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In the spirit of Sarah Waters and Geraldine Brooks, a dramatic mystery about love, secrets, and discovery in post-World War I London.

Still haunted by the death of her only brother, James, in the Great War, Evelyn Gifford is completely unprepared when a young nurse and her six-year-old son appear on the Giffords' doorstep one night. The child, the nurse claims, is James's, conceived in a battlefield hospital. The grief-stricken Giffords take them both in; but Evelyn, a struggling attorney, must now support her entire family—at a time when work for women lawyers is almost nonexistent.

Suddenly a new case falls in Evelyn's lap: Seemingly hopeless, it's been abandoned by her male coworkers. The accused—a veteran charged with murdering his young wife—is almost certain to die on the gallows.... And yet, Evelyn believes he is truly innocent, just as she suspects there may be more to the story of her "nephew" than meets the eye...

The Crimson Rooms Details

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From Reader Review The Crimson Rooms for online ebook

Marguerite Kaye says

My second read of this book, and I enjoyed it every bit as much as the first. McMahon does a brilliant job with Evelyn, a middle-class young woman with a burning desire to follow her father into the law, but who has no chance before WWI because that's her beloved brother's destiny. Her beloved brother is killed and Evelyn gets her chance - but at such a cost. Trying her best to live in both worlds, that of the stuffy house of women in mourning, and that of the London courts who think women are an outrage, Evelyn feels her world is one of constant compromise. And then...

And then - go read the book!!! It's fab. I'm delighted to discover there's a follow up. Can't wait. If you haven't read any Katharine McMahon before, you are in for a total treat. I love her books.

Merged review:

Loved this! As a lawyer who never practiced, I was appalled at the way women lawyers were treated in the 1920s in the UK, though not really surprised (was astonished too, that not once in the years I studied law did the history of lawyers form any part of the curriculum). The key theme in this book was what happens to those who survive after a major war/catastrophe. Evelyn, the main protagonist, has lost a beloved brother, and aside from the continuing tragic effect of his death on her family, she has a huge guilt trip because she's effectively taken his place and would never have been allowed to go to university, never mind become an articulated lawyer, if he'd survived. I'm utterly fascinated by the impact of war, by the way it shifts society from its roots, by the way it creates a before and after world that is irrevocably different, and the Great War is one of the most tragic, pointless, truly appalling wars in modern history.

What is it like to be a survivor? Do we owe it to the dead to uphold their memory or to move on? What if what we think we knew of them turns out to be inherently flawed? How can we reconcile the atrocious, abominable things they were forced to do in war time with the person we knew? This book deals with all these issues, and manages at the same time to incorporate a brilliantly enthralling story, a doomed romance (or was it?) and some dreadful historical asides, such as the treatment of children in homes, which made me fume and cry and want to go away and read a whole lot more.

This is the second Katharine McMahon book I've read, and it lived up to all my expectations. Now I need to find another.

Toast says

There's obviously something about pioneer women that gets under McMahon's skin. In *The Rose of Sebastopol* it was Florence Nightingale and the first female nurses. In this it's the first female lawyers. Again an area I know nothing about and was delighted to learn.

It's also about taking on an independent role, usually the man's role, and using individual character to succeed against the odds, the law, the establishment.

It also deals with real human emotions - grief, guilt, love, fear - in a way that is more than just a noble abstract but everyday living wise.

What a little gem!

Jill says

I thoroughly enjoyed 'The Crimson Rooms' by Katherine McMahon. The author wrote in a style that emulated the period in which it was set (1924) so it took a while for me to get into it. But I loved the idea of a protagonist being a young woman lawyer at a time when women were not welcome to practise and the few who had the courage and ambition to challenge the status quo were openly criticised and ostracised. I appreciated that each character had their good points and flaws, in particular Evelyn who is a feisty and engaging person. I also loved the way the very disparate threads of the story came together in the end: Evelyn's two cases and her detective work that was realistic and thoroughly absorbing; her continuing inability to get over her brother's death in the Great War; the sudden appearance of a woman who has had her brother's child; and her unexpected love affair with a barrister. The long shadow of the war envelops almost every character.

Debbie says

"The Crimson Rooms" is a tragedy-style historical set in 1924 in England. It also contained a mystery and a romance. The characters were complex. Historical and setting details were expertly woven into the story and brought the story alive in my imagination.

