



# Keeping the House

*Ellen Baker*

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## Keeping the House Ellen Baker

Set in the conformist 1950s and reaching back to span two world wars, Ellen Baker's superb novel is the story of a newlywed who falls in love with a grand abandoned house and begins to unravel dark secrets woven through the generations of a family. Like Whitney Otto's *How to Make an American Quilt* in its intimate portrayal of women's lives, and reminiscent of novels by Elizabeth Berg and Anne Tyler, *Keeping the House* is a rich tapestry of a novel that introduces a wonderful new fiction writer.

When Dolly Magnuson moves to Pine Rapids, Wisconsin, in 1950, she discovers all too soon that making marriage work is harder than it looks in the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Dolly tries to adapt to her new life by keeping the house, supporting her husband's career, and fretting about dinner menus. She even gives up her dream of flying an airplane, trying instead to fit in at the stuffy Ladies Aid quilting circle. Soon, though, her loneliness and restless imagination are seized by the vacant house on the hill. As Dolly's life and marriage become increasingly difficult, she begins to lose herself in piecing together the story of three generations of Mickelson men and women: Wilma Mickelson, who came to Pine Rapids as a new bride in 1896 and fell in love with a man who was not her husband; her oldest son, Jack, who fought as a Marine in the trenches of World War I; and Jack's son, JJ, a troubled veteran of World War II, who returns home to discover Dolly in his grandparents' house.

As the crisis in Dolly's marriage escalates, she not only escapes into JJ's stories of his family's past but finds in them parallels to her own life. As *Keeping the House* moves back and forth in time, it eloquently explores themes of wartime heroism and passionate love, of the struggles of men's struggles with fatherhood and war and of women's conflicts with issues of conformity, identity, forbidden dreams, and love.

Beautifully written and atmospheric, *Keeping the House* illuminates the courage it takes to shape and reshape a life, and the difficulty of ever knowing the truth about another person's desires. *Keeping the House* is an unforgettable novel about small-town life and big matters of the heart.

## Advance praise for *Keeping the House*

"Ellen Baker's first novel is a wonder! *Keeping the House* is a great big juicy family saga, a romantic page-turner with genuine characters written with a perfect sense of history, time, and place. Her portrayal of the American housewife is hilarious and heartbreaking. I couldn't have liked it more!"

—Fannie Flagg, author of *Can't Wait to Get to Heaven*

"Ellen Baker's first novel, *Keeping the House*, is a quilt that grids a small Midwestern town in the middle of the last century. Under this writer's deft hands, each square is a story, a mystery, an indiscretion, a tale of the great house and grand family who once ruled there. Even more, it captures the roles of women then: both the living embodiments of demure ideals, and those who couldn't fit the pattern. Edith Wharton's novels of domestic despair and display come to mind with each page."

—Jacquelyn Mitchard, author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*

"A born storyteller, Ellen Baker has written an enthralling family saga filled with three generations of memorable characters and capturing the dreams and frustrations of twentieth-century women in wonderful, spot-on historical detail."

—Faith Sullivan, author of *Gardenias* and *The Cape Ann*

“Ellen Baker has written the novel I’ve been waiting to read for a very long time. It’s the book you want to curl up with, the book you rush home to, the book you wish you’d written. In *Keeping the House*, she serves up the complexities of family relationships, the anguish of victims of wars, the innermost thoughts of women, and the social mores of the past. Seasoned with mysteries that kept me devouring pages, this is one huge gourmet feast of a book for readers to savor. I look forward to every delicious book this author writes.”  
–Bev Marshall, author of *Walking Through Shadows* and *Right as Rain*

## Keeping the House Details

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Author : Ellen Baker

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# From Reader Review *Keeping the House* for online ebook

## Sara says

I loved this nostalgic story that chronicles the story of a newlywed fifties housewife. Well written, poignant and endearing, this novel develops into a lovely family saga. Dolly Magnuson is naive, sweet and has nothing more in her life than planning her dinner menus. She thinks her marriage will work if she looks great, cooks great and maintains her house—these things are, after all, what are expected of a married woman. Dolly always wears her best dresses and heels for her husband and ensures that his favorite dinner is ready when he gets home from work. Dolly is disappointed that her life is a little unfulfilled as she anxiously awaits her husband's approval as he wordlessly eats her meals each night. Feeling a little lost in her marriage and her new town, Dolly soon becomes obsessed by the old Mickelson place, a prominent but now empty house. Dolly finds fault in her bungalow while believing that only she can bring the love back to the dilapidated Mickelson place. The novel unfolds in Dolly's time while weaving in the stories of the Mickelsons through past generations. Slowly Dolly starts learning the Mickelson history—the very real stories of love, loss, war and family. Soon Dolly figures out that Ladies Home Journal and the Ladies Aid may not have the best insight into her marriage—only she can figure out what she needs.

