



SALLY
HEPWORTH
the things we keep

BOOK CLUB NOTES





the things we keep

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Reader,

This time last year Sally Hepworth's debut novel in the Australian market, *The Secrets of Midwives*, went into bookstores and wowed the reading public. From the first, the book seemed to have a sprinkle of magic about it: the author had received glowing endorsements from some of the leading voices in women's fiction including Liane Moriarty and Emily Giffin, key industry reviewers and women's magazines alike raved about it, and there was a delightful element of serendipity as several people who helped bring the book to press were pregnant. The magic was proven in the sales – *The Secrets of Midwives* was the highest selling Australian fiction debut of 2015.

So when I received the final draft for *The Things We Keep*, I opened the manuscript with equal parts excitement and dread. Surely such magic could not come around a second time? It did.

The Things We Keep is even more readable, more heart-rending and more achingly sweet than its predecessor. In this beautifully crafted novel, Sally Hepworth presents three characters who have each lost someone or something important to them, stripping them back to their essential selves. In doing so, Sally leaves readers with the burning question – once everything has been taken from you, what remains? And in this most basic state, can love exist?

What was hinted at in *The Secrets of Midwives* is confirmed in *The Things We Keep* – Sally Hepworth is a major talent. Get ready to meet your new favourite author.

Haylee Nash

Commissioning Editor – Fiction

Pan Macmillan



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READER LETTER

Dear Reader,

Five years ago, I watched a news segment about a woman—a newlywed—who was pregnant with her first child. She had also recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. She was 31 years old.

More recently a friend of mine, who is a nurse at a dementia facility, told me about an elderly man and woman who held hands in the communal living area of the center every day. They came into the facility as strangers. Their memories were less than five minutes long. They were both non-verbal. Yet every day, they sat next to each other. Every day he reached for her hand, and every day she allowed him to take it. And for them, every time was the first time.


As I researched this book, I heard the story of a woman who didn't remember that she was married, but who began to cry when she saw her wedding dress. The man who didn't recognize his wife but gravitated toward her whenever she visited, often asking if she'd like to "take a walk sometime"—the very line he used when he asked her out the first time, sixty years earlier. The story of a grandfather who shielded his granddaughter from a dog, though he couldn't have recalled who she was, let alone her terror of dogs.

Dementia isn't the only place that memories are found to be flawed—people find out they can't rely on their memories every day. People blindsided in relationships. People who find out their truth is a lie. People pulled from trauma. People awakened.

I wondered: If you can't use memories to steer your life, what can you use? I didn't know. It was why I had to write this book.

I hope you enjoy it.

Sally xox



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Things We Keep is told from the points of view of Eve, Anna, and Clem. How does this structure enhance your experience as a reader? How would this novel have been different had certain sections been omitted or told from a different point of view?
2. Did you learn anything you didn't previously know about dementia while reading this novel?
3. When Eve suggests to Angus that Anna and Luke are in love he says, "But even if they loved each other once, they can't really love each other now, can they? How can you love someone you don't remember?" Eric makes a similar argument, saying that people with dementia are incapable of falling in love. But Rosie says "Dementia steals things— memories, speech, other abilities. But I don't think it changes who you are or who you love." What did you think about love and dementia as you were reading? Did you agree more with Angus and Eric or with Rosie? Did your ideas change as you read? Why or why not?
4. The Things We Keep explores both what it's like to live with Alzheimer's disease and what it's like to live and love someone who has it. How did you react to the decisions Jack made and the way he and his wife treated Anna? Did you agree or disagree with them? What did you think of the way he and Luke's sister reacted to the relationship between Anna and Luke? How would you have reacted if you were in their positions?
5. What lessons does Eve learn from Anna that make her think differently about events and people in her own life?
6. Anna and Eve are at the center of this story, but The Things We Keep is full of colorful secondary characters. Who were your favorites?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONT.

7. Eve is initially unsettled when Rosie lies to Anna and tells her that she will take her home the next day to see her mother (who is no longer alive) and her brother. Rosie tells Eve, “We can make each moment frightening for her with the truth. Or we can lie to her and make each moment happy and joyous.” How did you respond to this scene? What would you do if you were in Rosie’s position? What do you think you would want someone to do if you were in Anna’s position?
8. Eve risks her job at a time when she desperately needs it to help Anna and Luke despite being told that to do so is wrong and harmful. Why? What about the events in her own life make her feel so strongly about helping Anna?
9. Were you surprised by the truth about Anna’s fall? Did you have any guesses about what happened as you were reading? Did they change as the novel progressed?
10. Sally Hepworth does a skillful job of creating characters who are well-rounded and complex and not defined by one characteristic or one action. Where do we see examples of this throughout the story?