However, it's a depressing story. Evelyn's family is stuck in their grief. Her two main legal cases can't really have "happy endings" even if won. And, due to the high post-war female-to-male ratio and her low self-image, Evelyn's desperate to have sex with the first willing male (even if she knows he's just using her) so that she can have sex once in her life.

Furthermore, I couldn't believe that Evelyn really had the guts to defy her family and society to get her legal training when she's so compliant to everyone's wishes and whims at the beginning of the story. By the end of the story, she'd gained my respect in her lawyer role but lost it in how she behaved in the romance role.

So the historical part of this story was excellent, the mystery was interesting (though the court scenes at the end were a bit slow paced), but the romance didn't work for me. There was a very minor amount of bad language. The story also contained some "hot" kissing and a brief, not-particularly-graphic sex scene.

I received this book as a review copy from the publisher.

Lydia Presley says

If I had to sum up my feelings toward this book in one word, that word would be "apathetic".

The premise sounded good. Post-WWI era in London, one of the first female lawyers struggling to make her mark, the murder of a newly wed young woman, the accused her new husband. Family drama, court drama and love drama all wrapped up in one novel.

It wasn't that the writing was bad, or that the story was necessarily bad (I was most interested in the mystery part of it all), it was just that I was so incredibly bored the entire time I was reading this book. I found myself looking for chores to do rather than pick it up. And.. I'm ashamed to admit, I think I stared at the cover with more interest and longing then I felt at any time for the contents of the book. (It is a gorgeous cover).

I hate seeing so much potential prove to be so dull. In researching other reviews on this novel once I finished it, I found quite a few others sharing the same opinion. In fact.. I'm bored even writing this review. So I'll stop now. =)

Linda C says

Yet another book that started out strong, and then tapered off into a mess of mediocrity. Very disappointing. While Katherin McMahon is clearly a gifted writer, her characters were flat and lifeless. The heroine, Evelyn, was as repressed at the end of the book as she was at the beginning. Although I was initially cheering for Evelyn to break free of her obnoxious relatives and throw off the mantle of dutiful daughter, she was unable to do so. I kept waiting for her to cut her hair and even that didn't happen.

Although she did, apparently, come to terms with the human failings of the idolized dead brother, she refused to do so with her lover, and, in fact, sent him packing, literally and figuratively. Given the realities of post-WWI Britain, i.e. far more women than men of the marrying age, combined with Evelyn's age (30), it was hard to believe that she would not accept some character failings in her lover so that she could have the life and family that she longed for.

Living vicariously through her nephew was going to be just that, living vicariously. To be fair, McMahon did a terrific job describing the stifling post WWI society, and its effects on an intelligent woman.

My bet would be that the nephew acquires a step father at some point, and Evelyn returns to life with Mother and Aunt Prudence, dutifully living out her days wearing her shapeless clothes, hair coiled under her hat, church on Sunday being the highlight of the week.

Barb says

I recently read and loved 'The Alchemist's Daughter' by Katherine McMahon and was eager to see if her other novels were as good. This one certainly was and I think I may have found a new favorite author. One of the things I liked about 'The Alchemist's Daughter' was the strong female protagonist that McMahon created and while their characters are completely different the strong female protagonist in this story is equally compelling.

Evelyn Gifford is a thirty year old, Cambridge educated, lawyer earning a living as an assistant clerk in a law firm. She faces constant sexism in her daily work and when at home feels a similar bias from her own mother. Seven years after the death of her brother James, during World War I, her family still hasn't recovered from his loss. Now a woman has arrived on their doorstep with a child who is the spitting image of James. She claims he is James's son but Evelyn and her family are unsure about the woman's motives. At the

time of the woman's arrival Evelyn has taken on a case representing a woman charged with kidnapping her own son from his foster mother and her law firm is involved in the defense of an accused murderer.

Once again I don't want to give away any details that might spoil the story for a potential reader. But I will say that I enjoyed everything about this novel, it was flawlessly written with great attention to detail, the characters were alive with emotion, their interactions were realistic and every turn in this story was believable. I especially liked Evelyn Gifford and the work she does investigating the murder of Stella Wheeler, I also like the way she's transformed by the arrival of her nephew and her feelings for the handsome barrister Nicholas Thorne. I enjoyed this period in history and while I've only read a few novels set after World War I after reading this I would consider more.

