



The Secret of Nightingale Wood

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Book

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The time is the immediate aftermath of World War I. The family consists of Henrietta Georgina Abbott, 12 years old and known as Henry, Henry's beloved mother and father and a baby known as Piglet, real name Roberta. There is a live-in nanny called Nanny Jane. A brother Robert died in a fire before the family left London. Henry's mother has some kind of nervous breakdown. She received little help from Dr Hardy, the local GP who seems to be interested only in cases that further his research, rather than cases where he can help the patient. He prescribes rest, by which he means that the mother will be drugged and locked in her bedroom, out of bounds to either of her daughters.

Henry's father has departed for several months engineering work in Switzerland, a suggestion hovering in the reader's mind that he cannot cope with his wife's illness. The novel now revolves around Henry's attempts to keep the family afloat and try to arrange its reunification.

This book has three main strengths. It shows a sympathetic understanding of mental health difficulties in a context where such understanding was a rarity. Second, the book confronts prejudices about mental health and disability that are widely shared and that can shape anyone's vision of another person. Thirdly the book has a great deal of intertextuality with late nineteenth and early twentieth century classics such as **The Secret Garden** and **Alice in Wonderland**.

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