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## Gina says

This story takes place in the 1950's, with all that entails as far as what is expected of the so-called "housewife". Dolly Magnuson, a newlywed, falls in love with an old abandoned house in Wisconsin. Soon after marrying, she tries to conform to the 1950's norms, but realizes it's not like she's been reading in her women's magazines. She tries to be the attentive wife, plan meals every day, and be content, but it begins to wear on her, as she is a woman who wanted to fly airplanes at one time! When she finds the abandoned home, she becomes consumed by the history of the generations who lived there. This is the story of Dolly's determination to solve the mysteries of the home and what happened to the people who used to live there.

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## Stephanie says

I nearly gave up on *Keeping the House* very early because the reader on the CD version is SO irritating. She overdramatizes nearly every line. Nevertheless, I stuck with it because I have a fairly long commute and need long audiobooks.

Well, this one is unnecessarily long. The author really strings us along. She alternates between several time periods, and often tells the same scene in more than one section, but without really giving a significantly different viewpoint as such a multiplicity of perspectives should do in order to make that technique worthwhile. This book could have been at least a hundred pages shorter. Was she being paid by the word? At one point she actually writes (I paraphrase): "He got to the top of the stairs. He could take a 180 degree turn left or right, but he always turned right, because his office lay that way." Why even mention this?? Here's another one: "He closed her door, walked around the truck, opened his door, sat down and closed his door." What kind of time-wasting padding is that?

FINALLY, I got up to the climactic moment we've been strung along for, and it's such a melodramatic

cliche! \*spoiler alert\* Why didn't the author mention Florence the southern secretary EARLIER, so we could have had a chance at putting two and two together and solving the mystery ourselves?? I wish I had been this woman's editor. There is some good stuff here, but excessively padded and missing the impact it could have had.

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### **Katie says**

Keeping the House is a family saga that begins in 1896 and ends in October of 1950. The Mickelsons are a prominent family in Pine Rapids, Wisconsin, and their lives are shadowed by grief and betrayal.

Dolly Magnuson moves to Pine Rapids in 1950 and discovers the beautiful old Mickelson house vacant on top of its hill. She is new to town and her husband is always working, so she finds respite by going to Ladies Aid meetings and exploring the abandoned home. Dolly is drawn into the family's sordid past and becomes obsessed with the house and her desire to move there, even though there may be a "curse" set on it- it was built on top of an Indian Burial ground and nothing but heartache has ever come to the Mickelson family.

Keeping the House was slow to start, especially since the point of view and time period shifts so much at the beginning. It was hard to get a handle on all of the characters at first, and when the author was particularly verbose about describing a household task, I did skim a little bit. But! I loved the character development of many of the characters, especially Dolly and JJ. Some of the aspects of their storylines was disappointing, but I think that is a testament to how life is too, sometimes. The snippets above each chapter from different homemaker publications from the '40s and '50s were sometimes funny and other times heartbreaking.

Looking at it from an historical and feminist perspective was interesting too- how so much responsibility of a "successful" marriage and home life was on the woman and how stifling it could be. The minor redemption at the end was also true to life, however unsatisfying it was. The big "twist" in the plot I could see coming and it was a little out of the blue, but didn't change my opinion in any way. I struggled between 3 and 4 stars, but rounded up due to not being able to think about anything else but this 500+ page book for the past two days.

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### **Jeanne says**

Set in Wisconsin, this is the story of two families: the Magnusons and the Mickelsons.

Dolly and Byron Magnuson just moved to Pine Rapids, WI. It is 1950, and Dolly is desperately trying to be the perfect wife. While working on a quilt with the town's old biddies, she learns of the other family.

The Mickelsons lived in Pine Rapids also. Wilma and John were married in 1896 and lived in a grand house in the small town. They had four children, two of whom served in WWI and two grandchildren, one of whom served in WWII.

