and find a lost garden. It's the stuff of all good stories and this one is real.

When I walked in, I saw the first large swath of garden and it was called... Flora's Green.

Once again, I felt as if my character, Flora, had winked at me.


THE SECRET BOOK OF FLORA LEA
This was a journey of a lifetime – both this novel and this trip – I hope you've enjoyed traveling with me.
Patti Callahan Henry

The LEAVING-DAY

Forest Gate, West Kensington, London

September 1939

"All right children," our teacher, Miss Farley said on that first September morning. "Let's empty our rucksacks for our check-off list, and then today we'll have the pleasure of a visit from a brigadier general with the British army to help us with our mask fittings."

In the safety of our little white classroom with the blackboard up front, the aroma of chalk dust in the air, and the wooden desks in perfect rows, these drills felt like just another lesson, like calisthenics or sums or spelling. We were children, and yet we had our gas masks in our laps and packed rucksacks sat at our sides. I was nine years old and only vaguely understood that our lives were about to be upended. Oddly, exile felt both imminent and completely unreal.

Together, as we'd done so many times, we spilled our rucksack contents onto the floor. Plimsolls. Comb. Underwear. Spare socks. Toothbrush. Identity card. Name tag. Ration card. A stamped postcard to send to our parents when we arrived at our unknown destinations.

As Miss Farley worked her way through the room we whispered to each other: How is it possible that they would send us away to live with strangers? Surely they wouldn't really do it, would they? How could it be that they would take us from our parents? We had done nothing wrong; of course we hadn't, but there was a war.

Miss Farley reached my side and inspected each item meant to be in my rucksack. "Jan, where is your toothbrush?" she asked.

I shook out my sack and looked inside. "I'm sorry, ma'am, one of my sisters must have taken it out. My sister Wenda believes that if she takes things from my rucksack, I won't have to leave."

Miss Farley bit her lower lip and set her hand on my shoulder. "You must tell your sister how important this is, and that taking things from your rucksack will only hurt and not help."

I nodded. I didn't trust myself to speak anymore. If today was the day that Miss Farley told us to line up two by two and march out of the schoolyard and toward the Forest Gate rail station, I would be unable to say

goodbye to my little sisters. Had I hugged Mum that morning and told her I loved her? What about Daddy? Tingles of panic ran down my arms and across my chest. What if it was today?

As Miss Farley checked other rucksacks, my little brother, Hugh, burst through the door and ran into the classroom in his higgledy-piggledy way and threw himself onto the floor next to me. His brown curls and wide, round blue eyes made him look as if he'd been drawn to be in a storybook.

"Hughey! What are you doing in here? You have to be with your own classroom." I wanted to take his hand and run home. We'd sit in our warm kitchen with Mum in her apron and our sisters playing on the floor. We'd romp around the backyard and never leave. Not ever.

He sat up straight and told me, "They said that I should come to my sister to practice the gas mask since we'll be leaving together."

Since we'll be leaving together.

In his right hand he held the blue-and-red Mickey Mouse gas mask that the government gave to the younger children. With large glass eyes and a floppy red nose, it looked nothing like Mickey Mouse to me, but I didn't say a word.

"It's called Operation Pied Piper," Miss Farley had informed us only a couple weeks ago. This was the name of the plan the government had made to send us away from our town, our family, and our home. The government had given us the gas masks and a list of what to bring, and now each day we arrived at school with rucksacks packed and our gas masks dangling from the straps. Every day we knew it could be the leaving-day.

Now, Miss Farley wound her way through the other students checking each sack, while Hughey fiddled with his mask. Miss Farley was so beautiful. She pinned her hair in victory rolls and her red lipstick was perfectly applied. She wore flowered dresses cinched at the waist and never raised her voice at our fourth grade class. But when the brigadier general walked through the classroom door with his broad smile and stiff uniform covered in dangling medals, her face turned very serious.

"Hallo, children!" the general called out.

"Hallo!" we answered in return.

"My name is Brigadier General McCallister. I'm here so we can practice putting on the masks that very well might save our lives."

We all went quiet and the fan in the corner buzzed. "Can everyone hold up their masks?" he asked.

We all lifted our masks. They looked like twenty snout-nosed monsters, their dark, plastic, shiny glass eyes unseeing. My stomach flipped inside out, and I felt the cold shadow of dread for *the leaving-day*, the day Hugh and I must be given to another family and live in an unknown town.

