

THE CRIMSON ROOMS BY KATHARINE MCMAHON



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From Publishers Weekly

This brisk romantic mystery, set in post-WWI London, begins with a situation worthy of E.M. Forster as Evelyn Gifford and her family receive a visit from a nurse and a young boy who claim to be the wartime lover and child of Evelyn's late brother. Evelyn has little time to ponder the implications: a lawyer in training, she is pressed into service when her firm takes the case of a war veteran accused of murdering his wife and burying her body in the woods (along with all incriminating evidence). Evelyn believes in the man's innocence and tries to unearth new evidence that will exonerate him, but complicating her investigation are Nicholas Thorne, a handsome but engaged attorney whom Evelyn falls for, and the nurse, Meredith, who, having moved in with the Gifford family, begins to force Evelyn out of her settled existence. Despite these distractions, Evelyn doggedly follows a trail of clues leading back to a wartime coverup. In this determinedly old-fashioned novel of tangled mystery and morality, Evelyn makes for a smart and resolutely modest heroine. (Feb.)

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From Booklist

Even though the Great War is over, it still casts a shadow. Haunted by the death of her beloved brother, James, Evelyn Gifford leads a cheerless life. But though time seems to have stopped in the London house she shares with her mother, grandmother, and aunt, Evelyn has a career outside. As one of England's only female attorneys, she has to work hard for acceptance and finally gets involved in two cases, one involving a mother trying to regain custody of her children and the other involving a veteran who is accused of murdering his wife. Then there is Meredith, the irrepressible young woman who shows up on the Giffords' doorstep with a child she claims is James' son. And a possible love interest presents itself in the person of another attorney, Nicholas Thorne. A lot of balls in the air, but McMahon does a superb job of juggling them all. Evelyn's personal and professional struggles are convincingly rendered, and the period ambience and courtroom drama are equally satisfying. A thoroughly engrossing read that will appeal both as mystery and historical fiction. --Mary Ellen Quinn

Review

"McMahon's historical novels are often complex but extremely rewarding in their depth and character development. Her latest is her best novel to date." ---Library Journal Starred Review

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THE CRIMSON ROOMS BY KATHARINE MCMAHON PDF

From the author of the #1 international bestseller, *The Rose of Sebastopol*--an unforgettable historical novel.

Still haunted by the death of her brother James seven years ago in World War I, Evelyn Gifford is shocked when a young nurse named Meredith and her six-year-old son appear on her London doorstep. Meredith claims the child is James's son, and the grief-stricken Evelyn welcomes them into her home.

At the same time Evelyn, a struggling attorney, is defending a veteran charged with murdering his wife. She believes her client is innocent, just as she suspects there is more to the story of her "nephew" than meets the eye.

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Most helpful customer reviews

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

Highly recommended for those who enjoy historical fiction with a dash of mystery and romance worked in
By Redlady

The Crimson Rooms is set in post World War I London, England in the year 1924. Evelyn Gifford is haunted by the death of her cherished brother James, who died in the Great War. Evelyn is stunned when a young woman named Meredith and her 6 year old son Edmund show up on the families doorstep. Meredith who is a nurse, claims that Edmund, conceived in a battlefield hospital, is the son of her brother James. The family take Meredith and Edmund in but they are still grief stricken from James death as well as the recent death of Evelyn's father.

Evelyn is 30 years old, unmarried and lives with her mother, grandmother and Aunt Prudence and supports her family. This is quite unusual as Evelyn is one of few female lawyers and is struggling in a field that is dominated by men and a society that is not accepting of female lawyers. Most women of this time do not attend college and have their own careers. They are to focus on finding a husband and starting a family.

Evelyn is soon swept up in two legal cases that effect her life in many ways. One case concerns a young mother whose children are taken away from her because she is poor and she cannot care for them. Evelyn learns about the plight of the poor in London and uncovers some unknown secrets about what happens to some of the children who are being taken care of by these charitable organizations. In another case, a man that is an acquaintance of her boss is charged with the murder of his wife but won't speak to anyone. Evelyn meets and falls for a lawyer that appears to show interest in her and the murder case she is working on.

