

THE SKELETON HOUSE

KATHERINE ALLUM

ABOUT THE BOOK

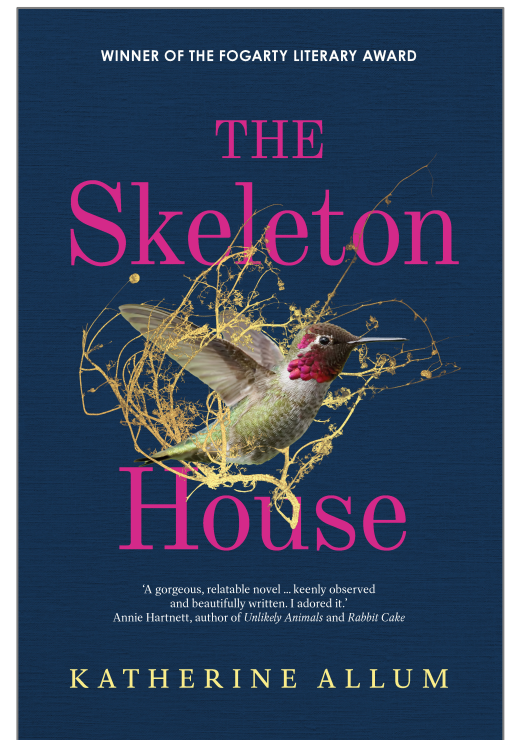
Ever since she was a teenager, Meg has been trying to leave the tiny town of St Stephens. But here she still lives, with two precious children, a hidden truth, and a husband whose ideas of a perfect wife do not match her own. When Meg puts her foot down on a third kid, gets a job and is empowered by the same book group that was meant to keep her in her place, her marriage begins to fall apart. Hers is a story of resilience and courage – the fierceness of a mother’s love and the power that comes with never forgetting who you really are.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Allum studied Creative Writing at Linfield University (BA) and holds an MA from City, University of London. American born, she grew up in four different states and has the strongest ties to regional southwest Nevada, and Portland, Oregon. After spending several years in London, she now lives in Perth with her husband. She does her best story plotting while swimming. Katherine’s debut novel, *The Skeleton House*, won the 2023 Fogarty Literary Award.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this novel called *The Skeleton House*?
2. Why do you think the novel opens with an epigraph quoting from The Book of Mormon: ... **beware lest there shall arise contentions among you?**
3. How does the author create a sense of unease or foreboding in the very domestic progression of events that she outlines?
4. Why do you think that Meg has married Kyle?
5. Why do you think that Kyle has married Meg?
6. In what ways does Kyle’s status as a Mormon who was sent home from his mission in South Carolina affect his expectations and choices?
7. How does Meg and Kyle’s ongoing battle over bank accounts represent their struggle?
8. What is the role in the narrative of Meg’s bedtime stories with Finn?
9. Why has Neeley retained a central presence in Meg’s imaginative life?
10. How would you describe Meg’s relationship with each of her parents?
11. What is the role of the book club in Meg’s life as a wife and mother?
12. What is the importance of her friendship with Carly?
13. Why is Whit such an important character?
14. Why do you think the author has included three chapters called ‘The Helicopter’ in this work? Why is it structured the way it is?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

You write about this community and this landscape as if it were very familiar to you. Is it?

When I was eleven, my family moved to a small town in the desert and, like Meg, I'm also OTM. I don't think I fully appreciated the beauty of the landscape and some of the opportunities I had as a kid until I left. Living in a small town means that your life crisscrosses with others in an entwined, intimate way that creates a sense of belonging and accountability when people know who you and your parents are.

Add the moody and sometimes spooky desert landscape – and all the strange creatures that come with it – and it's a fascinating and entertaining setting to play with.

Where did the seed of this novel begin, and where did your characters come from?

Crickets and creosote. A teenage boy and girl on a red quad bike, roaring down a dirt road into nowhere, their pale throats exposed as they holler to the thick indigo desert night. They disappear and the sun rises. There's a skeleton house, its timber frame silhouetted against the dawn sky.

It started out as a coming-of-age story. The first draft was a dual narrative with half the novel being Meg's journal. These were mostly stories and creative writing exercises, including a fight with Meg's dad written as an overly dramatic script (*exit, pursued by bear*). The journal didn't make the final cut, but it was a valuable exercise in character exploration.

First-person narratives are especially persistent, and the voice came before the character. Meg sort of showed up, crossed her arms and said, 'Ok ... write me, already.' I had to oblige. It doesn't feel like crafting characters; I uncovered them.

What do you know now that you did not at the beginning of writing this novel?

Be bold – you'll always have your old drafts. I took 'kill your darlings' to the extreme with this book, in multiple ways. In 2020, during the height of the pandemic lockdown in London, I deleted half of it (c. 50,000 words) and wrote it back up. The earlier drafts had none of the tense foreboding because there wasn't any breathing room. I learned so much from this novel – I think I plan more now, but I also am more likely to take risks and be bold with the plot.

What's next for Katherine Allum?

Chatting with more amazing folks about words and all things art (I never feel awkward in a room full of book people). Writing more books! I have a few ideas percolating – I am editing Book 2, drafting Book 3, and Book 4 is in that fuzzy honeymoon idea stage. Brace yourself for a big homeschool family.



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