

Book Review: The Keeper of Lost Art
By Laura Morelli

I enjoy reading historical fiction when it's well written, and I'm able to learn something new. Both of those elements are present in Laura Morelli's soon to be released book "The Keeper of Lost Art." My thanks to NetGalley and HarperCollins for an advance copy of this book, in exchange for an honest review. The book is scheduled for release on April 22, 2025.

It's 1943 in war-torn Italy, a country undergoing dramatic internal turmoil on the verge of joining the Allied forces and declaring war on its former Axis partner, Germany.

Twelve-year-old Stella Costa is sent by her mother from Torino to live with distant relatives in a villa in Tuscany. Stella does not know these aunts, uncles and cousins, nor is she prepared for the great responsibility about to be bestowed upon them. But the turn of events over the course of the next 18 months will shape her into the young woman she becomes.

Stella's relatives, caretakers of the villa, but now minding it for the owner who has fled to Switzerland, are asked to safeguard more than 300 priceless masterpieces from the Uffizi Galleries in Florence. The fear is that the Germans will confiscate anything they believe to be of great value. Stella and her newfound family put their lives on the line every day.

As the story unfolds, refugees are fleeing their homes as the fighting escalates. Many of them are given food and shelter at the villa. One of the refugees, a twelve-year-old boy named Alessandro, strikes up a friendship with Stella. He has a gift for drawing, and an understanding of the valuable treasures being hidden in the villa. Together, they vow to keep the masterpieces safe.

As if that isn't enough daily tension, Stella doesn't understand why one of her aunts is cool toward her. Though over time she learns it has something to do with her parents – and the fact that her father, whose whereabouts are unknown, has been largely absent from her life.

For readers, it's an interesting coming-of-age story wrapped around the historic efforts to safeguard Italy's cultural treasures during World War II. There are some points midway through the story that slow the book's generally solid narrative, a few sections seeming a bit redundant. At one point German soldiers requisition the villa and turn Stella and her family into forced labor. These chapters seem to go on for a while making me wonder, don't these guys have somewhere to be? But the character development is solid, and Morelli does a good job of conveying the daily struggles for food, shelter and safety that existed in Italy at that time.

One additional nitpick: Stella is clearly the main character in this story, though her uncle Tino is the key person charged with protecting the works of art. So, who is "the keeper" referenced in the title? And is the art truly "lost?" Or just hidden? As I said, it's a nitpick.

Overall "The Keeper of Lost Art" is an enjoyable and informative read that I'm comfortable recommending. I give it 4 out of 5 stars.