

## FIVE BEST FAMILY SECRETS

### Amin Ahmad

The author of the forthcoming novel 'A Killer in the Family'

#### The Architect of Desire

By Suzannah Lessard (1996)

1 In this memoir, Suzannah Lessard explores her family history through the lens of architecture. Lessard grew up at what she knew as the Place, a magnificent Long Island estate designed by her great-grandfather, the Beaux-Arts architect Stanford White: "The harmony and symmetry," she writes, "created an atmosphere of providential protection."

Only when she was in her 30s did Lessard begin to understand the deeper shadow of her ancestor's legacy. White had been spectacularly murdered in 1906 by Harry K.

Thaw, the heir to a railroad fortune. The architect had been a compulsive predator who targeted young girls and had raped the showgirl Evelyn Nesbit, Thaw's future wife, when she was only 16. Lessard's family had refused to confront White's deviance; as she connects her own history of sexual trauma to White's actions, Lessard visits the serene environments that White created and muses on the story her family doesn't tell. "Like architecture, it is quiet. It encompasses, but does not demand attention. You might not even notice it's there."

#### The Girl From Foreign

By Sadia Shepard (2008)

2 Sadia Shepard grew up in a Boston suburb, the child of a white Protestant father and a Pakistani Muslim mother, but she loved the long visits from her maternal grandmother, Nana: "With me, she spoke English, quietly and haltingly. With Mama she spoke quickly, in Urdu, and often seemed to be angry." From Nana, Sadia heard beguiling stories about her grandmother's young life in Bombay and later years in Karachi, Pakistan, where she fled after the 1947 Partition of India. When Sadia was 13, she learned that her grandmother's original name was not Rahat Siddiqi, but Rachel Jacobs, and that she came from the Bene

Israel, an ancient Indian Jewish community. Years later, as a documentary filmmaker, Sadia traveled to India and Pakistan, pursuing the surviving remnants— crumbling synagogues, documents, old pieces of furniture—that could give context to her grandmother’s tales. Even Nana’s delicious, supposedly Pakistani cooking took on a new meaning. “I would realize that my grandmother was feeding us traditional Bene Israel recipes.”

Mrs. Kimble

By Jennifer Haigh (2003)

3 In this novel an elderly man dies alone in Florida in 1994 of a heart attack, leaving behind half a million dollars in his bank account, a “dozen fine suits and three pairs of expensive running shoes.” This is Ken Kimble, who through his life has changed his personality to suit the needs of his three consecutive wives. Jennifer Haigh’s narration rotates through their varying perspectives on this elusive, enigmatic man: The first, Birdie, was abandoned with two young children in Virginia in 1969 when Ken, then a college chaplain, ran away with one of his students. The second, Joan, a middleaged heiress in Florida, was conned by Ken into believing that he was Jewish and a canny businessman.

Following Joan’s death, Ken posed as a wealthy real-estate investor in Washington, D.C. and took up with the much-younger Dinah. After he left her, Dinah would find herself trying to recall him: “Each night as she lay waiting for sleep, she tried to re-create . . . the tone of his voice, his hand on her shoulder.” Her memory has the quality of “an old photograph, the edges fuzzy from frequent handling,” and she’s forced to wonder if “she’d made the whole thing up.”

Family Matters

By Rohinton Mistry (2002)

4 The crowded, corrupt Bombay of the mid-1990s is home to the Vakeels. The aging patriarch, Nariman, and his two adult stepchildren, Jay and Coomy, live in a seven-room flat in the ill-named Chateau Felicity while Nariman’s daughter, Roxana, resides nearby with her husband and two teenage sons in a tiny apartment. Nariman suffers from Parkinson’s disease. After a fall shatters his ankle, his stepchildren dump him with his daughter. Rohinton Mistry’s novel explores how all the fissures within this family are deepened by this development. Nariman recalls how his emotional attachment to a love

from his past eroded his marriage; his stepdaughter engages in a lethal scheme to make sure he does not return; his son-in-law starts gambling and engages in fraud to gain a promotion. The accumulation of hidden strains builds to tragedy.

One of the novel's characters insists that all of us share "only one important story: of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemption. . . . Just the details are different."

## The Hare With Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance

By Edmund de Waal (2010)

5 The titular "hare with the amber eyes" in Edmund de Waal's memoir is a netsuke, a tiny Japanese carving intended as a fastener for use with a kimono. When Mr. de Waal, a British ceramicist, inherited 264 of these netsuke from a relative in the 1990s, he became fascinated by their artistry—and their provenance. Inheriting them meant inheriting "a responsibility to them and to the people who have owned them." Following the trail of these minuscule treasures back in time, Mr. de Waal traced the history of his forbears among the Ephrussi, a Jewish banking family that grew prosperous in the 19th century. His research took him to the family's ancestral home in Odessa; to Belle-Epoque Paris; and to the Palais Ephrussi in Vienna, where the netsuke resided until Austria fell under Nazi rule. The residence and its collections were confiscated. All that survived intact of the family's former treasures were the netsuke, which were smuggled out of the family's mansion by a loyal maid and returned to the family after the war. Now in Mr. de Waal's possession, the carvings spark a meditation on the painful nature of inheritance: "This is the strange undoing of a collection, of a house and of a family. It is the moment of fissure when grand things are taken and when family objects, known and handled and loved, become stuff."

'We cannot reform our forefathers.'

— GEORGE ELIOT



**REUNION** Stanford White's Box Hill Estate on Long Island, N.Y., in 1966. TONI FRISSELL/  
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