Overall, I found this to be an engrossing and satisfying story, the only thing that could have made it better, in my opinion, would have been the addition of several hundred more pages. I have already reserved two more of Katherine McMahon's novels at my local library and I'm looking forward to reading them soon.

Maura Heaphy says

Romantic fiction is Not My Thing. And, superficially, this novel pressed all of my negative buttons: soft-focus cover art. Swooning blurbs. Seal of approval from the Richard and Judy Book club. (It is literally a little gold seal. For my American Friends: Richard and Judy are the married co-hosts of a British morning TV show. Now you understand my qualms.) But ... duty calls, this was this month's selection for our village book group.

And how very, very, wrong I was. This is a genuine Good Read: McMahon's plotting heaps personal and professional trouble on her heroine, Evelyn, right from Page 1. Her efforts on behalf of her clients in two cases provide strong narrative scaffolding for her personal dilemma -- how to react to the woman who has turned up on the family doorstep, claiming that her son is the child of Evelyn's brother, who died in the trenches toward the end of the war. The different threads of the story suggest the varying ways that families can support each other, can let each other down, and bring out the best and the worst in each other.

McMahon also demonstrates a very sure touch with her historical material. She wears her research (clothes, food, music, politics) lightly, but she makes the most of her context -- the decade following the war that, in the UK, is still referred to as The Great War, a period in which the survivors (both military and civilian) had to emerge from the nightmare of the war years, and create a "new normal." Again the plot threads do a great job of demonstrating the after-effects of the War: broken families, men crippled in mind and body, women with little or no prospect of finding someone to create of family of their own.

Great stuff for a wet weekend!!

Zoe says

Like another reviewer said, a three star is too high, two is too low -- 2.5 is more like it. I so almost liked this

book. The historical setting was good, her research excellent, and her writing often beautiful. However. The problem was with the plot and the characters -- you know, two minor things in a book!

The suspense of finding out more about Meredith and her son were enough to keep me reading til the end, but they turned out to be a side story that was more or less forgotten in the more quickly paced end of the novel.

Until that point, I was constantly on the verge of either putting it down or skimming through large sections. Both cases Evelyn works on are distracting and often downright boring, written more like 1920s police procedurals than mysteries. As is so often the case with historical novels, I felt like I was wading through page after page of the author's research to get to the relevant plot points.

The characters were without exception unsympathetic and cliched -- how many books do we have to read about a woman who doesn't think highly of herself and lets people walk over her... only to find that gasp, she is actually stunningly beautiful, not frumpy at all, and that magnificent man over there has suddenly fallen in love with her! Edward Cullen much?

That said, I am a sucker for a tempestuous and well-written love affair... which was largely what kept me reading, and what made me hugely unsatisfied with the ending. To condemn Thorne as the bad guy's lackey and give up on her passion for him so suddenly made no sense to me. Completely hollow.

I finished this book, but I didn't feel good about it.

Catherine Siemann says

I'm very interested in the entry of women into the professions in the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly the legal profession, so when I read Bibliophile's review of *The Crimson Rooms*, I put it on my must-read list. Main character Evelyn Gifford is an articled clerk, making her way into the legal profession in the post-WWI world. Although she's the only one bringing any income into her now all-female family, rather than being appreciated, she faces disapproval for her defiance of traditional gender roles. Her tight-lipped, self-denying mother and aunt (there is a rather wonderful grandmother who was once an actress) try to manipulate her; and when a young Canadian ex-nurse turns up on the doorstep with her son, clearly the illegitimate son of the loved and lost-in-the-war son of the Gifford family, Evelyn has to make the first of a series of difficult decisions. There are two interweaving trial plots, as well as an unforeseen romance for Evelyn and the drama surrounding the introduction of Edmund and his mother into the Gifford household. While some of the oppositions Evelyn faces both in resistance to her presence in the courtroom and from her family members seem almost caricatured, my knowledge of the period suggests that they are not. Well worth the read, particularly if you're interested, as I am, in women in the legal profession.