Both marriages challenge the wives. Both women are not quite sure that marriage is the right choice for them. Through stories of the Mickelson family, Dolly learns that she is not alone in her struggles.

This is a great novel. The Mickelson family saga is engrossing, and Dolly is a very likeable character as well.

### **Michelle says**

Okay, I LOVED this book. It was SO freaking good and I raced through it, even though it was longish (over 500 pages). I literally finished it all in one plane ride. I didn't expect to like it because it seemed like it might be a little domestic/quaint for me. The characters were great, the interwoven plot lines were great... I just thought this book was awesome. I've been thinking about it for days.

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### **The Badger says**

Let's hear it for romanticizing misogyny and the "misunderstood" rapist! I hope the author made sure to quit writing early enough each evening that she'd have a homemade meal on the table ready for some Neanderthal to eat sans conversation, and still look good enough to be inseminated by him after she cleaned the kitchen...

I couldn't tell if the author's dedication of this novel to her two grandmothers was meant as commemorative or an insult.

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### **Beth says**

I liked this book.

It is sort of a cross between "How to Make and American Quilt" and "Drowning Ruth." As in "How to Make and American Quilt," there are intermittent quilting scenes where one of the story-lines unfolds. And it is like "Drowning Ruth" somewhat because it is post Great War and that influences much of what happens, but mostly because I spent a good deal of my reading time trying to figure out where, exactly, in Wisconsin that book was set.

I can imagine Oprah taking a shine to this book, even though it isn't really a downer. While I wouldn't quite call it a romance, there are love connections, almost loves, love disasters nearly averted and horrible love disasters. I wouldn't recommend it to many men.

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### **Alexis says**

This novel is essentially about marriage in the 50s, and how it was impacted by both world wars as well as by conventions of the time. The story itself started out slowly for me. I thought it was a little simplistic, even for a "simpler" time. One of the more interesting features was excerpts from magazines such as "Good Housekeeping" from the early '50s, giving advice about how to keep the house and the husband happy. The story eventually picked up its' pace, with several family secrets exposed that kept the plot more interesting.

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## **Junita says**

Ellen Baker is from Superior, Wisconsin (across the bridge from Duluth) and my mom cleans her teeth. This is her first novel, impressively published by Random House, about a housewife in the 1950's.

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## **Judith Teggelaar says**

There are two separate stories going on in this book, one in the past, the other in the present. The author does a wonderful job of going from one story to the other giving the feel of a serial and making you look forward to the next chapter.

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## **Adam says**

Post listen review

How do I sum up what I thought about this book? I am going to have to turn to Kristen Chynoweth and Idina Menzel for the answer to that. "What is this feeling? Fervid as a flame, Does it have a name? Yes! Loathing. Unadulterated loathing".

I hated every second of this book for a plethora of reasons but here are just a few for you.

Stagey whispering/shouting in the narration

The narrator has an irritating voice and reads the book as if she is on a stage in front of a large audience. Now when she reads dialogue that is fine but when she is reciting what is in the roast beef recipe and what cookbook it comes from, it's just plain annoying.

Quilting

Don't get me wrong, I like the Little House books, Jane Eyre and several Jane Austen books, all of which mention sewing or quilting or things like that in one form or another. But this book went freaking overboard with it. There were huge chunks where annoying women annoyingly corrected the technique of quilting in graphic detail for the longest time. No one cares. Unless you are big into quilting and in that case, you might want to quilt instead of listen to this book.

Melodrama

This book is so melodramatic it is disgusting. There is this woman who is having trouble in her marriage because in her opinion her husband doesn't pay attention to her. So naturally, instead of having a rational discussion about this with her husband she decides to trespass on some house in the neighborhood that is neglected and clean it cause that will make him umm... like her more I guess? Guess what? Doesn't work. At this house she meets this dude who tells her the story of his family. In that family there are two brothers that go off to war, one favored by the mother and one not favored by the mother. Guess which one gets dead? If you said the favorite, congratulations you can predict utterly predictable melodramatic plot points! In the same family there is a woman that falls in love with a soldier that her father doesn't approve of. I bet you see this coming-- that soldier is the son of the father. Yep. One life to live anyone?