Evelyn must deal with a shocking allegation that Meredith claims about her brother James. It shatters her perceptions of her brother and she uncovers the layers of deception within her own family. Meanwhile, Evelyn must continue to fight for recognition and respect in her role as a female lawyer while trying to help these two cases. Both cases end with drama and mystery with some unexpected twists at the end.

Ms. McMahon skillfully builds a story that is complex and layered with great detail. There is great depth to the story as McMahon builds strong characters and a complicated plot. At first, the story seems a bit mired in detail but I soon realized that the depth and detail was needed to weave the story that would unwind at the end. I enjoyed the historical aspects to the story which seemed to capture the spirit of this time period of London in the 1920's. There is murder mystery, courtroom dramas, social history and even a bit of love and romance mixed in. Highly recommended for those who enjoy historical fiction with a dash of mystery and romance worked in.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

A Fun Period Piece

By Cynthia

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.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

"Don't depend solely on the law, depend on justice."

By E. Bukowsky

"The Crimson Rooms," by Katharine McMahon, opens in 1924, with thirty year old Evelyn Gifford shaken by a recurring nightmare involving her brother, James, dying in agony at the age of twenty on a muddy French battlefield. She is startled to hear a knock at the front door in the middle of the night. Much to her bewilderment, a woman is standing in the entrance with a little boy who looks exactly like Evelyn's late brother. The stranger introduces herself as Meredith Duffy; she is accompanied by her son, six-year-old Edmund, whom she claims is James's child. The arrival of these guests throws the Gifford household, consisting of Evelyn, her mother, grandmother, aunt, and two maids, into turmoil.

Evelyn is a graduate of Cambridge with a bachelor of law degree, but "tradition dictates that women should not be lawyers and the law is governed by tradition." She considers herself fortunate when Daniel Breen, who is a champion of the downtrodden, takes her on as his articled clerk. She soon becomes embroiled in two very different legal matters: One involves a destitute woman, Leah Marchant, who is desperate to regain custody of her three children; the other concerns a former soldier, Simon Wheeler, who will hang if he is convicted of murdering his wife, Stella. Evelyn works tirelessly conducting research, interviewing witnesses, and uncovering surprising new evidence that could influence the outcome of both cases.

This is an engrossing work of historical fiction that is almost impossible to put down. The admirable heroine, Evelyn Gifford, is a highly intelligent and tenacious fighter for justice. In spite of the jibes she is subjected to about "women lawyers," she perseveres, knowing that if she is to become a respected advocate, she will need to be tough. The plot thickens when Evelyn is attracted to a dashing and charming barrister, Nicholas Thorne, who is already engaged to the gorgeous and wealthy Sylvia Hardyng. When Thorne appears to reciprocate her interest, Evelyn must decide how to handle this awkward situation. Her decision becomes even more difficult when she is forced to choose between desire and personal integrity.

Eventually, Evelyn faces some hard truths about herself, her family, and the society in which she lives. Edmund, Meredith, and Nicholas penetrate her psychological defenses, and she allows herself to feel deeply for the first time since that day in 1917 when she learned that James was dead. Her work with Breen reinforces Evelyn's outrage at the favorable treatment afforded to the rich and well-connected, while indigent females are denied basic civil rights. In addition, as Jacqueline Winspear does so effectively in her Maisie Dobbs series, McMahon creates a grim portrait of the ways in which the Great War decimated the flower of English youth. Those who survived often returned home maimed both in body and spirit. "The Crimson Rooms" is old-fashioned storytelling at its best. It is compelling on so many levels: as a suspenseful murder mystery, an incisive tale of social injustice, a poignant love story, and a gripping family drama. Although some readers might have wished for a more upbeat conclusion, the author shows courage in wrapping up her complicated story realistically. Truth be told, a sequel to this wonderful book would be most welcome.

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