

"Layered with magical storytelling . . . not to be missed!" — ARIEL LAWHON,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of *The Frozen River*

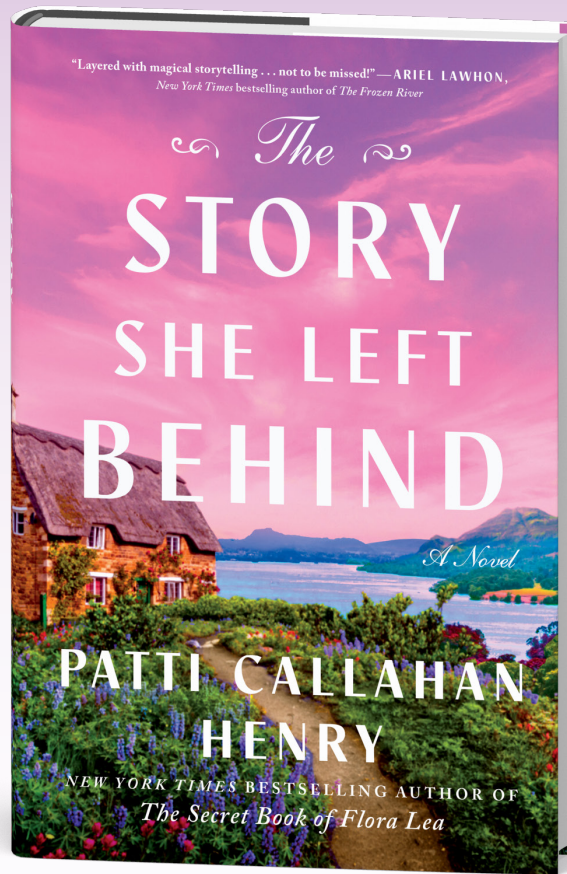
READING  
GROUP  
GUIDE

~ The ~  
STORY  
SHE LEFT  
BEHIND

*A Novel*

PATTI CALLAHAN  
HENRY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*The Secret Book of Flora Lea*



This reading group guide for *The Story She Left Behind* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Patti Callahan Henry. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.



*Inspired by a true literary mystery,  
The Story She Left Behind is the sweeping tale of  
a legendary book, a lost mother, and a daughter's  
search for them both.*

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. The story at the center of this novel, that of an author acclaimed for a novel written in her childhood, who then disappeared at the age of twenty-five, is one based on the true literary cold case of Barbara Newhall Follett. Had you ever heard of Barbara before reading?
2. Our protagonist Clara is an award-winning artist who has great sensitivity to her physical surroundings. As the novel progresses, we learn just the extent of how Clara's artistry exists in conversation with her mother's. What do you think the book says about generational artistry and how love impacts how we see and perceive the world?
3. When Clara and Charlie have their initial phone call, Clara is overcome with conflicting emotions. She finds herself torn between her lingering hope to learn what happened to her mother and her obligations as a mother and teacher. With two very opposed paths set in front of her, were you at all surprised by the fervency in which she sets off for England?
4. Upon arriving in London, Clara and Wynn timer are met with the Great Smog of 1952, conditions brought about by the industrial nature of the city. The extremity of the conditions, impossible though they were to predict, are based on historical fact. Have you ever heard of conditions like these? How might you have reacted to them yourself?
5. Clara's identities—as a parent, a daughter, an artist, an individual, etc.—seem to be in conflict with one another as the story progresses. For example, her dedication to her mother leads her to London, where she unwittingly puts her daughter's health at risk, and finds herself, for the first time in years, connecting romantically. Have you ever felt the various aspects of your life in conflict in such a way?
6. Throughout the book, Clara must reckon with the impact her mother has had on the world and on others, all outside of how she impacted Clara as her parent. How does Clara seem to cope with coming to terms with her mother as an individual and not just as someone beholden to her child?
7. Wynn timer, a wonderfully precocious child, makes a notable impact on every adult she encounters, and yet she has connected most powerfully with Emjier, her imaginary friend spawned from the protagonist of her grandmother's book. What purpose does Emjier serve in Wynn timer's life?