### Plagiarism

This book totally wants to be one of those great movies from the forties and really does it by ripping stuff off. So the woman cleaning the house that is not hers? Yeah, she wants to fix it up so that the husband can buy it, just like that part in *It's a Wonderful Life*. They even say that the movie is the inspiration for her doing it. I thought that was bad but they also rip off, but for a couple of words, one of the most famous lines from *Gone With the Wind* (arguably the most melodramatic movie in history, but still a great movie, unlike this not so great book). "As God is my witness I will never go hungry again" turns to "As God is my witness I will never be made witless again" Oh yes you will.

### Sexism

Every man in this book is only after women or money or both. All of the women would be fulfilled if they could be with the man that they "really belong with". Every guy that goes to the war comes back an alcoholic or a jerk and always goes fishing or fixes cars or whatever guys are "supposed to do." Wives are expected to quilt, clean, cook and in general "be there for their man". I will give you that a lot of these stereotypes are lived up to in the 40's and 50's but dude these people are just fitting right into those without a second thought ever. There are some funny moments relating to this with the readings of marriage advice given in *Ladies Home Journal* and the like at the time but I can't help but think that the woman who reads these and takes them seriously ought to meet the person who wrote them. I imagine the writer of the articles as some free-wheeling woman traveling the country on an old Indian motorbike, goggles covering her dirt streaked face, doling out crap advice for money cause it is easy to do and fuels her cross country trips. (I know that is probably not the case but it wouldn't surprise me if it was)

### Complete irrationality

The woman that cleans the old house says she is (I am not kidding) jealous of her husband's wristwatch because it spends more time with him than she does. Does she tell him she is lonely? Never explicitly so how does he know? She repeatedly asks her husband to tell her about the war that he repeatedly says he doesn't want to talk about. She thinks it will make them closer. I am guessing he thinks that talking about exploding corpses is unpleasant conversation. The same woman makes this pie with a Pillsbury crust expecting the husband to say to her something like "I appreciate everything you do for me" or something along those lines like the ad says he will. He doesn't and she gets way mad at him. Ok, fair enough right? But the next day he says how much he really liked her food and that it was great and everything and she gets even madder for that. In my opinion the husband is screwed either way. In another incident instead of telling the husband what she really feels she says, "I just want a baby" and the husband says, "We can go upstairs right now" and she gets mad at him. Sorry but if you want a baby, it doesn't magically appear and he had the right idea of how to get one. What does she want? No one can tell. She should have married a psychic.

### Bad dialogue

"Look Grandpa, you can bet your bottom dollar I am gonna enjoy the hell out of some waffles." Said waffles are disgustingly barfed up a shockingly short amount of time later.

"I'm sorry I f-ed things up." It is pronounced with the letter, not with the actual word, like we do now sometimes. Seemed oddly out of place in 1950.

"Well I don't know what kind of hussy girlfriend goes by herself to see a man overnight." Maybe you don't know but I bet you can guess!

### Affairs galore

The people who own the house have affairs. The kids who originally grow up in the house have affairs with fiancées and always try to seduce women. One of them I would really say pretty much raped a woman and this dude is the guy telling the story to the housewife that is randomly cleaning the house. Those two have an affair (although the guy did leave the rape details out of his retelling of what happened implying that the



woman was just too in love with him and decided to leave, no that he had put her through trauma. The neglectful husband has an affair. The house the woman is cleaning is built on a burial site of an Indian princess that killed herself for, you guessed it, having an affair. No one seems to be able to keep hormones in check.

### Boringness

Even the descriptions of the battle of Iwo Jima were boring and just made me want to go to sleep. One of the most intense battles in modern history and it is so predictable that I was ready for them to get back to quilting cause you just know what is going to happen in the battle. I could not wait for this book to be over.

So to sum up- It sucked!

Pre-listen guess: I have no idea what to think about this but it looks like something that is going to bore me to tears.

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### Erica says

I love thoughts like this: "...because she had read somewhere that nothing says 'Happy Home' to a husband like his smiling wife in an apron and lovely dress bidding him come to the table where she has a colorful, balanced, hot meal waiting." I'm sure that was a wonderful way to keep house more than half a century ago and by that standard, my home is nothing remotely happy, but I am glad that such notions are not the standard today. I would have a difficult time matching aprons to dresses and making my meals colorful AND well-balanced.

Ok. I'm done. And Cecily, you were right. I should have listened to your review (which would have been weird, since it's not an audio review).