Cynthia says

Though most of the action in "The Crimson Room" takes place in the mid twenties the real impetus comes from World War I. That war shaped the characters; warped them, saddened, bent or strengthened them. When her brother James is killed in the war Evelyn's family allows her to use the money set aside for James' education. She becomes one of the first female lawyers. Meredith, a young woman who'd met James while

nursing near the front, appears on the family doorstep with a young boy who looks inexplicably like James. Evelyn, her mother, her grandmother, and her aunt are dismayed at meeting this unknown child but also charmed by his resemblance to their lost loved one. They let Meredith and her son move in with them. Evelyn has had few opportunities to find love because she's so bookish and isolated AND because she doesn't believe in her beauty. During one of Evelyn's first law cases, a child custody trial, a handsome fellow lawyer chases her down to talk and she's smitten though she soon finds out he's already engaged. It doesn't matter though. She's already lost her heart. Their paths cross again when Evelyn becomes involved with a murder trial and her not to be lover's upcoming father in law is the defendant's boss. There are some interesting twists and turns in "Crimson Room" and Evelyn is a delightful protagonist. On the dust jacket Mosse compares McMahon to Sarah Waters but I'd say she's more like Anne Perry, whom I love as well. Both Perry and McMahon are excellent at creating period settings and deft mysteries.

Carole says

Evelyn Gifford (30) ~ the narrator ~ is a young woman who is living in the past, present and future.

The Past - The year is 1924 and Evelyn, who is a trainee solicitor, lives a lonely, unhappy life with her mother, grandmother and elderly aunt Prudence in a big rambling decaying house, still mourning the death of her brother, James, killed in WWII six years earlier. Both her mother and Prudence can't understand why she wants to be a solicitor, they think it's totally unsuitable for a young woman.

The Present - One night, Meredith, a young Canadian woman, turns up on their doorstep, totally unannounced, with her son, Edmund, 6, whom she claims is James son, throwing the house into total confusion.

The Future - Evelyn is a woman before her time. Women solicitors were almost unheard of in 1924 and many practices would not employ a woman over a man. But Evelyn's employer is a man who loves to defy convention and happily takes on the young and eager woman.

When Evelyn meets the charismatic barrister Nicholas Thorne who offers his help with her two cases, one of defending a man accused of murdering his wife and the other of a young mother accused of kidnapping her own baby, her world turns upside down.

My Thoughts - Katherine McMahon's writing was an absolute pleasure to read, she has a way of describing details so that you really feel you're there in the room. It reminded me of R.J. Ellory's A Quiet Belief in Angels. She is a wonderful storyteller and in Evelyn Gifford she has created a compelling and feisty character, who is so quiet and respectful at home but who can speak confidently when a magistrate treats her with disdain.

I absolutely loved The Crimson Rooms and was sad when it ended, I wanted to know more of Evelyn's life, of how far she can go. I would recommend it to anyone interested in the 1920's, of women solicitors, courtroom dramas, or who just wants to get lost in a really good story.

Candace says

I got this book as a first-read, and I guess I expected a lame book in desperate need of publicity. Not so! "The Crimson Rooms" is extremely well-written and grabbed me from page one. In fact, I stayed up all last night, trying to finish it.

Our heroine is a female junior law clerk in 1924 London, one of the first few women admitted to the bar. Her entire family is a frozen tableau of grief for her younger brother, Jamie, killed in WWI, and her father, who, heart-broken, drank himself to death. She lives in a dark cloud surrounded by her mother, grandmother, aunt, and two ancient female servants, who are all scraping by on the tiny bit of money left to her once-more-successful family. Her brother's room is still as he left it, and Evelyn Gifford's ground-breaking status as a female lawyer is not lauded within her very traditional family. Still single as she approaches 30, she is seen as an utter failure in female terms.

Thundering into her life comes a young Canadian woman, Meredith, who arrives in the middle of the night with a six-year-old boy, Edmund, in tow. Meredith claims that the boy was fathered by Jamie in a hospital behind the lines in France. Evelyn is mistrustful of the woman, and her family is appalled by her arrival.

Meanwhile, Evelyn becomes involved in two cases, one involving a woman who gave up her children to a charity home and now cannot get them back, and the other a war veteran who is accused of having shot his beautiful bride of only three weeks.

And much to her surprise, a handsome young lawyer, Nicolas Thorne, who is involved in the murder case comes into her life. Although he is betrothed to another woman, the two of them spark immediately.

