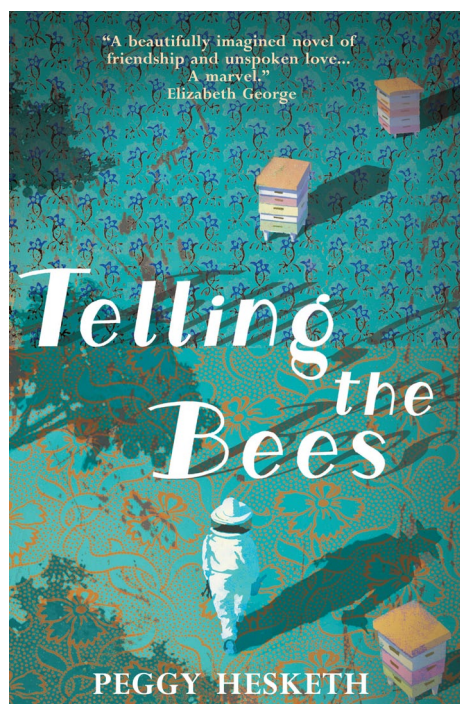




Oneworld Readers' Guide

Telling the Bees



Telling the Bees

Peggy Hesketh

An octogenarian beekeeper is haunted by the murder of his neighbour and by the secrets, lies, and truths that this crime brings to light.

Telling the Bees is narrated by Albert Honig, an elderly man who lives in a peaceful Orange County neighbourhood, where with the passing years, he has watched as the orange groves and farms he cherished are surrendered to the implacable onslaught of housing developments, freeways, buzzing power lines, and noisy neighbours. Still residing in the house in which he was born, Albert has never married and he makes a modest living through his beehives, just as his father and his father's father had done before him. His bees are his solace and his sustenance, his only true companions through the years and Albert prides himself on intuiting even the slightest change in his beloved bees.

But in truth, Albert did have one friend: the vivacious and beautiful Claire, who decades earlier became a willing new recruit in the art of beekeeping, escaping from her own difficult family life. Years after the last threads of their friendship had painfully frayed, a trail of bees leads Albert to Claire's murdered body, and Albert is plunged back into memories of the past, and the tragic story of Claire and her family.

Questions for Discussion

1. Albert lives in the house he was born in, and has watched the neighbourhood change over the years. Do you think his judgement of his neighbours and contemporary society is fair? *Telling the Bees* portrays a shift in values from the past and the present day. How would you define these?
2. *Telling the Bees* is narrated from Albert's first-person perspective, the story unfolding entirely through his internal thoughts and memories. Did you trust Albert's recollection of the past?
3. The murder case is closed as a robbery gone wrong, at the hands of two drug addicts. Do you think the suspects are wholly culpable, or do you think of them more as victims of society?



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4. “The cruellest lies are often told in silence.” / “It’s better to keep sleeping dogs lying.” In what ways are these statements reflected through the story and characterisation? When do you see silences as more destructive than words, and vice versa?
5. Albert’s bees and Claire seem to have been more important to him than his own family. What picture does *Telling the Bees* give of family? Perhaps use the following quote as a starting point: “When a hive goes bad, it nearly always does so from within.”
6. “I was too heavy for her and she was too light for me.” Do you think the male and female characters are depicted as opposite types? How do you see Albert and Claire’s relationship, and its unravelling?
7. Albert is a solitary character who engages little with the outside world. How does the author ask the reader to warm to him? What do you think the other characters feel about him?
8. Would you describe *Telling the Bees* as a philosophical book? To what extent could *Telling the Bees* be defined as a work of genre fiction?
9. Do you think Albert is freed from the past by the novel’s conclusion? Does finally solving and closing a chapter on the murders give Albert a sense of redemption?

Suggested Further Reading

Fiction:

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry by Rachel Joyce

The Memory Keeper’s Daughter by Kim Edwards

When God was a Rabbit by Sarah Winman

The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

Sophie’s World by Jostein Gaarder

Non-fiction:

The Hive: The Story of the Honeybee by Bee Wilson

50 Philosophy Ideas (You Really Need to Know) by Ben Dupré



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About the Author

Peggy Hesketh is a journalist and author, and currently teaches writing and rhetoric at the University of California. Her short story 'A Madness of Two' was selected by Elizabeth George for inclusion in her anthology *Two of the Deadliest*. *Telling the Bees* is her first novel.

A Note from the Author

The idea for this book grew out of my need to understand a real life incident I'd observed only obliquely. I used to drive by a house in Anaheim, CA on the way to work. Two little old ladies used to sit on the porch and sell honey. One day, yellow police tape was wrapped around their house. The next day, I read in our local newspaper that the women had been murdered in what appeared to be a bungled robbery. A few days later, I read another very brief article in the paper that said a niece (I think) had been arrested for the robbery and murder. I thought to myself, "How could this happen? I know families are crazy things, but how could this happen?"

And I kept driving by these little old ladies' house on the way to work. And the Harmony Ballroom (which by the way is where "Louie Louie" was written backstage) was torn down. And the little old ladies' house was torn down. And a condominium development was put up in its place, but sometimes, I could still smell the eucalyptus trees that used to line the street. And the power lines that ran along the street buzzed and hummed like a swarm of bees. And then after a while, a crazy family in our neighbourhood started putting crosses on their lawn. And still, I couldn't get this thought out of my head: How could family murder family? None of the details of my novel are true. The book is about trying to make sense of a real life tragedy in the only way I know how.