



THE MIDNIGHT DRESS

by Karen Foxlee

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‘A beautifully crafted story that builds in tension to the final page.’

Bookseller + Publisher ‘5-star Review/Top Pick’

THE STORY

‘Rose Lovell does not wear dresses. Rose Lovell does not need friends. Yet all she can smell, even with the huge sky and the evening storm clouds brewing, is coconut and frangipani.’(p 18)

In two alternating narratives describing Rose’s arrival in town and the disappearance of the girl in the midnight dress, this novel weaves an enticing web of story, memory and intrigue. Rose’s mother died when she was five, and her father is an alcoholic failed painter and itinerant. Hence, they’ve drifted from place to place and have never settled anywhere for long. Rose is permanently angry, and usually avoids friendships, but when she meets the beautiful frangipani-smelling Pearl, she finds herself powerless in the face of her unquestioning optimism. She’s told that at the forthcoming Harvest Festival she must wear a dress and that mad old Evie Baker will make it for her. Rose’s initial response is to decline but she finds herself not only visiting Evie but embarking on weekly sewing lessons in order to make the ‘midnight dress’ together. During these sessions Evie tells Rose stories about her own past history, and Rose, against her inclinations is gradually drawn into the tragic charms of this lost world. As Rose’s friendship with Pearl develops she becomes concerned that Pearl’s unquenchable romanticism will get her into trouble, and that her flirtatious ways with two older men – Paul Rendell at the Blue Moon Book Exchange and Rose’s father – are potentially dangerous. Meanwhile, the two girls seek out the old hut on the mountain built by Evie’s father Jonathan Baker for his beloved Florence before war destroyed him and their family. It becomes a refuge for them until Pearl betrays their secret, and Rose returns to her customary isolation and determines to leave town. The weeks leading up to the dance are undercut by the alternate narrative describing its aftermath, and ultimately the night of the Harvest Festival proves to be a climax and turning point in all their lives.

This mesmerising novel is a romance, a mystery, and a story of coming of age. In lyrical prose it stitches together a story of broken families, and of generational inheritance of emotional loss in the parallel tales of two young girls searching for love and a lost parent, set in the small and incestuous community of Leonora. Despite the tragic incident at its heart, it has an uplifting message about the capacity for individual empowerment, and the comforting power of memory and storytelling even in the direst of situations.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Foxlee was born in Mount Isa in 1971 and began writing at a young age. She started a Bachelor of Arts after high school but finished a nursing degree, never giving up her secret dream to become a writer. She finally completed her arts degree a decade later and began her first novel, *The Anatomy of Wings*, which went on to win the Dobbie Literary Award and regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award. *The Midnight Dress* is Karen's second novel. She lives in Gympie, Queensland, and continues to nurse and write.

