

Book Review: The Secret Book of Flora Lea
By Patti Callahan Henry

Children go missing. It happens today – just turn on the news if you need verification – and it happened decades ago. That is, unfortunately, a very sad fact of life.

And when the families of those missing children are unable to achieve closure, they cling to the hope, no matter how slim the chance might be, that the missing child will be found alive and well – even years later.

They also live with the guilt that it's their fault. That if they would have done just one thing differently, that child might not have gone missing.

That's the world within which author Patti Callahan Henry places us in her beautifully written novel "The Secret Book of Flora Lea." Only it's not 2023. It's London, England in 1939, and World War II is raging across Europe.

In an effort to keep the children of London safe, Operation Pied Piper (a factually historic event) is launched. Thousands of children are evacuated to the rural countryside to live with local families. Fourteen-year-old Hazel and her five-year-old sister Flora are two of those children. Separated from their mother, they are fortunate to be taken into a loving household by Bridie Aberdeen and her teenage son, Harry, who live in a cottage along the Thames River in Oxfordshire.

As a way to help her sister adjust to the upheaval in their lives, Hazel creates a unique fairy tale about a magical land called Whisperwood. It's a secret place only Hazel and Flora can escape to. But one day Flora disappears while playing near the banks of the river. An exhaustive search for the missing girl comes up empty. And Hazel, overwhelmed with guilt, carries that remorse into adulthood.

Fast-forward twenty years and Hazel, living in London, is in the final days of a long-standing job with a rare bookstore when she unwraps a package containing an illustrated book called *Whisperwood and the River of Stars*. The similarities to the magical land Hazel created for her and Flora, and which no one else knew about, are striking. Old wounds ripped open, Hazel sees the book as an omen. Is Flora still alive?

Thus, Hazel begins a journey to discover not only the origins of the book that fell into her hands, but what really happened to Flora along the banks of the River Thames twenty years ago. It's a journey through which Patti Callahan Henry weaves the sisters' days in Oxfordshire leading up to Flora's disappearance, with Hazel's emotional reunion with the people and places of two decades gone by.

The writing is vivid. People and places come to life. We're right there on that emotional rollercoaster with Hazel as she moves through the highs and lows of unraveling twenty years of history. We cheer her, albeit small, victories, and exhale in frustration at her setbacks.

But most of all, we recognize the same spirit in Hazel that we see on the nightly news in the faces of family members whose son or daughter has gone missing. It's the spirit of hope, of never giving up, and in this story, the bond of love between Hazel and her younger sister that is strong and resilient.

"*The Secret Book of Flora Lea*" is well written, well paced, and definitely worth the read. I give it a 4 out of 5 stars. I hope you'll check it out, and welcome hearing from you if you do.