8. Bronwyn's uniquely complicated past and personhood are what ultimately lead her to leave her daughter and husband after an unfortunate fire. Her actions are drastic, and yet, as the story unfolds, we understand why Bronwyn feels her actions to be necessary. Do you think that there could be a situation in your own life that would lead you down a similar path?
9. Do you feel that Bronwyn is justified in her actions? Do you think that, should this story be set in present day, the outcome might have been different?
10. The ideas of language and communication are omnipresent throughout the book. Have you ever felt, like Bronwyn, Clara, and Wynnie, the need to share something that your spoken language is unable to communicate? Outside of devising an entirely new language, how might you communicate these nuances in your experiences?
11. At the end of the story, Clara is coming to terms with her past, present, and future. What are the broader implications of childhood trauma? Why do we place so much importance on what was lost in the past? Can you think of anything noteworthy that you have hung onto since your childhood?
12. Clara's character displays many different emotions in decision-making throughout her life—hope, fear, guilt, love. Which one do you think is the dominant driver? Would it be the same if you were in her shoes?
13. *The Story She Left Behind* weaves an ode to language and, ultimately, how we connect and love one another in life. How do you feel like your styles of communication have changed throughout your life?

## Enhance Your Book Club

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1. Seek out a map of the world and chart Clara and Wynnie's journey from South Carolina to London to the Lake District.
2. Enjoy a tea service: a selection of English breakfast, Earl Grey, or green tea with sugar and milk options on the side. Add some tea biscuits or scones with butter and jam as a food option.
3. Think of a unique occurrence in your life, one that you don't quite have a word to describe, and come up with a new word for it.
4. Learn what else Patti is up to online at [PattiCallahanHenry.com](http://PattiCallahanHenry.com), where you can also sign up for her monthly newsletter.