"You start by sliding it under your chin." The general's voice boomed as if we were soldiers under his command. He held a child-size mask against his large face, and then he asked Miss Farley, "Will you please choose a student so I can demonstrate?"

"Jan." She smiled sweetly at me, and I wanted to believe I was her favorite student. "Will you please go

assist the general with the demonstration?"

I carried my mask with me as I walked to the front of the classroom. My legs felt quivery but I tried not to show it.

The general was tall, and he leaned down to face me. "Thank you for helping me. You are a brave girl. I'm going to stand behind you now and show your friends how to be safe with their masks. Is that all right with you?"

I nodded but I felt dizzy. I wanted Mum to hold me tight and tell me that I was practicing for something that would never truly happen. Instead, here I waws with a real army general. Tears clogged my throat. My classmates were staring at me. My little brother looked at me with his wide and adorable eyes; he seemed to be telling me that I needed to look brave, even if I didn't know what brave looked like.

"You first slide the mask under your chin," he said, "while holding onto the canister below. Then pull the straps up and around your head and secure the mask so that the plastic on the sides is tight and no air can get in except through your filter at the bottom." He tapped the can below my chin.

I stood perfectly still as my classmates fiddled with their masks and attempted to strap them on their faces. They laughed and nudged each other when their masks fell off or the straps became tangled. I stood as still as I knew how with the mask securely in place. From the view inside the mask, the classroom, my friends, and my brother appeared underwater. General McCallister walked from child to child checking the fitting and making adjustments.

Unwanted tears fogged the eye glass and my heart felt funny against my ribs, beating like a bird trying to get out of a cage. The mask squeezed my face, and there seemed to be no air coming in through the bottom vent. I couldn't breathe. Without thinking, in a near panic, I yanked off the mask and took in deep gulps of air.

Brigadier General McCallister spun around. "Oh, no," he said sternly. "You can never take off your mask during an attack." He looked around the room and then back at me. "It's very dangerous to take it off. Do you understand?"

Behind her mask, Millie Fagan began to cry with great gulping sobs. George Bond threw his mask on the ground, and Edith Ducker laid down on the hard wooden floors and began to kick her legs as if she were having a fit.

Miss Farley clapped her hands. "Now, now, girls and boys. Everyone please calm down. Jan, please put your mask back on and then let's all line up. Let us show this officer how well we know our drills. Find your partner and we'll walk outside and be done with our practice for the day. Come along now."

I looked at Miss Farley, and the compassion in her eyes was both real and deep. I slid the mask back on and so did the rest of the class. Then we stood two by two in line. I took Hugh's hand, and we all marched out of the classroom as if we were headed to the railway station to leave our lives, our families, and our town of Forest Gate.

The Live and Let Live pub in Forest Gate outside London bustled right below our bedroom that Sunday of September 3rd. The men's voices rose and fell as they argued about the coming war. Would the German bombs reach London anytime soon? Would their sons of call-up age be summoned? Would they be sent to France or Belgium?

The four of us Pardy children—me, Jan, the eldest at nine years old, then Hugh at six and Wenda at five, and Madge, four—huddled in our bedroom. The large square room held four single beds, and then in the corner were piled two packed rucksacks and four child-size gas masks. Although there were four us, only two of us would leave the minute the edict arrived from the government. Wenda and Madge would stay home. It wasn't fair, but nothing was fair during war, Mum reminded me.

Only Hugh and I would leave this nest above the pub. I would be the one to take care of him, and he was a sprite, that one. He was always bouncing with energy and verve, and yet he'd had the three of us to keep him entertained. How would he behave with just me at his side? I had no idea. He loved rounders and the riverside, he loved to pretend to play the drums on any surface he found, and he loved the mornings when he helped Daddy sweep up the sawdust stained with spit and ale in our pub.

Being the children of pub owners, we were the envy of our friends. "What's it like to live in a pub?" they'd ask in hushed voices, as if we had something wonderful or secret to tell them.

Mum and Daddy had strict rules about how we couldn't go into the pub after dinner—that was Dad's job—but we'd learned that if we listened through the floorboards, we could discover loads of the townspeople's secrets. Mr. McGinnity gambled most of his family money away and his wife didn't know about it yet. Mr. Bink had a mistress in Headington. Mr. Farley would cry when he had one too many whiskeys, because the Great War had broken him. But we also found out good things, too. We knew who was having a baby, or falling in love, or getting married.

