

Praise for *The Schoolteacher of Saint-Michel*

‘An emotional, beautifully constructed read. I especially loved the way the clues from the past and present slowly knitted together, answering the questions that had been missing their answers for so long’

Jill Mansell, author of *It Started with a Secret*

‘Gripping, at times heartbreaking, but ultimately uplifting, I found this beautifully written novel impossible to put down’

Katie Fforde, author of *A Springtime Affair*

‘An engaging tale of courage and friendship. The setting in the French countryside is lush and summery. A triumph!’

Gill Paul, author of *The Secret Wife*

‘I gorged on cherries and slices of rich history in this beautifully worked tale of bravery, woven into the reality of a time we can’t forget’

Mandy Robotham, author of *The Secret Messenger*

‘*The Schoolteacher of Saint-Michel* really draws the reader in. The storytelling is masterful, as are all the subtle touches that convey the sense of place; and, as with Nancy Moon, the bedrock is Sarah’s nuanced, unsentimental portrayal of warm, compassionate female friendships’

Felicity Hayes-McCoy, author of  
*The Library at the Edge of the World*

Praise for *The Missing Pieces of Nancy Moon*

‘I felt so passionately involved in Flo’s journey.

A GORGEOUS read’

*Prima*, Book of the Month

‘An **engaging** novel, strong on character and place,  
that kept me **wanting** to know more’

*Daily Mail*

‘A lovely read, with the descriptions of the  
60s jet-set particularly **evocative**’

*Heat*

‘I was **gripped**, desperate to solve the mystery  
of Nancy Moon’

Sarah Haywood, author of *The Cactus*

‘A lovely, heartfelt debut. Gave me the most  
**enormous emotional hug**’

*LoveReading*

‘A **gorgeous**, tender debut’

Kate Riordan, author of *The Heatwave*

‘I loved reading the entwined stories. This book is  
**warm and true**, and it pays tribute to the heart and  
backbone of women who support each other’

Stephanie Butland, author of *Lost for Words*

‘Inspired by the author’s love of vintage clothes,  
this is told over two timelines, with rich  
nostalgic glamour’

*Sunday People*

**Sarah Steele** trained as a classical pianist and violinist before joining the world of publishing as an editorial assistant at Hodder and Stoughton. She was for many years a freelance editor, and now lives in the vibrant Gloucestershire town of Stroud.

Keep up with Sarah on Twitter  
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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

*By Sarah Steele*

The Missing Pieces of Nancy Moon

The Schoolteacher of Saint-Michel

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*The*  
SCHOOL  
TEACHER *of*  
SAINT-MICHEL  
Sarah Steele

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP



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*To Mum and Dad*

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## Prologue

*In the peaceful pause between day and night, she steps out into the long shadows of the orchard, its treetops brushed with splashes of coral and gold. She weaves around the trees, her basket pressed against her hip, plucking the ripest cherries for her table, as she has done for countless harvests in this little corner of France.*

*Suddenly, like the deer in the woods beyond the stream, she freezes as dark clouds bubble on the horizon, extinguishing the last of the sun's rays. Thunderous booms echo across the soft hills as bright flashes of light dance like fireflies in the distance. Yet this strange summer storm will not bring the release of the rain the parched ground craves, nor break the crackling tension in the air. And in the meantime, life must go on, even if it is a shadow of the lives they knew not so long ago. The children must go to school, the fields must be ploughed, meals prepared, livings made, prayers said in the cool, dark church, and the summer harvest collected.*

*A squadron of planes flies low overhead, shaking the ground as they mimic the annual migration of geese, and she quickly fills the basket before hurrying inside. She glances back, all the grief of the world in her eyes as she searches the darkness, then pulls the shutters closed against the night. They have survived another day.*

Gigi woke suddenly, her frail heart tapping out a frantic rhythm. Even after all these years, long-buried memories of the war still floated to the surface of her dreams as though it were yesterday, urging her not to forget the people she had left behind, and the debt she owed them.

She looked out of the window as a flurry of petals caught the breeze, a candyfloss cloud tumbling along the street, as blossom drifts gathered in gutters and around tree roots that burst up through the grey London pavement. How many springs had she watched the monochrome scene transform itself into a Japanese watercolour? And each spring the blossom awakened the burden that dragged on her like heavy fruit on the branch.

A group of young mothers walked past the wide bay window, babies in pushchairs in front of them and trailing toddlers behind. She watched a little boy stop at the tree outside, spinning around its trunk and laughing, and she was transported again to those long-gone days of her dreams.

She closed her eyes once more, and like an old cine film on a whirring projector, images of her beloved France flickered before her: the sun-bleached orchard and the shallow stream bouncing diamonds of light across its bubbling surface; a couple dancing beneath the trees to the strains of an old folk song while children wove around them, gorging themselves on sweet, sticky cherries, as for a brief moment the war raging across Europe was forgotten. This was how she wanted to remember her motherland during those terrible times – the memories of dark woods and dangerous city streets, damp cellars and abandoned buildings were too painful for her old heart to recall.

She looked now at the photographs on the mantelpiece: more than most, she understood the value of family, love,

loyalty; knew how far it was possible to go in order to protect those one cared for. She knew too that the ties formed all those years ago had never weakened, and that those she had left behind would always be a part of her.

Again she felt her breath catch. She had become accustomed to this now: her heart was indeed broken, fighting to complete its lifetime's allocation of beats. Only difficult, invasive surgery could help her now, and she was too tired. She had lived her life as best she could, and there was only one thing left undone, one debt unpaid.

She had waited too long. She could see that now. There would be no more springs, no more time to put things right unless she gave her story to another.

She reached across to the little table beside her, and picked up a photograph of her granddaughter as a little girl. She had been lucky: of course she adored her son, but the easy friendship with dear Hannah that had grown over the years was a gift she cherished. Gigi had passed on to Hannah the arts of perfect pastry and an exquisitely tied silk scarf, the bond between them as close as mother and daughter. And now that little girl had her own life and her own love, her own pain: her dear, kind Hannah who reminded Gigi so much of someone from her distant past, the bittersweet memories of those war-ravaged times tugging at her heart.

Hannah, her *petite fille*, who understood what it was to live with something that ate away at you, and for whom she prayed this task might offer some balm.

Hannah, who might put things right for her.

She eased herself out of the chair, wincing as a pain shot down her arm, and fetched her writing paper and an envelope

from the old bureau. Her arthritic hand paused over the tissue-thin paper, ink pooling at the expectant nib of her pen as she searched for the words.

*My darling Hannah*, she finally began, breaking off only to catch her rapidly shortening breath. And then, within a few short lines, it was done, and she folded the letter inside the delicate lilac envelope. The effort had drained her, and her beautiful copperplate handwriting wavered as she wrote Hannah's name, the final *h* trailing across the paper.

She placed the letter beside her on the table and closed her eyes once more, unable to resist the weight of her eyelids and the sleep that overcame her like a sedative, so that dreams and memories were indistinguishable as she once again stood in a shady orchard, smelling the sun-warmed grass as a sudden peace wrapped its arms around her.

She had plucked the heavy fruit from the branch and handed it to one she trusted, and at last her heart was free.