



# The Amber Keeper

*Freda Lightfoot*

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Set against the backdrop of revolutionary Russia, *The Amber Keeper* is a sweeping tale of jealousy and revenge, reconciliation and forgiveness.

English Lake District, 1960s: A young Abbie Myers returns home after learning of her mother's death. Estranged from her turbulent family for many years, Abbie is heartbroken to hear that they blame her for the tragedy.

Determined to uncover her mother's past, Abbie approaches her beloved grandmother, Millie, in search of answers. As the old woman recounts her own past, Abbie is transported back to the grandeur of the Russian Empire in 1911 with tales of her grandmother's life as a governess and the revolution that exploded around her.

As Abbie struggles to reconcile with her family, and to support herself and her child, she realizes that those long-ago events created aftershocks that threaten to upset the fragile peace she longs to create.

## The Amber Keeper Details

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Author : Freda Lightfoot

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Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Mystery

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# From Reader Review The Amber Keeper for online ebook

## Kylie D says

Very interesting story set in two different timelines, 1911-19 in Russia during the revolution and the late 60's in England's Lake District. It follows the lives of Millie, an English governess for the Russian aristocracy, and her granddaughter Abby, recently returned to England with her young daughter after a failed relationship. Millie's daughter, Abby's mother, has recently committed suicide, and there are questions as to why? Abby's father and brother are blaming Abby for breaking her mothers heart, but why after Abby has been away for so many years. Abby goes to her grandmother searching for answers, to which Millie slowly reveals her life in revolutionary Russia, and the paths that led three generations of women to where they are today. I found this book to be quite riveting, especially the Russian part. It was very interesting to read about the revolution from the eyes of a young English girl. Recommended for all lovers of Historical Fiction.

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## Nicki says

Oh dear. This book is such a disappointment. It's all tell and no show, flat characters and unrealistic dialogue.

Each character spouts reams of exposition in lieu of setting the scene through their actions or describing the setting. The only reason we know half of the book is set in 1960s England is because a character tells us that or the author does by saying a precise song playing on the radio. The dialogue and social mores don't feel like 60s England. The same is true of the Russian parts set before and during the Russian Revolution.

The main character in the 1960s section is Abbie, granddaughter of Millie, the main character in the Russian sector. I think Abbie is supposed to be a strong young woman, ahead of her time. She's not. She's a whiny, insecure little girl with a 'why me?' attitude. Everything is black and white to her, with no shades in between. In fact, the same could be said of the whole novel.

Millie is much the same in revolutionary Russia. There's no real connection between old Millie and young Millie. And because we know that Millie is alive in the 1960s from the start, there's no sense of danger. Her love story is insipid. She flip flops around after Stefan, a character as two-dimensional as the rest of them.

The villain of the piece is the beautiful Countess. Frankly, she might as well be the Wicked Queen from Snow White, for all the subtlety she displays. She lies, shouts and stamps her foot, regardless of the situation she finds herself in, yet she gets away with it all.

The most interesting parts are the Russian ones. You could quite easily lose the 1960s parts and treat the flashbacks as the whole story. Even the author appears to get bored, dropping some characters completely, stuffing a nonsensical murder plot into the last few chapters and tying up Abbie's story in a neat bow.

I'm astounded by the five-star reviews on here. If this was well-written, there could be a decent story hidden in here, but it's not. Instead, this is writing by numbers. This is the first Freda Lightfoot novel I've read and it will definitely be the last.

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## **SherrieB says**

The historical part of this novel tells the story of Millie, a young English nanny to a Russian family who witnesses the Russian Revolution first hand. This part of the novel is very interesting and well developed.

The other part is the modern day story of Abbie, Millie's granddaughter. Unfortunately, this part of the book just isn't as good. It's not bad per se, just not as well plotted. Abbie as a character is hard to like or sympathize with. She seems too flighty, not at all a strong person. This makes it hard to believe some of her actions towards the end of the book. In addition, the ending seemed rushed and not well plotted. It was as if the author just wanted to end the book.

