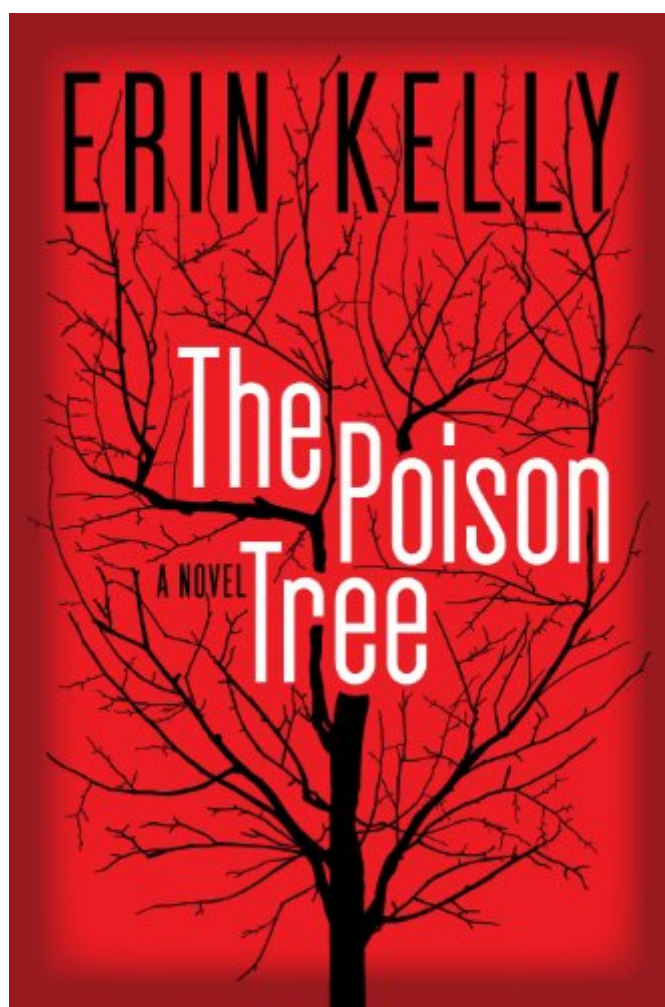


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# The Poison Tree: A Novel



## Synopsis

From an incredible new voice in psychological suspense, a novel about the secrets that remain after a final bohemian summer of excess turns deadly. This taut psychological thriller begins when Karen and her nine-year-old daughter, Alice, pick up Rex from a ten-year stint in prison for murder. Flash back to the sultry summer in 1990s London when Karen, a straight-A student on the verge of college graduation, first meets the exotic, flamboyant Biba and joins her louche life in a crumbling mansion in Highgate. She begins a relationship with Biba's enigmatic and protective older brother, Rex, and falls into a blissful rhythm of sex, alcohol, and endless summer nights. Naïvely, Karen assumes her newfound happiness will last forever. But Biba and Rex have a complicated family history—one of abandonment, suicide, and crippling guilt—and Karen's summer of freedom is about to end in blood. When old ghosts come back to destroy the life it has taken Karen a decade to build, she has everything to lose. She will do whatever it takes to protect her family and keep her secret. Alternating between the fragile present and the lingering past with a shocker of an ending, *The Poison Tree* is a brilliant suspense debut that will appeal to readers of Kate Atkinson, Donna Tartt, and Tana French.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Review based on Advance Reading Proof\* A wonderfully well-written, psychological thriller debut, one that just cries out to be read and discussed. A perfect choice for a book club. Although I found it a bit disconcerting with early chapters switching between then and now, it is really just an essential hiccup in the storyline. This ploy simply increases the building suspense as the story unfolds. Watch out for author Erin Kelly, she has thrown down the gauntlet and intends to stay around for a long time! An unusual storyline from the voice of the protagonist, Karen Clarke, the characters with their many differences are well-drawn and continue to grow throughout the book. Take a young normal girl who just happens to be fluent in several languages and throw her suddenly into a completely different society and what is she to do? Her meeting with Biba opens a whole new world to her, one she is not only introduced to, but embraces wholeheartedly. In 1990s London, the beautiful and vivacious Biba lives her life fully and dramatically, essentially the actress she wants to be. When she meets Karen, the straight-A student of linguistics, she brings her to her home, a very run-down yet exotic house of many characters, some of whom live there with Biba and her brother Rex. Soon Karen is a constant visitor. The book begins near the end, then switches back to this carefree and exciting life, time and time again. We learn of old secrets that have a distinct effect on the brother and sister, and later newer secrets come between them. Karen can not tell her story alone without telling the story of Rex and Biba. Their lives and stories are tangled as one. These three are the main characters, but there are more roles to be played by lesser players.

In this novel the surprises keep coming until the very end, so be sure you read the Epilogue. By page 335, from quite a large cast of characters only two remain who know the whole story, and that is down to one by the time we reach page 340 and final in this edition. I almost felt it a compliment that it had all been revealed to me as well. The story is very clever indeed, and clever in the right way. Indeed, I might have difficulty in recalling when I last encountered such a well developed plot. If you will take my word for that, don't let some of the carefully placed hints in the earlier chapters irritate you as they nearly irritated me. What we learn first is that Something has happened to one or more of the participants, but it is only disclosed gradually who all the affected parties might have been. I kept expecting the hints to be resolved on the next page or in the next chapter, and it was after realising that I was going to have to wait that I fully got into the swing of the narration. Who was involved in What is a thread that unravels slowly and gradually. What the Great Dark Secret was is something we think we must have got to about three-quarters way through, but there is a very unexpected twist in the tale still later; and, come to think of it, it is only quite near the conclusion that

we stop finding out about new and unsuspected deceptions. Incidental surprises come and go too, including one quite lengthy and beautifully placed decoy. Otherwise none of the characters or events are wasted or without some later relevance. This is part of what I mean by calling this book and its author clever. The observation and characterisation are very smart as well. The various actors (no pun intended) in the drama are vivid and memorable.

Erin Kelly dangles suspense carrots early on in her edge-of-the-seat debut thriller: "[The floor] was in terrible condition when we lived there, and afterward, there was that terrible stain." Honor student Karen Clarke has just finished university and settles in at eccentric Biba's GREAT EXPECTATIONS-like "crumbling urban castle," where wretched bohemian excess belies the affluent quarter of London known as Highgate. Enthralled by Biba's intoxicating aura, it is Karen's "tipping point between innocence and experience, after which everything began to descend into chaos." Set mainly as flashbacks to summer 1997 and wild-child Biba's hedonistic 21st birthday bash, there are gruesome deaths --- other than Princess Diana's. In the present, Karen reflects that she has "done so many terrible things. I am frightened, but I feel strong. I have the strength of a woman who has everything to lose." She is haunted by "passive spirits who have become active ghosts." But who did the dirty deed? Biba's brother, Rex Capel ("rhyme with apple"), and Karen's lover is convicted. Freed 10 years later, he moves in with Karen and their nine-year-old daughter, Alice. As with another Alice, the one in Wonderland, things are not as they seem --- only this is no bizarre dream for Karen, Rex and Alice. Making bad choices often comes back to haunt, and a truly evil spirit insinuates itself into their lives at the end of Karen's decade-long lost weekend. Parallels are drawn from John Knowles's A SEPARATE PEACE. Scholarly Gene clearly is representative of Karen, and athletic idol Finny's fall from a tree is Biba's downward spiral. In this case, a figurative fall from a poison tree.

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