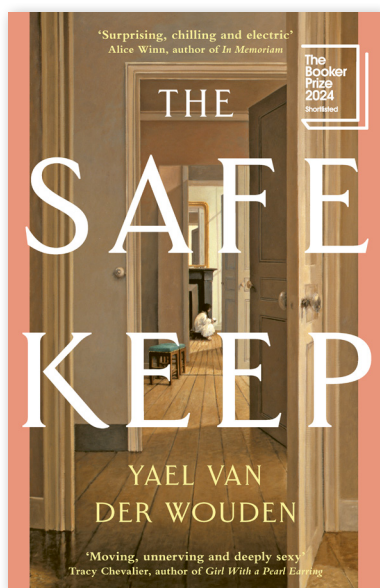


The Safekeep

by Yael van der Wouden



SHORT PLOT SUMMARY

'A house is a precious thing...'

It's been fifteen years since the Second World War and the rural Dutch province of Overijssel is quiet. Bomb craters have been filled, buildings reconstructed and the conflict is well and truly over. Alone in her late mother's country home, Isabel lives her life as it should be: led by routine and discipline. But all is upended when her brother Louis delivers his graceless new girlfriend, Eva, at Isabel's doorstep, as a guest – there to stay for the season.

Eva is Isabel's antithesis: she sleeps late, walks loudly through the house and touches things she shouldn't. In response, Isabel develops a fury-fuelled obsession, and when things start disappearing around the house – a spoon, a knife, a bowl – Isabel's suspicions spiral out of control. In the sweltering heat of summer, Isabel's paranoia gives way to desire, leading to a discovery that unravels all she has ever known. The war might not be well and truly over after all, and neither Eva nor the house are what they seem.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Van der Wouden's use of sensual detail is one of the most stand-out characteristics of *The Safekeep*. The slow, brooding intensity of Isabel and Eva's attraction is full of sense imagery: Eva's brown skin when they go swimming, the tone of her voice, the sounds of their kisses, the sensations of their lovemaking. The languorous pleasure that Isabel finds with Eva is in stark contrast to the repulsion she feels when Johan kisses and touches her.

Ripe, sticky and sweet, the symbol of a pear occurs at several points during the novel, which could be said to represent the sensual delight Isabel craves to explore with Eva, but is for much of the book afraid to open herself to. Eva gives Isabel a pear which Isabel takes to eat secretly in her room, consuming it all so that she will leave no trace

“A gripping debut written with the mastery of a seasoned novelist, about a relationship between two women with a dark, hidden history that lies beneath them.”

DIANA EVANS,
2025 JUDGE



Shortlist
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of having enjoyed it: she does not want to be seen to give in to Eva's temptation.

When Isabel and Eva finally make love, Eva becomes the fruit that is eaten: 'Isabel ate her, the loud suck of a full-ripe fruit; she ate the flesh and the seeds and the core and all'.

Later, when all seems to be lost in her relationship with Eva, Isabel sees 'Outside, a pear tree, arms wide, a circle of rotting fruit on the ground' at Tante Rian's house. As Isabel despairs at the loss of Eva, she is also discovering the rot that has always been at the core of her family: the secret she has never known about the provenance of her family home.

DISCUSSION POINTS

At the climax of the novel, we discover that Isabel, Hendrik and Louis have grown up in a house that had belonged to Eva's family, and that Eva has deliberately got involved with Louis to be able to regain access to her childhood home, and, perhaps, reclaim some of her family possessions.

When Isabel questions Uncle Karel about what happened, he defends the legality of his ownership of the house, saying that he bought the deeds from the bank, and that if people default on their mortgages, then it's only to be expected that their houses will be repossessed.

However, Eva's explanation reveals that while Uncle Karel may be technically right, it is also true that he is ignoring the moral implication of their ownership:

'My father bought the house. He was a principal at a school. He died in the camps. He didn't pay his mortgage because he died in the camps. That's why the house was sold – because he didn't pay his mortgage. Because he died.'

Were you aware that property was taken from Holocaust victims in this way? Is Isabel's solution enough? Can anyone ever truly make reparations for what has happened to Eva?

QUESTIONS

Is it easier or more difficult for Eva and Isabel to be a couple than for Hendrik and Sebastian? Or do they face the same prejudice?

Isabel observes when she first meets her that Eva is 'pretty in a way men thought women ought to be pretty.' Eva also talks to Louis in what Isabel thinks is an artificial way. How is Eva different from Isabel and Louis and why?

How does the house symbolise Isabel's relationship with her mother? And how does that change as the story progresses?

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Isabel considers the idea of joy after Eva asks her if anything makes her joyful. 'What was joy, anyway. What was the worth of happiness that left behind a crater thrice the size of its impact.' Have you felt this? Is true happiness a scary concept? Why?

NEXT STEPS

Write a short story inspired by a family possession. This might be an heirloom of some kind, like Eva's family's plates, or the spoons, or a childhood toy like the stuffed hare that she had to leave behind. You could begin the story by describing the item and then telling its story: where has it been, how did it get to you? Where did it live before it came to you? You could imagine what might have happened to it before it belonged to your family, or perhaps there is a secret attached to it that only you know, or that you could make up. Was it connected to one person in particular? Why was it so important to them?

Alternatively, create a map of memories of your childhood home. What do you remember of it? Was there just one home, or did you live in several places when you were younger? If the house is still lived in by your family, perhaps you could visit and map it out, marking out specific memories that happened in different places as labels – you could just write in things that happened, or create a key of symbols, or illustrate everything. It might be particular conversations that you remember happening in certain rooms, meals that were enjoyed, secrets told, belongings that were stored in certain places. Even if you can't visit your old home anymore, see what memories are unearthed in the process of drawing everything out. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yael van der Wouden was born in 1987 and lives and works in The Netherlands. *The Safekeep*, her debut novel, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2024. It was also longlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Wingate Prize, and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. She lectures in creative writing and comparative literature.



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In *Our Missing Hearts*, Celeste Ng tells a heart-wrenching novel about the unbreakable love between a mother and child and how civilized communities can ignore the most searing injustice.

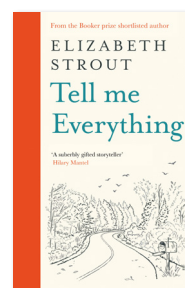
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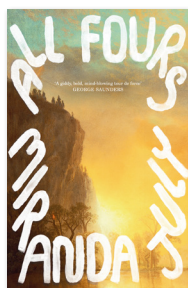
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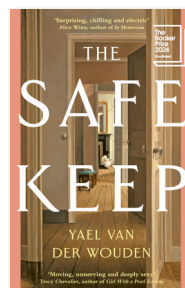
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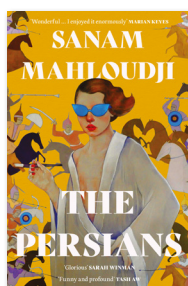
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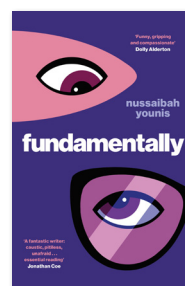
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