All in all, this is not a bad book. It's a quick read and the parts detailing Millie's experience during the war are well worth the read.

Borrow it from your library.

Disclaimer: I received an ARC from the publisher in exchange for a fair and honest review.

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## **Claudia {SparrowHawk} says**

When I first encountered *The Amber Keeper*, I had just finished watching the film *Gandhi* and was left with a strong desire to travel further into historical tales -which is slightly significant considering I seldom ever read historical fiction. So, I rushed over to my collection of novels in my Kindle library, and stumbled upon this lovely book cover with its colorful Russian architecture -which by the way, reminded me so much of Disneyland's "It's A Small World" attraction. Now that I think about it, this seems to have been the pertinent detail surrounding my overall reading experience this year hasn't it? Those enticing book covers :P

Regardless, *The Amber Keeper* was unlike anything I've ever read, but similar to everything that I have seen in a typical British drama; something comparable to *Pride and Prejudice* in itself, but more foreboding than a sappy love story. Oh but don't get me wrong, there is romance, plenty of it actually to make this story almost realistic; as a matter of fact, it is the romance within the narrative that propels the plot to branch out into a complicated and hot mess.

Strangely enough, I enjoyed the sentimental approach of the prose, as well as the romance, in how it so readily captured the reckless joy and passion between the protagonist Millie and her dearest Stefan, even when it was portrayed in pain. Not to mention, Countess Olga, the concentrated physical manifestation of pure evil! If truth be told, she took center stage in this narrative and I found I was utterly engrossed with this book solely because of her role in the story; her character delivery was genius!

Frankly, if I had to reduce my experience with this novel into one word, it would be: zestful. Because that is exactly what this novel delivers: an abundance of outrageous pleasantly sharp flavors of tangy intriguing dramatics, and I liked it!

### **IN A NUTSHELL:**

// Freda Lightfoot's writing is simply beautiful, and while she does use an extensive amount of sophisticated words, they never seem to overwhelm the narration of the story. Actually, I felt that the usage of the polished words complimented and dressed her storytelling with elegance

// Compares to Titanic. Holding a resemblance to Rose Dawson's verbal account of her devastating romantic story on the Titanic, this book measures up to its motif. Millie Dowthwaite similarly recounts the tale of her love story, her emotional distress as Governess to Serge and Irina and the difficult hardships fed to her through the wretchedness of Countess Olga. It seriously has that feel and tone to the prose as it alternates between past and present settings

// It's a story that sheds light on the strife between social classes, social isolation and loneliness, as well as one that celebrates the strength found in forgiveness, resolve, and certitude; especially within family dynamics

// This novel delivers stellar character development contrary to its incredibly slothful plot; it was fun to read however, and unforgettably sinister

// I liked it! I found The Amber Keeper to be a beautifully rendered story. My only quibble was with the sluggish pacing of the storyline. Despite this reservation though, I would recommend it!

### **3 THINGS I LIKED:**

+ Countess Olga! This antagonist seriously takes the crown for "The Wickedest Antagonist of 2014!" I've read a good handful of fantasy and dystopia this year, which rendered some pretty mediocre foes (i.e. Queen Levana, Jeanine Matthews, President Snow, Beliel, The Creators, Leck to name a few) and not one was able to cast a spell on me like Countess Olga. Verily, verily I say to you, Countess Olga is the perfect personification of a self-absorbing narcissists and villain and man was I ever so fascinated with her character! She desires nothing more than to feed on chaos and mayhem. I have to admit that it was more her obsessive jealous motives that made me love her, loath her and sometimes even feel sorry for her, that's how brilliantly she plays portrays this role; I admire the creation of this character