Unbeknownst to anyone, the Pardy children were the keepers of Forest Gate's secrets. If Mum or Daddy ever found out that we repeated anything overheard in the pub, there'd be no more running across the sawdust floor or playing hide-and-seek below the tables. So we kept hushed about what we knew.

But these days all anyone talked about was war. Most of the young men were already gone, and the tourists had stopped coming by for a pint.

Wenda bounced up and down on her bed that night as we waited for Mum to come tuck us in and say our prayers. "Do you think they will send you away soon?" she asked.

"I don't know," I snapped at her as I slipped on my flannel nightgown and readied for bed. "If I knew, that would mean I was in charge, which I'm not."

"Don't be mean," she said and stopped bouncing, staring at me with hurt eyes.

"Well, they won't send you away," I told her. "They'll just send me and Hugh, so stop asking. It sounds as if you want us to go."

Her lips quivered. "But I don't want you to go. That's not one bit true." She ran to me and climbed into my lap, snuggling close.

I hugged her. "I know. I'm sorry."

"How will we know where you go?" she asked. "Will you just . . . disappear?"

At that word, Madge began to cry, and I reached out my hand for her. "Of course we won't disappear." I jiggled Wenda in my lap. "I'm told they'll post a sign on the school gate that tells where we go. And Hugh and I will write to you all the time and you will write back." Even to my own ears I sounded grown up. How did I sound exactly like something I wasn't? Inside, I quivered with fear.

Mum entered our bedroom just then. Her face was crumpled and her eyes were small and puffy. Her hair was loose from her usual chignon, and she sat on my bed and held out her arms for all of her children. We piled around her.

"What is it?" I asked, for I knew this was not our usual nighttime routine.

"Prime Minister Neville has announced that England has declared war, and your daddy must leave tomorrow to help England."

I began to cry.

"Hush, Jan. Hush. We have to be strong for each other. England has been through this before, and we'll prevail again."

I swallowed the sobs that rose in me, but I knew this declaration meant leaving-day was near.

Mum tucked us in one by one as she always did; she said our prayers as she always did, and she moved from bed to bed kissing us on the forehead as she always did. But when she bent down to me, she whispered, "You must be brave, my darling girl."

"I promise," I told her.

Morning slipped into the kitchen in bright yellow stripes on that unusually warm September Monday. Mum heated the porridge on the Aga stove, and sausages sizzled in the pan. Wenda played with her spinning top on the slate floor, and Madge bounced around Wenda, wanting to play with her. It would have felt like any other day but for the fact that Daddy appeared in the doorway in his RAF uniform of gray wool, the brass Kings Crown buttons gleaming like new, four ranking rings on each sleeve and a belt drawn tight around his waist. He held his cap in his hand.

"No," I said.

He smiled sadly at me.

"Daddy." I stood. "Please don't leave." I felt, all the way to my insides, that if he left I would never see him again.

"Oh, my daughter, I will come back to the family," he said. "You all take care of each other and your mum. Do you hear me?"

We all ran into his arms and he somehow enfolded the bunch of us. He was soft for only a moment and then he stood straight, his face fighting something sorrowful and grand. He nodded at Mum. "I love all of you so very much."

He kissed her lips and then he was gone. Just like that, he was gone. I imagined the map that hung on the far wall in my classroom and saw how there was only the channel and Belgium between us and Germany, where the evil mustached man was trying to conquer the world with pain and bombs and tanks.

That's when something in me separated—I was both the scared child and the responsible older sibling. I was terrified and I was brave. I was sad and I was impassive. I knew I could pretend.

"Time for school," Mum said after a few moments, as if Dad hadn't just walked out the door in his military uniform, leaving us without him. Clearly she was trying to show to us that everything was all right.

This is how we do it, this is how we get through things, I thought. We go about our dailiness and pretend. We pretend.

Hugh and I took our lunch pails, our packed rucksacks, and our gas masks, and we walked out the front door to head the four blocks to school. Mum, Wenda, and Madge followed us out as they always did, and we waved goodbye.

"Have a grand day at school," Mum called out as she jiggled Madge on her hip.

I looked back at the three of them and took it all in like a photograph, for somehow I feared I would never see this scene again: The brick building that was our home and pub, the trimmed hedges along the wrought-iron fence that surrounded the building, and the arched iron entryway one must pass under that read in large white letters, *Live and Let Live*.

