



Ladies in Black

By Madeleine St John

First published in 1993

Genre and Subject

Australian fiction

Women sales personnel

Friendship

Synopsis

Previously published as *The Women in Black* and now a major film directed by Bruce Beresford and starring Julia Ormond, Angourie Rice, Rachael Taylor, Ryan Corr, Shane Jacobson, Susie Porter, Alison McGirr, Noni Hazlehurst and Vincent Perez.

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 fairy-tale 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. With the lightest touch and the most tender of comic instincts, Madeleine St John conjures a vanished summer of innocence. *Ladies in Black* is a great novel, a lost Australian classic.

Author Biography

Madeleine St John was born in Sydney in 1941. Her father, Edward, was a barrister and Liberal politician. Her mother, Sylvette, committed suicide in 1954, when Madeleine was twelve. Sylvette's death, Madeleine later said, 'obviously changed everything'.

St John studied Arts at Sydney University, where her contemporaries included Bruce Beresford, Germaine Greer, Clive James and Robert Hughes. In 1965 she married Chris Tillam, a fellow student, and they moved to the United States where they first attended Stanford and later Cambridge. From Cambridge, St John relocated to London in 1968. The couple did not reunite and the marriage ended.

St John settled in Notting Hill. She worked at a series of odd jobs, and then, in 1993, published her first novel, *The Women in Black*, the only book she set in Australia. When her third novel, *The Essence of the Thing* (1997), was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, she became the first Australian woman to receive this honour.

St John died in 2006.

Discussion Starters

1. *The Women in Black* is set over six weeks in the late 1950s. What themes in the novel are still relevant today? Would you consider this book a modern classic?
2. *The Women in Black* has been described by critics and readers alike as hilarious and a comic masterpiece. What are some of the funniest moments in the text? How does Madeleine St John craft scenes of such warmth and humor?
3. *The Women in Black* is set against the backdrop of great societal change in 1950s Australia—from evolving roles for women to an influx of postwar European refugees. How does St John use her characters to illustrate these changes? Keeping in mind that St John herself left Australia for England and the US, are there places in the text where her feelings and attitudes about her home country emerge?
4. Compare Patty's marriage to Frank with Magda's marriage to Stefan. Other than the fact that neither couple has children, how are these relationships similar? What do you think Madeleine St John is trying to say about happiness in marriage?
5. Fay Baines lives by the motto "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again" (page 15). In the realm of romance, this motto doesn't work for her (until it does). Fay does not have family around to offer emotional support during her unhappy times. What advice would you offer Fay?
6. Discuss Stefan's ironic statement "Naturally we are cultivated, we reffos, we are famous for it, or rather notorious, it is one of our most despicable qualities" (page 94). How do Stefan, Rudi, and Magda's appreciation of the finer things in life set them apart from the Australian characters in the novel? What do you make of their desire to share that appreciation with others?
7. Early in her friendship with Lisa, Magda thinks, "It was very nice to have the charge of so ignorant a little girl, for she, Magda, could teach her everything" (page 60). Contrast this with Mrs. Miles's comment to her daughter, "If only you knew what being grown-up can be like, you wouldn't want to do it any faster than you have to" (pages 98–99). Discuss how each woman influences Lisa in her own way.
8. Nearly all of the details of Miss Jacobs's life remain a secret, even her name. What do you think she is supposed to represent? Who do you imagine she is mailing letters to on Christmas Eve when Mr. Ryder spots her (page 121)?
9. Both Stefan and Rudi stand in stark contrast to the Australian men in the novel. Discuss the ways in which the Australian men are as trapped as the women. Do any of the men in the book defy the roles set for them?
10. When Lisa falls in love with one of Magda's model gowns, she is hit by "the sudden recognition that a particular frock is not merely pretty, would not merely suit one, but answers beyond these necessary attributes to one's deepest notion of oneself" (page 65). Have you had a similar feeling about an item of clothing before? Discuss.
11. "Change is the law of life," remarks Mr. Ryder in the closing pages of the book (page 208). What do you imagine Lisa, Magda, Fay, and Patty will be doing the following Christmas?

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