+ By the same distance, Millie Dowthwaite. This protagonist evoked more conviction and hindrance than inspiration, and this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. I was honestly spellbound to say the least by Millie's responsive nature when regarded with Olga's psychological warfare. At first, Millie is defenseless and vulnerable, which had me grunting and heaving deep sighs. Gratefully however, Millie comes to blossom through the medium of embracing her sufferings and applying them as lessons -which later helped her become more and more adept at expressing her inner feelings. She eventually learns to verbalize and actualize her feelings, and to stand up for uprightness. Her rationale was moving, baffling and gripping and I gobbled her tale

+ Even though The Amber Keeper is categorized under historical fiction, not once does it feel or read like a deep exposition, nor does it ever feel like a history lesson

### **3 THINGS I DID NOT LIKE:**

- The Amber Keeper presents itself as historical tale set in the early 1900's during the time when the Russian Army finally begins to modernize and expand, but that is all we experience through the narrative. Remember the craving that led me to pick up this novel? A strong desire to munch on historical accounts?

Unfortunately, The Amber Keeper was an unseasoned serving – the historical aspects of the prose were bland and under cooked; thus historically, the majority of the novel went by uneventful

- The sibling rivalry between Abbie and Robert was an appetizing melodramatic-dish served well, yes, but I felt that Robert's character was underdeveloped – Robert is hot-headed and abrasive towards Abbie, and that's all fine and dandy, but the most absorbing rivalry's for me, are the ones that expand on the conditions and climates revolving around the bickering. I wanted to know what happened with Robert to make him so incredibly spiteful towards Abbie; I wanted to understand why Robert's heart hardened to such a degree, I wanted to know why he was so pressing on the issue of his mother's dying will. One obvious reason was the death of his mother, but there seemed to be more to his bitter approach than just this one issue. I simply felt that there could have been more room to explore his character and the circumstances surrounding his prose

- My main issue with the book was with the sluggish pacing of the narrative. It just dragged, terribly, and because of the torpid pacing, some of the turning points felt flat. I struggled at points to stay engaged and interested. BUT as aforementioned, Countess Olga was the reason I finished this book ;)

**Overall Rating:**

**Storyline | 2/5**

**Characters | 4/5**

**Violence | Moderate**

**Profanities | Mild**

**Sexual Content | Heavy**

**Mature subjects/themes include, but are limited to:** loss of a loved one, death, suicide, child abuse, aggravated assault, martial strife, divorce, adult drinking, religion, adoption, mother-daughter rapport, sibling rivalry, martial affairs, emotional and verbal abuse, depression, war and chaos, politics, disease, riots, Old Earth creationism, false imprisonment

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**Anne (Booklady) Molinarolo says**

I have mixed feelings about The Amber Keeper. The historical parts in which Millie (Abbie's grandmother) recalls her times in Russia between the years 1911 - 1919 were excellent. But when reverting to the present day of 1963 England were not so good. The writing, in my opinion, was off. And Abbie wasn't a sympathetic character; she appears weak, whiny, and a bit self absorbed. True, a feminine take on the prodigal son was different, and I liked that; especially since she was a single mother. And who can blame her for wanting to find out more about her mother that just died of an apparent suicide? No one, but her family.

And the the Countess was a truly vile person, but a bit over the top depiction of a Russian autocrat. And the perpetual trust that allowed Millie and her family to live in Cheswick until ??? And what happened to the Count and Serge?

The ending seemed rushed also as if the author was also bored with the story by this time. I am giving 3 Stars to the novel because of the well written historical parts, but I'm not sure if I will visit this author again.

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## **H.A. Mims says**

The plot was decent, but I couldn't get over my annoyance at the way the grandmother related her past. Page after page of uninterrupted dialogue, with no pauses to emote/interact with the person listening? That was bizarre enough on its own, but the way she supposedly remembered every detail of events that happened \*decades\* before is just absurdly unrealistic. For the major upheavals, sure, but she was repeating even the most mundane conversations verbatim, describing exactly what was eaten on ordinary days. Somehow, more than 40 years later, she was able to remember everyone's expressions and tone of voice, regardless of whether they were freaking out about the revolution, or just asking for another cup of tea.

