



Family Secrets

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When patriarch Gerald Hawkins passes away in his Tasmanian home, after ten years of serious illness, his family experience a wave of grief and, admittedly, a surge of relief. Gerald's dominating personality has loomed large over his wife, Connie, their children, Andrew and Kerry, and his sister Flora, for decades.

Connie, whose own dreams were dispensed with upon marriage, is now determined to renew her long friendship with Gerald's estranged sister, Flora. She travels to France where she finds Flora struggling to make peace with the past and searching for a place to call home. Meanwhile Andrew's marriage is crumbling, and Kerry is trapped in stasis by unfinished business with her father.

As the family adjusts to life after Gerald, they could not be more splintered. But there are surprises in store and secrets to unravel. And once the loss has been absorbed, is it possible that they could all find a way to start afresh with forgiveness, understanding and possibility?

Family Secrets Details

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Brenda says

When Connie Hawkins' husband Gerald passed away after ten years of her being his full-time carer, she felt a mixture of overwhelming grief, and profound relief. Her children and grandchildren were with Connie at her home in Tasmania for the funeral – it was the very same day that son Andrew and daughter Kerry tried to tell Connie what was best for her future. But Connie had made up her mind; she was going to France to catch up with her one-time best friend, Flora, who was also Gerald's estranged sister. Then she would travel to London to reflect on her past; to visit the places she'd been so happy as a child with her mother.

In the meantime, Connie's children and their families were struggling through their own grief and lack of direction. Andrew and his wife Linda were having trouble in their marriage, with their almost sixteen-year-old daughter Brooke caught in the middle. And Kerry couldn't work out what was wrong with her – her constant anger and feelings on being apart from everyone else scared her, but she didn't know what to do about it.

What would happen to them all as secrets from the long-ago past became known? Would forgiveness and peace finally find a place in their lives?

Family Secrets by Aussie author Liz Byrski encompasses all that was complicated in one family's dynamics. Even extended family were affected, and it's this "working through" that makes the story an enjoyable read. From Australia to France to England, Connie tries to find herself, while her family are doing the same thing at home. My favourite characters were Chris, Kerry's husband, and Brooke, Connie's first granddaughter. I always enjoy this author's work, and *Family Secrets* is no different. Highly recommended.

Hazel Edwards says

Liz Byrski maintains a cast of characters and their inter-relationships and viewpoints extremely well, even across generations. Such a change to read about 'rounded' older females with various aspects to their lives. Really enjoyed the settings of Hobart and St Malo. Towards the end I got a bit irritated by the strength of Connie's angst about discovering the consequences of her controlling husband's earlier relationship but resolved with common sense by the grand daughter. Will definitely recommend this and Byrski's other novels.

Chris Waterford says

I should have known better. I like chick-lit but only when they are very well written. I was taken in by Liz Byrski's romantic memoir "Remember Me" which I thought was outstanding. I winced every time I read some dialogue in this--it may have been quite normal but didn't seem real to me.

Phrynne says

My first book written by this author and I enjoyed it. It is a very pleasant, easy read about several generations of the same family and of course as the title suggests, the family secrets.

The book meandered from Australia to France to England and sometimes I forgot who lived where and had to back track a bit. There were a lot of characters to keep track of and the secondary ones sometimes only got a mention in passing. On the final page when we find that Bea and Molly will be visiting in the future I thought "Who on earth is Molly?" I paged back until I found out but it was actually irrelevant:)

Every character except Chris seemed to have a damaged past and be disturbed in some way so there was plenty of drama. However once all the secrets are aired everything turns out fine.

Reading back it sounds as though I did not like this book! I did though. It is a perfect holiday read with plenty to enjoy on its pages but no need for deep thought on the part of the reader.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

When Liz Byrski turned fifty she keenly felt the lack of literature that reflected the lives of women in mid life, and drawing on her experience as a journalist and freelance writer, set out to change that by writing the sort of books that she wanted to read.

Family Secrets is Liz Byrski's eighth fiction novel, a story about love, regrets, forgiveness and redemption.

After a long, debilitating illness, Gerald Hawkins passing is both a cause for sadness and relief for his wife Connie, and his adult children Kerry and Andrew. For decades they have lived their lives as Gerald, a dominant man, had wished them too and now that he is gone they are all forced to find their own way forward.

Connie chooses to revisit her past, announcing her plans to go to England for an extended holiday, hoping to reconnect with the woman she was before she married Gerald and gave up her dreams to become a dutiful wife and mother in Tasmania, and to rekindle her relationship with her childhood best friend, and Gerald's sister, Flora, who has been estranged from the family for many years. Connie's journey is not what she imagined it would be however, especially when she is confronted with some home truths about the choices she made and the person she has become.