DISCUSSION NOTES

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1. The novel opens in second person; the fictional narrator addresses herself directly to the reader, as she does in all the 'flash forward' sections in the novel. This technique creates an intimacy with the reader, but also allows the narrator to manipulate how much she tells the reader about the events which have unfolded; to tease the reader with only parts of the truth. As in her previous novel Karen Foxlee uses young protagonists as the focal point, but here she uses third and second person rather than first. What effect does this have on the telling?
 2. This novel is focussed on Rose and her complex identity. "If you were a meteorological phenomenon, Rose, which would you be?" asks Pearl to annoy Vanessa even more. "A summer hail storm," says Rose quietly.' (p 14) Pattie Kelly tells Rose her aura is ruby red, but Rose doesn't believe her, 'she feels angry because she knows Mrs Kelly can't see anything at all. She's just making it up. If she could really see inside her she'd know her aura is black. Onyx black. Tar black. Black as the burnt-out insides of a scorched tree.' (p 30) What do these contrasting remarks by Rose suggest about her self-image?
 3. Read these two quotes: 'In the book she keeps a column of words she hates. First is the word grief. She hates the sound of it. It reminds her of a small wound, halfhealed. The word doesn't encompass at all the emotion that has no edges. The feeling rises like a giant cumulus cloud. It surrounds her, dark and magical.' (pp 6-7) 'Rose thinks of the words she keeps in her notebook. She loves them and hates them at exactly the same time. They aren't exactly poems, she's not sure what they are. She has no control over the words. Those words control her.' (p 47) What function do Rose's jottings have in her life? Are they a means by which Rose deals with her feelings, or bottles them up?
 4. Each chapter opens with a title referring to sewing: Anchor Stitch, Oyster Stitch, Catch Stitch, Straight Stitch, Binding Stitch, Spider Web Stitch, Seed Stitch, Stepped and Threaded Running Stitch, Fern Stitch, Fly Stitch, Slip Stitch, Twisted Stitch, Knot Stitch, Ladder Stitch, Buttonhole Stitch, Blind Hem Stitch, Cross-stitch, Double Cross-stitch, Flame Stitch, Plain Running Stitch, Beautiful and Easy Rose Stitch, Simple Thorn Stitch, Hidden Stitch, Gathering Stitch, Upright Cross-stitch, Finishing Threads. This idea is also reflected in some of the descriptions: 'Skein after skein of birds unravel from the forest canopy.' (p 21) 'The sea is as flat as a pond, grey-green, the dark clouds have tattered hems.' (p 97) When Edie is teaching Rose to sew

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(pp 132-3) she tells her to sew by counting lists of memories, and later she tells Rose: ‘It’s strange how life turns out. That day is threaded all the way to here and me sitting with you. If I pulled that thread, right now, I would see the places that day has touched my life, gathered up in folds. You won’t understand it now.’(p 163) She offers advice such as: ‘This is what my mother always said to me when I was feeling blue. Sew some chain stitch and it will cheer you up. Or some daisies. That brightens everything.’ (p 264) and Rose acknowledges what she has gained from sewing: ‘Edie has taught her how to sit still. How to breathe. How to sew a straight line. How to pin a pattern. How to double stitch a seam, how to make tulle petticoats, how to work lace at a cuff.’ (p 318) What part does sewing play in the thematic development of this novel?

5. “‘You look full of secrets,’ Pearl says. ‘You’re a real closed book.’” (p 29) Rose may be full of secrets, but so are all the characters in this novel, including Pearl. Are all these secrets resolved? Discuss.

6. Edie Baker is regarded as a witch by the local townspeople, and no one has seen her for years. This is a common fate for the elderly or reclusive in small towns, where they are dismissed as being crazy far too easily. Discuss.

7. This novel might be compared to other great stories of a rite of passage entwined with a tragic mystery such as Craig Silvey’s *Jasper Jones* (2009), Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Donna Tartt’s *The Little Friend* (2002), Sonya Hartnett’s *Of A Boy* (2002) or Karen Foxlee’s previous novel *The Anatomy of Wings* (2008). Compare and discuss one of these novels with *The Midnight Dress*.

8. ‘He’s handsome in a way, although old, as old as her father easily, thinks Rose. He has a pale face and his hair falls in a foppish way. He could be an English explorer, or a visiting missionary, Rose isn’t sure which; whichever, he doesn’t look like he belongs in Leonora.’ (p 49) Is Paul Rendell a bad man or a weak one, or both? This novel is full of absent or neglectful fathers, jaded older men, and thoughtless young ones. Are there any redeeming male characters in this narrative?

9. The story of Jean-Claude Mercier, Edie’s great-great-great-great-great grandfather, is magical and enticing (p 64). The novel is littered with such stories, or pieces of personal histories. What effect do these sections have on the thematic development of the narrative?

10. Nature is very present in this book; the rich tropical seasons and the humid nights; the cacophony of sounds such as flying foxes and of things literally growing through the soil reaching to the sky. This provides the background to the human drama unfolding: ‘All this does not change. It is the preordained nature of things. And in the schoolyard at Leonora High, it is exactly the same. All through the wet season girls dream a plumage of dresses, and the prettiest girls are expected to go out with the bestlooking boys, and this has never changed.’ (p 73) How does nature reflect the emotional action in this novel?