As such, her story lacked authenticity for me. There was nothing conversational about it, no real feeling that relating these events was particularly difficult or painful for Millie (despite repeated insistence to the contrary). It's just one big information dump, written more like standard narrative than a genuine flashback.

Beyond that, some of the dialogue made me cringe, and the ending felt cobbled together, as if the author was determined to shoot for "happily ever after" than something with more depth or realism.

Solid plot, but the execution left a lot to be desired.

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## **Nick Phillips says**

A perfectly fine family history-mystery novel. As with most of this genre it tends a little too much toward the romantic rather than the adventurous but not so that it gets in the way.

There is a formula to this kind of novel which usually sees a modern character finding out about a family secret some years in the past, here we get a slight twist in that both time periods are in the past, allowing the action to swing between the 1910s and the 1960s while still enabling characters from the former period to be alive in the latter. This works well though while the earlier time period is captured in terms of tone, voice, language and behaviour the more recent one strikes as a little too modern, though that in itself might be more to do with our shared expectations of how that era should be portrayed rather than how it actually was.

Where the writing does fall a little short is in character and exposition. Too many of the characters have the same voice as if there is no difference between the generations or between those who live in Russia and England. At the same time simple exposition is presented quite bluntly with the author simply stating 'It is this' or 'that means that' rather than letting the reader learn and discover for themselves. Both of these flaws smack on either lazy writing or a basic underestimation of the intelligence of the reader, neither of which I find particularly enjoyable traits when reading a novel.

That aside this is an enjoyable novel and well worth investing with a couple of hours of your time.

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## **Jeanie says**

This is why I love to read Historical Fiction and one that is such a mystery to me. A historical account of the Russian Revolution, with many interesting characters, an engaging plot and little lag time, this came together nicely. I love when an author uses several generations to bring it all together.

Our main protagonist Abbie comes home after being estranged from her family when her mother commits suicide. Abbie is heartbroken. So many things left unsaid, so many things misunderstood. With the help of her Grandmother Millie, Abbie is looking for answers. Why would her mother commit suicide? Why did her mother keep her at arm's length? Why did Millie adopt Abbie's mother and who are her mother's parents.

Abbie's grandmother is somewhat reluctant to share the story. The narration is done in Abbie's voice as she picks up the broken pieces of her family, and Millie's voice as she tells Abbie how she became a governess to the Countess and Count of Russia. The arranged marriage of The Count and Countess is anything but loving however; Millie's main concern is for the children. The daughter who is completely ignored by her mother and the son that is indulgent and spoiled, Millie brings stability to these children that is endearing. When the revolution breaks out, you begin to understand the politics and what a dangerous time it was. The many people that died to be free remind you that freedom has a cost. Millie is at war of her own with her employer the Countess. The tension between the two contrasting women make you wonder why did Millie stay and the hold the Countess had.

Abbie own story is just as engaging as Millie's. She wants to continue her mother's business at her gift store making jewelry when she comes to her own road blocks. Her father and brother and the new man in town that wants to buy the business. With determination of being a single mother, Abbie will not be thwarted in finding out what happened to her mother and making a success of her mother's legacy.

A special thank you Lake Union Publishing, and NetGalley for an ARC in exchange for an honest review.

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## **BrokenTune says**

*'The cave, the cave,' yelled Jonathon. Fay appeared with a wriggling Carrie desperate to escape the confines of her pushchair. 'Can we come too?' her sister-in-law asked, her tone revealing her own eagerness to escape for a while.*

DNF.

The Amber Keeper was recommended to me by a friend and I really wanted to like it. Not least because I had not enjoyed her previous recommendation all that much either.

So, deciding to DNF was - and this is unusual for me - hard.

So, anyway, why did the book not work for me?

Well, The Amber Keeper tells the story set in the 1960s of Abbie, an un-wed single mother who returns to the Lake District for her mother's funeral. In the aftermath of the funeral and the squabble about inheritance etc. Abbie spends a lot of time talking to her grandmother and finds out about her gran's time in Russia during the years of the Revolution.

