



Ladies in black

By Madeleine St. John

First published in 1993

Genre & subject

Australian fiction

Women sales personnel

Friendship

Department stores

Synopsis

At the very end of the Ladies' Frocks Departments, past Cocktail Frocks, there was something very special, something quite, quite wonderful; but it wasn't for everybody--that was the point. Because there, at the very end, there was a lovely arch, on which was written in curly letters Model Gowns. Written by a superb novelist of contemporary manners, *Ladies in Black* is a fairytale which illuminates the extraordinariness of ordinary lives. The women in black are run off their feet, what with the Christmas rush and the summer sales that follow. But it's Sydney in the 1950s, and there's still just enough time left on a hot and frantic day to dream and scheme... By the time the last marked-down frock has been sold, most of the staff of the Ladies' Cocktail section at F. G. Goode's have been launched into slightly different careers.

Author biography

St John was born in 1941 in Castlecrag, a suburb of Sydney, and schooled at Queenwood School for Girls, Mosman. She was born to Edward St John, the son of a Church of England clergyman. Her French mother, Sylvette (Cargher), committed suicide when St John was 12. Her maternal grandparents were Romanian Jews.

She went the University of Sydney to study arts where she was a contemporary of Bruce Beresford, John Bell, Clive James, Germaine Greer, Arthur Dignam, Robert Hughes and Richard Walsh, whom her father defended in the first Oz obscenity trial in 1964.

She married Christopher Tillam, a filmmaker, with whom she moved to San Francisco to live while he studied film. The marriage ended after St John went to live in England during 1968, where she remained. She took a series of jobs in bookshops and offices. Eventually she stuck with a part-time job for two days a week at an antique shop in Kensington. During the following eight years she attempted to write a biography of Helena Blavatsky but was dissatisfied and destroyed the manuscript.

In the early 1990s she decided to write novels. Her first, *The Women in Black* was published in 1993.

Not used to the success her writing brought, she remained a very private person, almost reclusive in style if not in actuality.[4] She died aged 64 at St Mary's Hospital, London, of emphysema and was cremated at Kensal Green Cemetery.

Discussion starters

- Lisa thinks to herself on page 52 that '...life was, in all manner of possibilities, truly now and almost tangibly beginning.' Discuss the idea that it is only when the characters have the courage to enter into an honest dialogue that the possibilities for their relationships begin.

- Frank might be ‘a bastard of the standard-issue variety’ but as the novel progresses Frank becomes a man we ache for in his ‘unarticulated anguish’. Do you agree?
- The growing intimacy between Patty and Frank is acutely observed. Discuss the night that Frank left and the day that he returned. Discuss the hungers in their relationship. Discuss the hungers in other characters.
- Discuss the idea that like the Southern suburbs, which are described as ‘terra incognita’, many things are not yet mapped or documented in the lives and relationships in the book.
- Stefan and Rudi stand in stark contrast to the Australian men in the novel. Discuss the ways that the Australian men in the text are as trapped as their wives. Do any of the men break the roles set for them?
- Magda and Stefan each survived hell and yet they are colour while the women in Goode’s are black. How does St John create this contrast and for what purpose? How do the clothes and food parallel the characters?
- Clive James comments that ‘In *The Women in Black*, Madeleine St John evoked the collision of modern European history and the still-awakening Australian culture...’ Discuss this idea.
- In what ways does Lisa symbolise the awakening Australian culture? What comment is St John making about the importance of art?
- *The Women in Black* has been described as a comic masterpiece. Discuss some of the funniest lines and moments in the text. How does St John create scenes of warmth and humour?
- Christopher Potter, publisher of Madeleine St John’s novels at Fourth Estate, comments that ‘Beneath the sly and witty veneer of her writing, she explores questions that are basically theological: we must do the right thing, but how can we tell what the right thing is?’ In what ways does St John explore this theme in *The Women in Black*?
- For Lisa, Blake’s poem is mysterious and enticing. Discuss why St John might have made reference to Blake’s work in her novel. Discuss too, her reasons for including references to *Anna Karenina*, *Emma* and *Tender is the Night*.
- In some ways St John explores how family and connection can limit people. In other ways she shows the emptiness of life without connection.
- What idea is St John exploring through the character of Miss Jacobs?
- Mrs Miles comments to her daughter, ‘Lisa. If only you knew what being grown up can be like, you wouldn’t want to do it any faster than you have to.’ How do some characters change their circumstances? Despite the sadness in the text, humour and hope dominate. Do you agree?
- Kaz Cooke comments that the novel ‘...evokes another time while being mysteriously classic and up-to-date...’ How are the themes raised in the novel relevant today?

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