Evelyn wrestles with several mysteries: Can she help the mother of three children get them back before they are sent off to Canada or Australia? Did the bereaved husband really murder his bride? Is Thorne really in love with her? And what's the deal with Meredith?

*****SPOILER ALERT — READ NO FURTHER TO AVOID PLOT DETAILS*****

The character of Meredith never quite comes together for me. I guess she is supposed to represent some of the brokenness of all who participated in the horror of WWI, but she seemed very inconsistent to me. She was also the source of a heckuva lot of coincidences that weren't explained convincingly by the plot. She felt like a plot device more than a person to me.

I also didn't understand Evelyn's complete rejection of Thorne at the end of the book. It did turn out that he had some involvement in the cover-up of a dreadful crime, but his involvement was largely unwitting. I half expected the sudden huge twist of a Sarah Waters novel, where love is revealed to be nothing more than intrigue and betrayal, but that was not the case here. So, why the need to so utterly reject him?

She was able to forgive her mother's betrayal (withholding Jamie's last letter), but not Nicolas, who never really did betray her. I just don't get it.

And why, at the end, would she move in with Meredith, who seemed to me to be hellbent on her own slow, eventual dissolution?

I guess the author wanted to avoid the usual "happily ever after" of most heterosexual romances, but she

didn't do it in a way that felt believable or uplifting. It felt like Evelyn was choosing to define herself as Edmund's spinster auntie, and that didn't really make sense to me.

On the other hand, the writing was strong, and the plot really involved me.

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Note: The version of the book sent to me was supposedly an "uncorrected proof," and yet I found only a very few typos and perhaps one error. (Don't the well-to-do English go to "public schools" rather than "private" ones?) That impressed me because so many modern books come to us riddled with typos and mistakes. Obviously, some care went into its preparation. I am also supposed to note that I received this book via one of Goodread's First Reads, which offers us the chance to enter to win various books.

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### **Leah Murphy says**

I received this in a pre-release giveaway from GP Putnam's, and I am so glad that I did!

The introduction to this story was very quick and abrupt; a major life event happening to the characters before we even knew their names. This bothered me at first, but as I got further into the story it came around and I don't think it would have worked any other way.

This story follows Evelyn, one of the first female lawyers in London, post-WWI. While dealing with the loss of her brother to war, her entire family lives a life that is very sheltered and mournful, even 6 years later. A series of huge events such as the appearance of her brother's son and his mother as well as a major murder trial, force her to re-evaluate many facets of her life.

Thrown in is a great murder trial mystery, that intertwines the characters even more. I myself am not one to try to figure out mysteries, as I'm typically too engrossed in the story to really see anything deeper right away. After knowing the outcome of this though, I realized some great clues, moments of foreshadowing etc that could have led another reader to a conclusion that I just wasn't seeking, while not being so obvious to just give the story away.

Overall I think this book was very well written and engaging. Katharine McMahon painted a vivid picture of early 20th century London, as well as the trials and tribulations of a woman entering a new field. I recommend this to anyone who enjoys historical fiction!

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### **Alisha Marie says**

I won this book from the First Reads program here on Goodreads and it really sounded promising. But I've been having terrible luck with historical fiction recently and unfortunately, *The Crimson Rooms* has fallen into that stigma.

First, let me say that I love historical fiction books. They usually allow me to be immersed in a time period that I would never have been a part of and they have the added element of teaching me something that I

didn't previously know. But the thing with *The Crimson Rooms* was that it was boring.

I think what mostly killed me was that *The Crimson Rooms* is supposed to be sort of a mystery. And I can get into mysteries no matter how badly written (ahem...James Patterson), mostly because they have this thrilling atmosphere. *The Crimson Rooms* wasn't like that. All of the tension that you could've felt, just fell a tad bit flat for me.

Sure, there were interesting aspects of the book, but they were overshadowed by the boredom I felt throughout most of the book. The main character Evelyn was intriguing, but even she couldn't save me from the boredom I felt. I found that I was doing things that I didn't enjoy (homework, cleaning, etc) just to avoid picking up the book again. Finally, I just sat down and said "I'm finishing this". Trust me, had I not won this book, it would've been gone so fast.

So, alas, this First Reads book was a miss. Hopefully, this one and *Mistress of the Art of Death* were just bad luck and I'll have more good luck with the historical fiction genre as a whole.

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