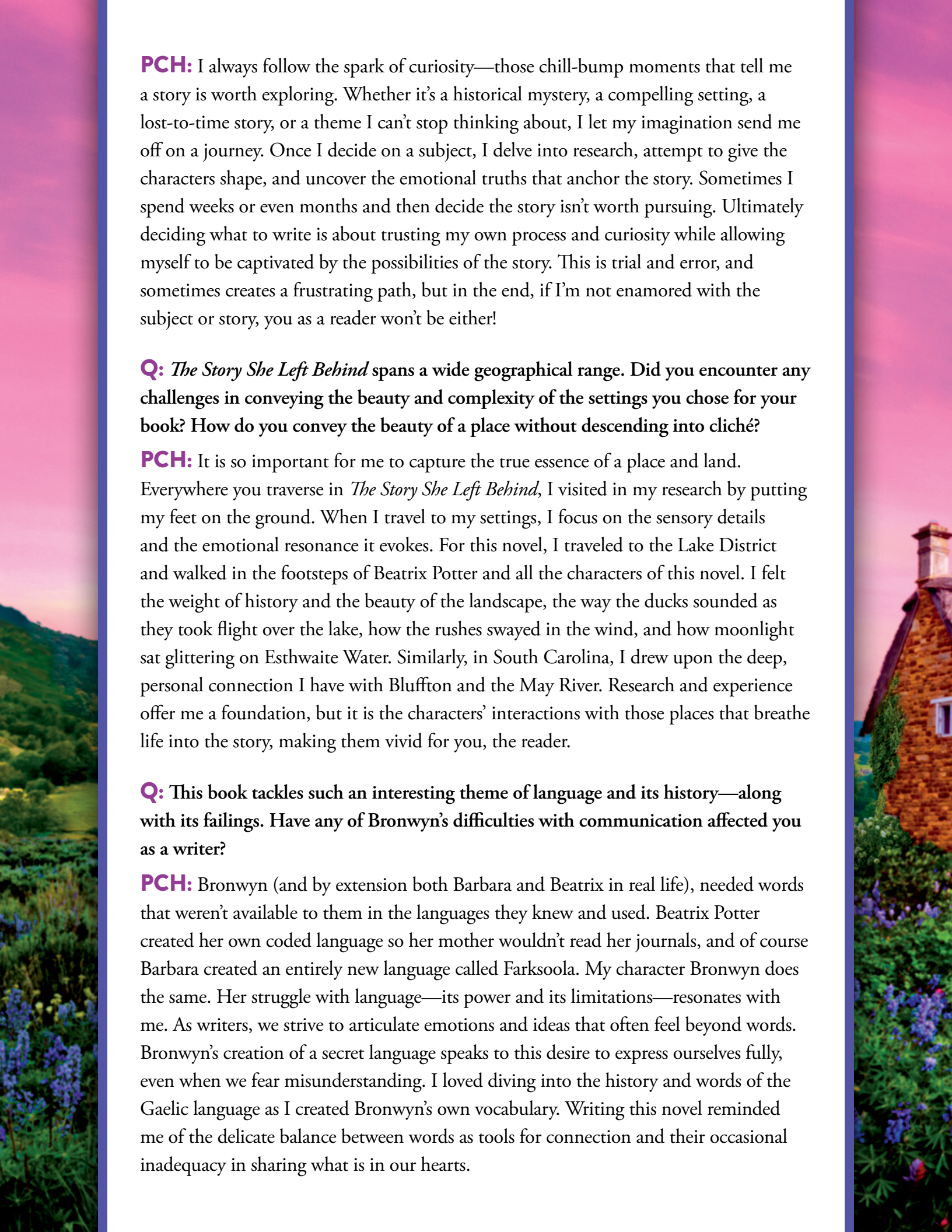


## *A Conversation with* **Patti Callahan Henry**

**Q:** You speak in the author's note about your discovery of Barbara Newhall Follett's story—a fascinating tale surely many of your readers will learn about for the first time within the pages of your book. Was there anything you uncovered in your research about her that you found truly remarkable?

**PCH:** Until I discovered Barbara Newhall Follett's story while researching women who created languages, I had never heard of her—a surprising realization, given the extraordinary blend of wonder and tragedy that defined her life. Barbara's story captivated me with her remarkable imagination and resilience in the face of immense personal challenges. She created entire worlds and an intricate language called Farksoola to express herself when the real world felt confining or painful. Her disappearance eerily mirrors the fate of the fictional character in her fantasy novel, *The House Without Windows*. I was astonished to learn that her life's work, including her intricate language, is preserved in sixteen boxes housed in the archives at Columbia University in New York. Barbara wrote mythical stories of escape, of running away, and through her stories she gives us insight into her obsessions, but not her fate. I wanted answers even if it meant creating them in fiction.

**Q:** You've written both contemporary and historical fiction novels. How do you navigate all your ideas, and how do you decide what to write next?