If only the evil man in Germany would do that very thing.

I stopped to take it all in and Hugh pulled at me. "What are you doing?"

"Look," I said. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"What is?" He glanced over his shoulder.

"Our home," I said.

He looked oddly at me and then nodded solemnly. "Our home."

The moment I walked into the classroom and saw Miss Farley's face, I knew: it was leaving-day. We had only hung our coats on the pegs at the entry when she looked at us and said, "Let us check our rucksacks and then line up in our pairs." And she didn't use the word "practice." Then she looked out the window and said clear as a bell, "And please wear your name tags."

Leaving-day.

We followed Miss Farley as we walked in our well-rehearsed line out of the schoolyard, and through the cobbled streets of Forest Gate. Merchants came out of their stores and waved. Mums and dads were running toward us, looking for their children after hearing the news of the evacuation as it spread through town.

The noise at the Forest Gate railway station was deafening, and the crowd was crushing and pushing us as we tried to keep up with Miss Farley. Hundreds of children from East Kensington were all being evacuated at once. Some children were crying; others were running about as if playing a game, and then others were frozen as siblings or friends tried to pull them along.

We were soon on the railway platform. I held to Hugh and tried to keep up with the class. A train roared into the station and screeched to a stop, steam rising in a white cloud.

"Jan! Hugh!" I heard my mum's voice and then Wenda's cry, too.

Hugh and I turned and there they were—Mum carrying Madge and Wenda running alongside, pushing their way through the crowd to get to us as the train doors swooshed open.

"Get in. Get in," Miss Farley said in a stern voice. "Now. We can't leave anyone behind."

But I wanted to be left behind.

Mum was at our side; Wenda clung to my jacket hem and Madge cried out Hugh's name. For the second time in my life, I saw Mum cry. "Be safe my children. Be safe and write to me as soon as you get wherever you are going!"

She held my face in her hands; she kissed each cheek and then stared at me with her bright blue eyes under lakes of tears. "Take care of each other. Do you hear me? We will be together again."

I nodded. "I promise."

The force of the crowd pushed us onto the train car. Hugh and I wobbled down the aisle as our rucksacks bounced against the seats and other children's shoulders. Finally we found two empty seats and we sat, Hugh at the window and me on the aisle.

"Where are we going?" he asked in a shaky voice.

"I don't know any more than you do, but I promise we will be together."

Hugh began to cry. Then sob. The train lurched away and sped along the railway from city to countryside and still he wept. I tried to pull him toward me; I tried to soothe him; I brought out the chocolate squares Mum had packed in our pail, but nothing worked.

A few stops later, two girls, one with dark hair who looked to be about fifteen-years-old and her little sister who seemed Hugh's age with blond curls and a big smile, sat across the aisle from us. The little one wasn't weeping; in fact, the older sister leaned over and whispered things that made the little one laugh. Even as the train barreled away from their stop in London, even as their teacher called out their names to make sure they were in the rail car, even as they settled in, they were both so very calm.

What a pair these two were; everything about them radiated love and kindness, and I wanted to know their secret. Then the older girl turned and caught me staring at her. She smiled, as if she knew exactly what to do and how. Yes, she was older, but it was more than that; there was a confidence she exuded.

"Hallo," I said shyly.

"Hallo, I'm Hazel!" she said as another child moved down the aisle on the way to find a seat, bumping both of us. Then she set her hand on her sister's arm. "And my sister's name is Flora Lea."

"I'm Jan," I told her, "and this is Hugh, my little brother." But Hugh didn't look up; he was sniffling into his coat and had turned toward the window to keep his face hidden. "What are you saying to your sister to keep her from crying?"

"I'm telling her a made-up story about a magical land."

"All you're doing is telling her a story?" I asked in awe.

Hazel nodded. "Yes, but one of my own making. One just for Flora Lea."

"Can you tell me?" I asked, desperate as could be for some help.

She smiled kindly but said, "The story is only ours. But you can make up your own for your brother. I do believe he'd love that."

I gazed at this wise girl and told the truth for the first time. "I'm very scared," I whispered across the aisle, unsure if she even heard me.

She pulled her sister closer. "I am, too," She said. "But I'm pretending."

Of course. She was playing pretend for her sister and herself. We smiled knowingly at each other while the train traveled past stations without signs, the town names removed to keep the enemy from knowing where they might find themselves. Though children ourselves, on this day both Hazel and I were in charge of the little ones.