Meanwhile her children are grappling with their changing futures. Andrew, disillusioned with his career and his marriage, is unsurprised to discover his wife's affair but determined to protect his teenage daughter, Brooke, from the fall-out. Kerry, harbouring long held resentment and guilt about her father is at a loss when he dies, and is left struggling with the symptoms of clinical depression.

Byrski explores the way in which it is often difficult to be honest with ourselves, and others, and the corrosive nature of failing to accept the truth. Each main character in Family Secrets is challenged to reconcile their past and escape the shadow of Gerald's legacy by taking responsibility for the people whom they have become, and making changes that allow them to reconnect with the people they love.

I thought Family Secrets was an engaging read, not especially gripping but a thoughtful and well told story of realistic domestic drama.

Kerry Tolson says

Connie gives up her dreams of pursuing a life in Opera to marry her best friend's brother, Gerald, and become the dutiful wife and mother. Gerald wants to be a 'big fish' in life, and moves he and Connie from England to Tasmania, Australia where the 'pond' is small enough for him to stand out. As Gerald builds a life as a Politician and businessman, Connie falls further and further into the role of wife and mother to Andrew and Kerry, banishing all desires of something more, hiding from her family any hopes or dreams she may have ever had. As the years go by, Andrew and Kerry grow, marry and have children and careers of their own, all that have been orchestrated and approved of by Gerald. Upon retirement, Gerald becomes ill and Connie becomes nurse, spending ten years caring for Gerald, separating herself even further from a life and from her now adult children and young grandchildren.

Upon Gerald's death, Connie finally finds herself free from his dominating personality and is determined to re-find herself and reconnect with her former best friend, Gerald's sister - Flora - who was banished from the family fold many years earlier. Meanwhile Andrew is watching his own marriage collapse and is considering a different career path, and Kerry is trapped in stasis by unfinished business with her father.

As they struggle with their day to day lives and deal with the grief of losing the dominating presence of Gerald. Connie, Andrew and Kerry must also find a way to reconnect their splintered fragmented family and deal with the discovery that Gerald's life was not all they thought it was.

This is a story about how well do any of us really know of those we love. How well does a wife know her husband or vice-versa, who were our parents before they become mum and dad, what were their dreams, what did they do, who did they love. Every person has a hidden past, a hidden dream, a hidden life. It's also a story about rediscovering self and facing the idea of 'what-if'.

I enjoyed this book very much, Liz Byrski is writing real stories about the everyday person and about the choices women have felt they needed to make in the context of society at the time. I also related to this book because the 'family secret' that is discovered in this story actually happens in my own family and is more common than many of us think. Yet even today it is still a skeleton that is kept tucked away and hidden in the closet for many a family.

Mary says

I love that Liz Byrski focuses on the lives of older women. Here, after a long illness, Gerald has died. Gerald was a larger than life character who dominated and damaged his family with emotional abuse. Now that he is gone Connie has to work out who she is, apart from Gerald's wife and carer, and how she can put herself and her family back together. Her children and grandchildren have also been deeply affected as has her friendship with Gerald's sister.

I enjoyed this book but found it difficult to be entirely gripped by it. Some behaviours just did not seem to match the characters. Some characters did not seem entirely believable. And it dragged a bit in spots for me - probably because there are so many characters over such a wide geographical area and the focus is very

spread out.

Anne Forrest says

A cleaver writing style, written from the perspective of many different family members. This gives the reader a balanced view of the dynamics of the family. She juggles these many characters, setting & situations well. I was keen to read on as the various stories unfolded.

Set in London, Tasmania & coastal France, I didn't "see" these locations or learn anything about them. That disappointed me, I like to learn about places I haven't visited.

It was an easy read. I have read others of hers I have enjoyed more.

Steph says

Others on Good Reads have summarised the storyline well, so I suggest that you read their reviews here.

What can I say? She writes for women of my generation and background. She articulates our issues so well. Reading any one of these novels is empowering. Her writing is pleasing. Her subject matter and the way she handles it is psychologically powerful.

Marianne says

Family Secrets is the eighth novel by British-born Australian author, Liz Byrski. When seventy-three year-old Gerald Hawkins dies after a long illness, he is survived by his wife Connie and their two adult children, three grandchildren and his long-estranged younger sister, Flora. And now that this forceful presence in their lives has gone, things will change for everyone. But perhaps not as expected.