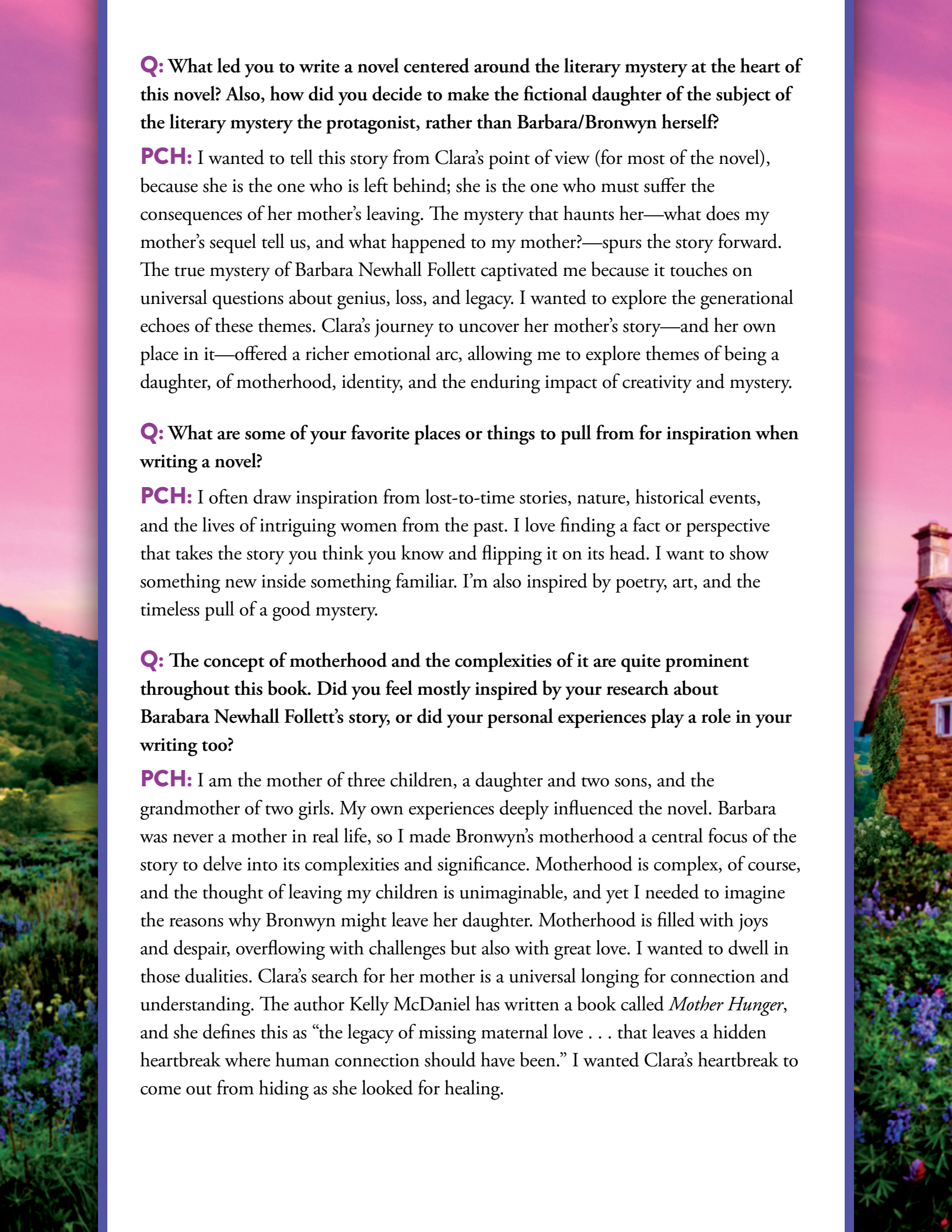
**PCH:** I always follow the spark of curiosity—those chill-bump moments that tell me a story is worth exploring. Whether it's a historical mystery, a compelling setting, a lost-to-time story, or a theme I can't stop thinking about, I let my imagination send me off on a journey. Once I decide on a subject, I delve into research, attempt to give the characters shape, and uncover the emotional truths that anchor the story. Sometimes I spend weeks or even months and then decide the story isn't worth pursuing. Ultimately deciding what to write is about trusting my own process and curiosity while allowing myself to be captivated by the possibilities of the story. This is trial and error, and sometimes creates a frustrating path, but in the end, if I'm not enamored with the subject or story, you as a reader won't be either!

**Q:** *The Story She Left Behind* spans a wide geographical range. Did you encounter any challenges in conveying the beauty and complexity of the settings you chose for your book? How do you convey the beauty of a place without descending into cliché?

**PCH:** It is so important for me to capture the true essence of a place and land. Everywhere you traverse in *The Story She Left Behind*, I visited in my research by putting my feet on the ground. When I travel to my settings, I focus on the sensory details and the emotional resonance it evokes. For this novel, I traveled to the Lake District and walked in the footsteps of Beatrix Potter and all the characters of this novel. I felt the weight of history and the beauty of the landscape, the way the ducks sounded as they took flight over the lake, how the rushes swayed in the wind, and how moonlight sat glittering on Esthwaite Water. Similarly, in South Carolina, I drew upon the deep, personal connection I have with Bluffton and the May River. Research and experience offer me a foundation, but it is the characters' interactions with those places that breathe life into the story, making them vivid for you, the reader.