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11. ‘In the beginning her father will present the easygoing version of himself. The happy, just-blew-into-town him, the travelling him with the quiet laugh, the looking-for-work him, the down-on-his-luck him, the father-with-a-daughter him, the she’s-a-good-kid him, the we’re-doing-our-best him.’(p 95) The alcoholic’s pattern of behaviour is evinced by the father Rose knows only too well. At each stop after he’s gone dry for awhile he’ll cheerily go off to a new job and then the downhill slide will begin. But this time, in Leonora, the pattern is frighteningly interrupted: “I hate you,” she says. She does. This new him. The other him is much better. The larrikin him. The drunk him. The drunk him just blusters, breaks, barges; the drunk him just up and leaves. This new him terrifies her. He’s too quiet, too controlled. He’s always thinking.’(p 165) Does the fact that Rose’s father suffers from alcoholism excuse him for his cruelty and carelessness?

12. ‘There’s this story that the rock is this mother and she lost her children in a flood. They got swept away, and she turned all bitter, and each year takes a child back, or an adult, whoever she can get her hands on as a revenge. Heaps of people go missing up there.’(p 129) There are several myths about natural features of the landscape referred to in this novel, and the knowledge of the land evinced by Waldron, the Aboriginal tracker employed by Detective Glass is another example of the ‘songlines’ lying under the surface of white Australian lives. Discuss.

13. ‘The problem with Pearl Kelly is that she thinks the whole world is one big romance novel. She thinks love is the only important thing. She thinks everyone is just waiting for the one big moment when they fall in love. Fall. Why is it falling in love? Falling implies an injury or a trap. Splatting, slamming, plummeting. Rose thinks she couldn’t stand to feel like that, all nervous and butterfly fidgety, all pale and swooning.’ (p 217) Pearl’s life is lived in both the hope of rescue by a handsome prince, and in the shadow of the dream of finding her lost Russian father, whose one night romance with her mother has remained one of the fundamental myths in her life. Romance novels are referred to often in this novel. Are the values perpetrated in such novels emotionally destructive for women, or are they simply innocent escapism?

14. ‘Is that the sky she feels inside her? The trembling of the seasons? Would she wait all day in the heat and the rain to run away with him? She looks at Murray Falconer from the corner of her eye. He looks at her. They both smile at the sea.’(p 252) Rose’s feelings for Murray are described here in a lyrical way and this moment in the novel is a genuinely romantic one, unlike the sadly contrived moments which Pearl has enjoyed with Jonah Pedersen and with Paul Rendell. Does romance generally take one unawares like this?

15. “‘I’ve never had a home,” says Rose, wiping her nose. “You don’t understand, I’ve never had a home.””(p 263) Is this the source of Rose’s angst and anger?

16. ‘Years later, when she is older, she will still dream of the places she discovered there: the gully, the secret rose gums, the hut beside the waterfall. These places will appear clearly in her dreams; the perfume of rotting leaves, of moss, will fill her nose. She will wake swallowing air as though they are her first breaths.’(p 286) This passage is intensely evocative but it is also revealing of the secret which has been kept by the narrator throughout the novel. Had you guessed before you read this?

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17. Rose ‘feels’ her mother’s presence (p 310) and knows that she must escape her father just as her mother had done years before. There is a sense of personal revelation and liberation in this, too, for finally Rose must acknowledge that her mother wasn’t abandoning her; she was simply escaping an impossible situation and abandoning her father instead. Discuss.
18. What if we could go backwards as the narrator suggests (pp 259-60) and undo all the things which lead to a moment of tragedy or loss? Every human being has this feeling at some stage. Discuss.
19. What does the title of the novel suggest symbolically? What is the central theme?

FURTHER READING

Karen Foxlee *The Anatomy of Wings* (UQP, 2008)