I like the idea of a long, drawn-out family saga. And I like that the story spans two wars. I loved the quotes from '50's publications on how to be a good wife and keep a happy, healthy home. But oh my gosh, what a boatload of horrid characters. I don't think there was one I liked. And the ridiculousness of the "mysteries" that suddenly come to light were over the top. Dark secrets are great, and all, but really? The family dysfunction bordered on maudlin.

Also, I wanted to punch Dolly in the face until she fell out of the book.

Though I've seen it done, I wouldn't compare this with *How to Make an American Quilt* though quilting does sort of come into play, mostly as a vehicle to bring the history of the house on the hill to Dolly. But, again, I just could not attach to any character. The few that were not outright repulsive in one way or another weren't fully-developed characters, so there was nothing to care about.

I also had a problem with the reader. She started out with an odd, staccato way of speaking, adding emphasis to strange words at odd times. She sounded like an Australian trying to adopt a northern American accent while running quickly (her words kept coming out in too much breath, like she was panting quietly) but she became better midway through the book. Still, it was jarring and I'm not sure she was the best reader for these characters.

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## **Kit says**

This is not a \*bad\* book: it's a quick read and the chapter headings quoting marriage advice from circa 1940s Good Housekeeping magazines are kinda fun. There's a lot of American history here, as the family story spans something like 1895 to 1950, but a number of the (many) characters are just flat and I found the structure (weaving back and forth between time and characters' POV) sometimes wearisome.

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## **Elizabeth says**

Young immigrant Knute Mickelson may not have founded the town of Pine Rapids, Wisconsin, but the sawmill he built north of the small town and the family dynasty created after his marriage to an ambitious New York woman surely were the driving forces in the growth and development of the forested northwest Wisconsin village. In her debut novel, *Keeping the House*, Ellen Baker recounts the multi-generational family saga of the Mickelsons as told through the experiences of Dolly Magnuson, a new resident of Pine Rapids who has developed an obsession to own the abandoned Mickelson home, “three stories of dove-gray clapboard and melancholy stained glass, trimmed in an aged white, with a stately front porch and third-floor windows on the side and front that poked up like pointed caps,” sitting high on the only hill overlooking Pine Rapids and the Bear Trap River, the hill that local superstition said was cursed -- “some Indian chief’s young daughter is buried on that hill, and the old chief put a spell on the land to keep folks off it. He said that great sorrow would come to anyone who disturbed his daughter’s resting place, and it would be the deepest kind of sorrow – that caused by love.”

In the early summer of 1950 Dolly (20 years old) and her husband Byron move to Pine Rapids where he and a fellow World War II veteran are partners in a Chrysler dealership. Dolly, who grew up in a small town herself and knows how difficult it can be to find acceptance into the best circles, quickly joins the Pine Rapids Ladies Aid group which meets in the home of 80-year-old Cecilia Fryt, “taller than Dolly, and stout, with iron-gray hair swept up in a bun, and a face like an old potato,” a long-time neighbor, but no friend, of the Mickelson family. It is through weekly attendance at the Ladies Aid quilting bee that Dolly hears the sorrowful tale of the Mickelson family.

Interwoven in the story of the Mickelsons is that of Dolly’s attempts to meet the societal expectations of a wife of the 1950s. Ms. Baker has effectively portrayed mid-20th century gender norms through use of chapter headers quoted from period publications, such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *The Modern Family Cookbook*, *Popular Home Decoration*, *Photoplay* (“When he comes back [from the war] it may take a few years for him to “find himself” – it’s [your:] job – not his – to see that the changes in both of [you:] do not affect the fundamental bonds between [you:]....”). Driven by her obsession, Dolly breaks into the Mickelson house and decides to become its self-appointed caretaker in the absence of the family. One afternoon while cleaning the kitchen, she hears a key turn in the lock and she is discovered trespassing by JJ, the prodigal grandson. It is JJ’s return to Pine Rapids that enables the final chapter in the downfall of the Mickelson family to be told.

In an interview with Random House Readers Circle, Ms. Baker said, “I don’t think that issues in relationships are ever resolved, but they are always in the process of evolving, and with time hopefully comes the ability to interrogate and restructure one’s own unconscious expectations.” By abandoning their “cursed” home in Rapid Falls, do the Mickelsons overcome the deepest kinds of sorrow – those caused by love? Do Dolly and Byron restructure their own unconscious expectations and live happily ever after?

Read *Keeping the House*, written by Ellen Baker, and discover for yourself.

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