**Q:** This book tackles such an interesting theme of language and its history—along with its failings. Have any of Bronwyn's difficulties with communication affected you as a writer?

**PCH:** Bronwyn (and by extension both Barbara and Beatrix in real life), needed words that weren't available to them in the languages they knew and used. Beatrix Potter created her own coded language so her mother wouldn't read her journals, and of course Barbara created an entirely new language called Farksoola. My character Bronwyn does the same. Her struggle with language—its power and its limitations—resonates with me. As writers, we strive to articulate emotions and ideas that often feel beyond words. Bronwyn's creation of a secret language speaks to this desire to express ourselves fully, even when we fear misunderstanding. I loved diving into the history and words of the Gaelic language as I created Bronwyn's own vocabulary. Writing this novel reminded me of the delicate balance between words as tools for connection and their occasional inadequacy in sharing what is in our hearts.



**Q:** What led you to write a novel centered around the literary mystery at the heart of this novel? Also, how did you decide to make the fictional daughter of the subject of the literary mystery the protagonist, rather than Barbara/Bronwyn herself?

**PCH:** I wanted to tell this story from Clara's point of view (for most of the novel), because she is the one who is left behind; she is the one who must suffer the consequences of her mother's leaving. The mystery that haunts her—what does my mother's sequel tell us, and what happened to my mother?—spurs the story forward. The true mystery of Barbara Newhall Follett captivated me because it touches on universal questions about genius, loss, and legacy. I wanted to explore the generational echoes of these themes. Clara's journey to uncover her mother's story—and her own place in it—offered a richer emotional arc, allowing me to explore themes of being a daughter, of motherhood, identity, and the enduring impact of creativity and mystery.

**Q:** What are some of your favorite places or things to pull from for inspiration when writing a novel?

**PCH:** I often draw inspiration from lost-to-time stories, nature, historical events, and the lives of intriguing women from the past. I love finding a fact or perspective that takes the story you think you know and flipping it on its head. I want to show something new inside something familiar. I'm also inspired by poetry, art, and the timeless pull of a good mystery.

**Q:** The concept of motherhood and the complexities of it are quite prominent throughout this book. Did you feel mostly inspired by your research about Barbara Newhall Follett's story, or did your personal experiences play a role in your writing too?

**PCH:** I am the mother of three children, a daughter and two sons, and the grandmother of two girls. My own experiences deeply influenced the novel. Barbara was never a mother in real life, so I made Bronwyn's motherhood a central focus of the story to delve into its complexities and significance. Motherhood is complex, of course, and the thought of leaving my children is unimaginable, and yet I needed to imagine the reasons why Bronwyn might leave her daughter. Motherhood is filled with joys and despair, overflowing with challenges but also with great love. I wanted to dwell in those dualities. Clara's search for her mother is a universal longing for connection and understanding. The author Kelly McDaniel has written a book called *Mother Hunger*, and she defines this as "the legacy of missing maternal love . . . that leaves a hidden heartbreak where human connection should have been." I wanted Clara's heartbreak to come out from hiding as she looked for healing.

**Q:** The secret language at the heart of this book is the source of so much emotion and power. What to your mind would motivate a person to come up with a language of their own?

**PCH:** Creating a secret language often seems to stem from a need for what I'd call sanctuary-of-the-self, a way to either protect one's innermost thoughts or to find a new way to express them. For Bronwyn, it was a means of reclaiming control and asserting her individuality in a world that often misunderstood her. Language becomes more than communication; it's an act of defiance, creativity, and connection. It allows a person to articulate emotions and ideas that might feel under expressed or too vague, too fragile or profound for conventional words.