I really like the premise of the plot. What I had an issue with was the delivery.

Let the book speak for itself:

*"Abbie felt a sudden hopelessness overwhelm her as she sat gazing out of her bedroom window, her transistor radio playing Andy Williams singing Can't Get Used To Losing You, which was exactly how she*



*felt right now. To lose her mother just when she needed her most, needed that much-longed-for reconciliation, was more than she could bear. How cruel life was at times. If only she possessed her grandmother's strength. She watched the whooper swans preparing to leave Carreckwater for their summer breeding grounds on the Arctic tundra. How far those beautiful birds must have to travel, and to a region even colder than this one. Rather as Millie had done when she'd sailed to Russia."*

Why is it important that Andy Williams gets a mention?

Why the reference to her grandmother's strength? This is before her gran reveals her story in the book, and up to this point there are only vague references about family secrets - and not much about her gran.

And most important - and most annoying to me - why do I need to know that whooper swans have summer breeding grounds in the Arctic tundra? I'm sorry, but unless the swans feature in the story, I do not want to read about their summer breeding grounds.

(Btw, I checked - there are no further references to the swans. So, why....?)

So, puzzled, I continued to find this:

*" 'Sorry I didn't manage to call yesterday, Gran, only we took the children out on Coniston Water for a treat.' 'Good for you. Cheer you all up, I expect.' 'Indeed it did.' Abbie sipped her coffee as the two lapsed into a comfortable silence, watching a house martin flying frantically to and fro as it gathered material for its nest."*

I think the author may be a twitcher. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but it does not move the story forward or create any of the much needed atmosphere. Nor do the references seem to be metaphors for anything. So, still puzzled I read on.

*"Both women lapsed into silence for a moment as they recalled happier days, then Abbie gave a little sigh. 'I still can't get my head around why Mum would do this. It's quite beyond my comprehension. But then she was never easy to understand.'*

*'It's true she was rather a complicated person, a bit screwed up, as you young people would say. But then she had a lot to deal with, not knowing exactly who she was, for one thing.'*

*'That must have been awful for her.'*

*'I'm afraid it did trouble her greatly.'*

*Abbie tried to recall when first she'd learned that her mother had been adopted, perhaps when she was being something of a problem during her own teen years. Kate had told her that she considered herself fortunate to have enjoyed a good upbringing with loving parents, which included being privately educated at a local girls' school, when she could so easily have suffered a deprived childhood confined in an orphanage."*

It was at this point that I had to laugh. I mean, it can be difficult to convey to readers how characters might feel, but fear not - in this book, the author does an awesome job at telling you exactly what people think and feel and why they do it.

Incidentally, when trying to contrast growing up at an orphanage with growing up in a loving family - who cares about the private education at a local girls school?

From here the reading became less laugh out loud and more strenuous because of the amount of eye-rolling I felt compelled to engage in. So, at risk of causing permanent damage from eye-strain I decided to skim through the rest of the book and see if it does get better. Then the following caught my attention:

*" 'Good for you. Amber is beautiful, likened to the sun because of its colour and clarity. There are many myths and legends attached to it, not least that it is considered to possess healing properties, often worn by children when they are teething. And significantly it is a symbol of fidelity, meant to represent everlasting love,' Millie said with a smile.*

*'Oh, I like that. We could do with a bit more fidelity in this world, judging by all the scandalous goings-on in this Profumo affair. What his lovely wife feels about her MP husband sleeping with a woman who is also having it off with a Russian diplomat, I dread to think. Poor woman!'*

*'Windmill girls, or so they think, and the dreadful scandal is having to be carefully kept from Lady Astor that her son has become an innocent victim in the affair, a scapegoat in fact, just because he allowed Stephen Ward to use a cottage on the Cliveden estate.'*

How do you get from making jewelry to the Profumo Affair? And most importantly - WHY??? It has nothing whatsoever to do with story - and none of it is ever mentioned again. (I checked.)