I smiled at Hazel in gratitude and turned away. "Hughey," I said. "Let's go on an adventure."

His sniffles ceased for a moment, and he wiped his face to look at me. "How?"

"I want to tell you a story about two children named Jan and Hugh who build a magical boat that takes them wherever they are pleased to go."

He lifted his face, but it was a dubious look he gave me. "Wherever I want? Anywhere?"

"Anywhere," I said.

‘”I want to go home.”

“Then let’s pretend to build a boat that sails in the sky and takes us there.”

He smiled for the first time since we’d walked out of the gates of our primary school.

“Once upon a time,” I said, “there was a little boy named Hugh who knew how to make boats. Big boats. Small boats. Sailboats. Tugboats. Anything he wanted.”

“Today,” he said in a clearer voice, “Today it will be a pirate ship.”

And it was. From London to Banbury we told ship-stories; we found our way to another world even as the one in front of us came undone, leading us to a new family and new town.

Hugh and I were just two of millions of children in hundreds of places from the countryside to the seaside who were sent to mission halls and town centers to be chosen by families who had agreed to house us so we’d be safe from German bombs that were sure to strike the cities. Hugh and I found ourselves in Banbury, where we were chosen by our first family. The Nickersons weren’t unkind, they just didn’t want children and were unsure what to do with us. The homesickness was a fever that never left me or Hugh, but we muddled through together. I was never able to tell that girl I met on the train how she helped me during that awful time, how Hugh and I designed our magical boat for many years, until we didn’t need it anymore

I’m old now and I rarely think of those days. But I understand that our family was one of the lucky ones—we all survived. One glorious fall day three years into evacuation, Mum came with Wenda and Madge to retrieve us both, declaring that we were moving to Penzance to live with her sister on the tip of Cornwall, where we’d be safe. She’d sold the Live and Let Live pub. I’d been right that sad September morning—I never saw my home again.

After the church bells tolled in London on May 7, 1945, declaring England’s victory, our daddy came back to us. He was alive and well, if gaunt and exhausted. We were reunited just as he’d promised the day he walked out of the Live and Let Live. We spent months on the beaches and endless fields of the Celtic nation of Cornwall until he was ready to move to London, where he eventually became a teacher.

I never speak about those days of exile to either Mum, Hugh, or my sisters. I never even spoke about them when I married my husband, Martin, God rest his soul, and we moved to Chalfont St. Peter. I’m not sure exactly why I keep those days to myself, other than the fact that they are over. Our family was reunited and that was enough.

As Mum always said, what good and use is there in looking back?

But for all the things I have tried to forget about those days—the towns, the bombings, and the fear,

the families and the children who called us the cruel name of "vaccies"—I will never forget a young girl named Hazel and her little sister, Flora Lea, who sat across the train aisle from me and Hugh on leaving-day. I often wonder where those two girls ended up, what town and province they landed in, and if they were billeted with a good family. I hope the very best for them, and I think of them every time my own children and grandchildren say, "Let's pretend." In that command, I remember the auburn-haired girl and her little blond sister on a train leaving London.

A Note From Patti Callahan Henry

One lovely spring afternoon in 2022, I met a charming British woman named Jane Pennell in South Carolina. Somehow, as is the way with synchronicity and chance, Jane casually mentioned that her aunt in England, who was ninety-two years old, had once been a child World War II evacuee.

I had just handed in the manuscript of *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*, which is about two sisters who are wartime evacuees. This wasn't the first or the last time that I felt my imaginary world reaching out to touch my real world.

I told Jane about my novel and I shared that I was visiting England in a month's time. She said, "Well, well, so am I."

And thus a meeting was set up for me to meet Aunt Jan, who had been dispatched to the countryside with her little brother, Hugh, just like my Hazel was sent to Binsey in Oxfordshire with her little sister, Flora.

Encountering Jan was truly revelatory, in that I realized the untapped wealth of knowledge among so many older people who have carried their incredible life stories tucked away in memories. When I asked Jan if she had ever talked about that time of evacuation with her mother or her brother, she answered quickly, "No."

Then she tilted her darling head and said, "That's odd, isn't it?"

No, I don't think it's odd, but I do believe we need to hear their stories. This generation holds a treasure trove of tales of perseverance and bravery. Evacuees' stories are vanishing, and I wanted this one, of Jan and Hughey, although fictionalized, to live alongside my imagined sisters from *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*.