

ALLEN & UNWIN



 READING
GROUP NOTES

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About the book

An Australian historian determined to find the truth, a stolen inheritance, a wishing tree, a long-lost grandmother, and an unlikely sweetheart come together in this dazzlingly original, audacious and exhilarating novel.

I know that two men are coming up the mountain, at this moment, including the boy from far away. I wonder what my grandson's face will look like. This is a boy in the skin of a man. I know the boy is innocent, that it's his family soul which is guilty.

An old woman sits waiting in a village that clings to a Turkish mountainside, where the women weave rugs, make tea and keep blood secrets that span generations. Berna can see what others cannot, so her secrets are deeper and darker than most. It is time for her to tell her story, even though the man for whom her words are meant won't hear them. It is time for the truth to be told.

Nearly a hundred years before, her father James had arrived in the village, gravely ill, rescued from the abandoned trenches of Gallipoli by a Turkish boy whose life he had earlier spared. James made his life there, never returning to Australia and unaware for many years that his own father was indeed the near-mythical bushranger that the gossips had hinted at when he'd been a boy growing up in Beechworth. Now, as Berna waits, a young man from Melbourne approaches to visit his parents' village, against the vehement opposition of his cursed, tight-lipped grandfather. What is the astonishing story behind the dark deeds that connect the two men, unknown to each other and living almost a century apart?

The Secret Son is a remarkable debut, a dazzlingly original, audacious and exhilarating novel. At once joyous and haunting, it is a moving meditation on love, honour and belonging, as well as a story about the strength of women and what it means to be a good man.

About the author

Jenny Ackland is a writer and teacher from Melbourne. She's been blogging since 2005, and her short fiction has been listed in prestigious literary prizes and awards. She has travelled widely, and has spent several years living in Turkey and Japan. *The Secret Son* is her debut novel.

Reviews

'Jenny Ackland's debut novel cleverly guides us into that space of suspension of disbelief where truths in fiction question the very essence of truth.' – Readings

'...a powerful story of good and evil, and belonging.' – *The Sydney Morning Herald*

'It's more than a coming-of-age novel... This story lays bare the bewilderment of someone held to account for the sins of the previous generation, coupled with the pain of those who've been wounded and long for acknowledgement and restitution.' – ANZ LitLovers

For discussion

- ☞ “The first and most important thing a man must do is identify his quest. The second thing he has to do is complete it.” (pg. 103) Consider and compare the varying journeys of the characters in *The Secret Son*. Do you agree with Ibrahim’s idea of what constitutes a fulfilling life?
- ☞ Consider the unlikely friendships formed between James and Ferhat; Cem and Harry. What do these characters learn from their companions?
- ☞ *The Secret Son* explores the lives of women in two very different societies. How does the book portray the rights and roles of women? And how do the female characters challenge these constructs?
- ☞ Consider the parallel journeys of James and Cem. In what ways are they similar? And how are they different?
- ☞ Discuss the power of storytelling throughout the book. How does the act of listening to and telling stories help the characters gain a greater understanding of the world and themselves?
- ☞ Discuss Cem’s attitudes towards women throughout the book. How are they changed and challenged by his experiences and interactions with the female characters in the book?
- ☞ How does the revelation about his father change James’s understanding of himself? How does looking back help him move forward?
- ☞ ‘What is it you know absolutely?’ Throughout the book this question is asked repeatedly of the characters. How important is the idea of truth to the characters? What place is there for faith and mystery?
- ☞ ‘The souls of men are not as dark as we like to believe. . . . There’s always a context for a life lived.’ (p. 245) Consider this statement by Linda. How do the characters grapple with the idea of being a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ person? Is it ever that simple?
- ☞ How does *The Secret Son* challenge the idea of truth in history? What role can fiction play in shaping our understanding of the past?

Suggested further reading

The True History of the Kelly Gang – Peter Carey

Dead Europe – Christos Tsiolkas

The Water Diviner – Andrew Anastasios, Meaghan Wilson-Anastasios

Game – Trevor Shearston

Landscape of Farewell – Alex Miller

Sister Kate – Jean Bedford