Is it just thrown in there to give the story a sense of being set in the early 1960s? If so, why not do this by setting the scene rather than by throwing a reference to a political scandal that most people outside of the UK have not heard of?

And for what it's worth, don't get me started on "poor" Lord and Lady Astor. How could they not have known what was going on at Cliveden. They were there!

Anyway, I'm digressing - much like the book. Unlike the book, however, I'm not trying to tell a story.

In summary, *The Amber Keeper* is an interesting story but the patronising, over-explaining, info-dumping, tell-rather-than-show kind of writing drove me nuts!

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## **Ionian says**

If you go about buying this book for the Russian Revolution angle, you may not get exactly what you were expecting. It is mentioned, but not described in detail as this is rather a very character driven story. That didn't really bother me, as the plot sounded interesting and it turned out that it was a great read.

This story begins with a main character that finds herself in a bad situation and things only get worse for her when she returns home to her very judgmental family. I felt bad for her, and it was this feeling that drew me into the story and made me want to learn more about her and her family. I wasn't expecting for the story to go backward in time as soon as it did, but I was grateful for the author's ability to make many story lines intersect at crucial moments and keep the reader interested and turning pages.

This is a book that will make you stop and think about the decisions we make and how they affect our futures and the lives of those around us. I liked the way the author described her settings and thought that the narrative voice was inviting, regardless of which character was telling the story.

Overall this was a really good book and I am glad that I took the time to read it. Quite an adventure one finds in these pages.

This review is based on a complimentary copy from the publisher and provided through Netgalley. All opinions are my own.

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### Joleen says

This was a complicated little book...but I like complicated. Not quite as good as A Guide for the Perplexed, by Dara Horn, but I'm still giving it 5 stars because this was true historical fiction. I learned a lot about Russian history in the early 1900's, but the story also was brought into the 60's as we learn the stories of Millie and Abbie, grandmother and granddaughter respectively.

Millie has an amazing story that Abbie has never heard in its entirety, only bits and pieces about her grandmother's time in Russia. Abbie decides she wants to unravel the mystery behind her mother's mysterious suicide, and she believes hearing the whole story of what lead to her (Kate's) adoption from Russia might help.

What she hears was way more than she could have ever expected.

This was a mystery, several love stories, and earning a place back in her family after an unfortunate choice on Abbie's part a number of years ago.

Good book, and one I can recommend for everybody, not just women. Nothing racy. Well done.

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### Vita Kadile says

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### Joey Woolfardis says

I suppose it was written fairly well in terms of being correct grammatically, though there are a few strange word choices, but I disliked the protagonist from the off and that's never good. It felt slow, quite laborious, and I couldn't get in to it enough to finish it.

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### Joanne Lewis says

It's always the sign of a good book when you don't want to put it down and can't wait to pick it up again and this was certainly the case here. An intriguing blend of a nod to historical fiction, with half of the book set during the time of the Russian Revolution and half set in the Lake District in the 1960s, this is more a tale of hardship, deceit, love and overcoming battles, both personal and political, than it is a history lesson.

The journey the reader is taken on as you learn of Millie's past in Russia and begin to piece together the links between her own experiences and the impact they've had on future generations of the family is compelling. The 'will they, won't they' aspect of Abbie's encounters with Drew draws a nice parallel with Millie's earlier relationship with Stefan and each character is sufficiently developed to enable the reader to identify with their personalities, whether agreeable or otherwise!

The ending may feel a little contrived to some readers, but provides another twist which allows the final

pieces of the puzzle of Kate's suicide to be revealed and so the author just about gets away with it.

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### **Donna Finke says**

"Set against the backdrop of revolutionary Russia"...great chance to touch on some Russian history.

Story is told in flashbacks by the Grandma in England, telling Abbie about her life and that of her mothers.

The dreadful helpless life of people trapped as servants to the rich and mighty.

Abbie wants a new life for her daughter Aimee and to reconnect with her family and gain their respect.

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