Believing they need to take their mother's future in hand, Andrew and Kerry are surprised at Connie's vehement disagreement with their plans. Firstly, she is going to England and France, to catch up with Flora, and to find the Connie that she was before Gerald came along. And she has absolutely no intention of selling up to move closer to her children and grandchildren, thank you very much!

As the title implies, this is a family with secrets, and lots of them. Unstated bitterness at a life not lived, hidden sexual preferences, secret lovers, worries about mental disposition, resentment at disloyalties, guilt about betrayals, fears of rejection, all these and more are concealed from those who have a right and a need to know. The catalyst of Gerald's death sees many of them exposed, but the biggest secret of all is one revealed to Connie during her time away.

Byrski uses several narrators to tell her tale and easily conveys the perspective of both young and old. Her characters are all familiar and believable in their attitudes and reactions, although Connie's self-absorption at a certain point may leave readers gasping. Any woman would want a Chris to love and support them, but few would envy the latter years of Connie's marriage. Byrski touches on a myriad of topical issues including the assimilation of refugees and the effect of a long terminal illness on the spouse/carer. Another brilliant Byrski book.

Kathryn says

I've just finished this one, my first Liz Byrski. I really enjoyed it, and am definitely interested in reading more of this author's work.

I enjoyed the settings of Hobart, Port d'Esprit - a little coastal village in Brittany, France, and in England (mostly London).

I enjoyed reading about the family dynamics as the main character, Connie, heads back to France/England after her husband's death to try to repair family relationships and discovers more secrets than she was aware of.

I did feel that Connie's characterisation was a little inconsistent at some points - she spent all her married life avoiding confrontation with her husband and keeping the peace among her family, yet she goes over to England and is almost combative at times. I guess maybe you could make the argument that she was sick of holding her tongue and making excuses for wrong behaviour after all that time, but her attitude just didn't quite ring true at times.

But I was mostly able to put that aside and suspend my disbelief and just enjoy the story. I liked that the story was written from the perspective of different members of the family, giving a more well-rounded view of the whole.

Lyn says

Liz Birski juggles many characters, through 4 generations and in 3 countries, and about as many social and emotional issues as you could imagine a family might face. The time line swaps back and forward. The dead grandfather, Gerald, still seems to be the link and the millstone for most of the characters. His widow Connie, her two children and three grandchildren have had their lives on hold whilst he took ten years to die. Connie chose "peace" over right and let the bully, Gerald, call the shots. Connie seemed to have missed out on women's lib, as if she was from a previous generation. Secrets and lies colour the lives of nearly all the characters, loss and sadness clouds others. I thought it well written but the width seemed to drag the depth down. It was a bit ambitious, character and theme wise, as if it had something for everyone. Still it is worth the read.

Jan says

Liz Byrski has to be admired for the skill she displays in writing about family relationships. The story comes across to the reader with such ease it gives the impression Byrski has sat down at the computer and knocked it out in one draft. I don't expect that is the truth, but this confident tone makes Family Secrets very believable. She knows her target audience and includes humour, pathos, anger and jealousy. All very entertaining and absorbing.

Terri Smith says

Not up to Liz's usual standards. I didn't love this book.

Dale Harcombe says

Four and a half stars.

When Gerald dies after being cared for by his wife for ten years, Connie experiences sadness and relief.

Connie has a lot of regrets in her life and blames Gerald who was, without doubt, a selfish control freak.

After he dies, Connie determines to catch up with Gerald's sister Flora, her friend from younger days. Gerald and Flora had been estranged for many years. While I could feel for Connie, I struggled with her compliance. Never having been married to such a controlling personality but rather someone who encourages and supports me, I struggled to understand how she could let her own wishes and dreams be completely overridden by Gerald.

As for their children, Andrew and Kerry, I don't mind admitting I felt like slapping them to begin with. Over the course of the novel, the behaviour and attitudes of several people change as secrets are revealed.

This is a novel about marriage, family, love, regrets, forgiveness, friendship and home truths, and sometimes blaming others instead of accepting responsibility for personal choices made. Even though at times I questioned some of the decisions and choices made by various characters, I thoroughly enjoyed this novel and was emotionally involved all the way through. While I mostly liked Connie, Brooke - her granddaughter, Flora and others, the character I most liked was Connie's son in law. Chris. He is a caring, supportive man - the type many would like to be married to.

Liz Byrski is one of my favourite Australian authors because she writes about people I can relate to who have had lots of life experience. The characters are complex and very real and maybe not always what they seem at first. A great read that I kept wanting to get back to. In fact my dear husband was told at one stage, 'I can't do anything else now; I have to finish my book.' Since he is also a reader he understands that power of a good book.
