

READING NOTES



THE *Dressmaker's* SECRET

'A phenomenal success'
The Age



'A true original'
Sydney Morning Herald



Rosalie Ham

LOVE. REVENGE. COUTURE. THE STORY CONTINUES...

ABOUT THE BOOK

It is 1953 and Melbourne society is looking forward to coronation season, the grand balls and celebrations for the young queen-to-be. Tilly Dunnage is, however, working for a pittance in a second-rate Collins Street salon. Her talents go unappreciated, and the madame is a bully and a cheat, but Tilly has a past she is desperate to escape and good reason to prefer anonymity.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Farrat and the McSwiney clan have been searching for their resident dressmaker ever since she left Dungatar in flames. And they aren't the only ones. The inhabitants of the town are still out for revenge (or at least someone to foot the bill for the new high street). So when Tilly's name starts to feature in the fashion pages, the jig is up. Along with Tilly's hopes of keeping her secrets hidden...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosalie Ham is the author of four previous books, including the bestselling novels *The Year of the Farmer* and *The Dressmaker*, now an award-winning film starring Kate Winslet, Liam Hemsworth, Judy Davis and Hugo Weaving. Rosalie was born and raised in Jerilderie, New South Wales, where her family still farm, and now lives in Melbourne, Australia. She holds a master of arts in creative writing and teaches literature.

THEMES

Fashion and costume

'Clothes make a statement, costumes tell a story. You would like costumes – the process is about finding truth in fiction, and it's collaborative.' (Page 248)

1. The residents of Dungatar are still wearing the three-year-old rags of Tilly's Macbeth costumes. How do these costumes highlight the townspeople's character and disconnect from wider social norms, and reality?
2. Tilly started her career in the schmatte (which literally means 'rags') fashion industry of Melbourne and went on to the elegant sophistication of Europe, and back. Would you describe her journey as rags to riches? Why or why not?
3. Salon Mystique copies European designs for the Melbourne market. What statement does Tilly make with her signature pieces?
4. Why is Tilly reluctant to design costumes? In contrast, why does Sergeant Farrat enjoy it?

Institutions and social hierarchy

'You know, Shirley, we put up with our place in the hierarchy out of fear, but we don't need to. The world can't do much without us.' (Page 128)

'I've seen enough of the learned, decent folk of authority to know that sometimes the costumes they wear are a lie.' (Page 326)

5. How does Tilly upset the hierarchies at the Salon Mystique? Consider Valda's role as Atelier Première and Directrice Technique and the growing influence of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union.
6. Tilly, Marigold and the McSwineys all suffer from the interventions of people of authority: for example, the nuns, Winyerp Asylum, lawyers, the guardianship tribunal, Children's Services and the Welfare Department. What are some of the hypocrisies of these authority figures?
7. Even though it is 1950s Australia, Dungatar is often described with references to the Medieval feudal system and serfs. Why?
8. The coronation celebration at the Hippocampus Club features many unexpected upsets of conventional society, including a scene where the judge cross-examines God for the

injustices of the world (Page 312). How does this reflect the book's attitude towards what is moral, normal or correct?

Ambition and vengeance

'Your hypocrisy, prejudices and lies, and you can't see what you are . . . that's the biggest tragedy.'
(Page 364)

9. The desire to show up other women drives Gertrude and Marigold's search for Tilly's dressmaking skills, as well as Miss Post Office Picnic. How does fashion become a weapon in this story?
10. This time, it's Mae McSwiney who sets fire to Dungatar. What are her reasons? Who does she seek to punish?
11. Are there any truly innocent people in this story? Who?

The modern woman

Nita threw her lovely head back, laughing. 'I have had no misfortune. I have, in fact, triumphed over prejudice and oppression.' (Page 61)

'I thought that we would make couture for that very exclusive group of wealthy patrons and make enough to survive on. But I can't, in all good conscience, continue doing that. I want to move forward, and I think the modern women will lead me.' (Page 243)

12. We might think of the 1950s as a time of traditional gender roles in Australia, where the ideal women married, had children and stopped working. Do the women in *The Dressmaker's Secret* fit that mould? How do they deviate, and how does it work out for them?
13. As a woman designing for women, Tilly has a less conventional view of what women want to wear: she won't dress Nita for the male gaze and she derides Dior's 'corsets, a subconscious symbol of suffocation.' (Page 246) What role does this attitude play in her creative success? How does it influence her desire to make prêt à porter (ready to wear) clothes?
14. Tilly is a mother, wife, businesswoman and entrepreneur who grows to know her worth as a person and a professional. Would you describe Tilly as a feminist character? Why or why not?
15. Divorced actress Nita Orland is even more exotic and infamous than Tilly was in Dungatar. How does she wear her reputation? Where does her confidence come from?

Love, friendship and family

She was looking forward to waking up with Joe and his entire family, the family Teddy had woken to each day: a tight-knit, true family, held fast with love and loyalty, who would forever defend Joel, enfold and protect him, an entire army of them. (Page 210)

Nita rolled her eyes. 'My dear Tilly, friends make life navigable. (Page 248)

16. At the beginning of the book, Tilly aims to achieve her independence without assistance, but she soon finds herself in need of help. How does she find allies and friends? How does she treat them?
17. The Head of the Welfare Department is adamant that a child is *'usually best off with its family, a mother and a father'* (Page 125). What does Joe's family look like? Contrast it with Tilly's family growing up.
18. What do Sergeant Farrat and the McSwiney family sacrifice by reconnecting with Tilly? What do they gain?
19. How does Tilly's relationship with Arlen O'Connor differ from her relationship with Teddy McSwiney? How does she honour Teddy even though she cares for Arlen?

Confronting the past

'Generally, I try not to collide with my past.'

'Your past is the foundation of your life – you have to keep referring to it so that you can grow from it.' (Page 184)

20. Arlen is introduced as a figure from Tilly's mysterious past, with uncertain motives. But he proves himself a friend. Why is Tilly reluctant to trust him?
21. Tilly is worried she will turn into her mother, driven to madness by losing one son, Pablo, and nearly losing another. But Molly has a strong presence in this book, especially when the main characters return to Dungatar at the end. What does she represent?
22. Teddy McSwiney's death haunts Tilly and Mae and colours their relationship with young Joe. How does it separate the two women, and how does it bring them together?
23. Joe is called a phoenix for both Tilly and the McSwiney family (Page 130). In what way does he symbolise rebirth?

The true self

'Fashion is a lie, a marketing tool that's all about the designer, the couturier's vision, not the individual. One should make dresses that announce true character, show someone at their best.'
(Page 244)

'A satin strapless fishtail, a wig and false eyelashes meant he could be himself, or herself. His day costume allowed him to present as a conventional man' (Page 249)

24. As a designer, Tilly is adept at reading people's desires and personalities, and translating that into clothing. How does she do this?
25. The Hippocampus Club is a place for people whose true selves don't always match what they present to the world. Read the description of Esmeralda's sea-inspired dress (Page 252–254). Does it fulfil the design brief? How does it allow the judge to express his true self?
26. By leaving the bitterness and prejudice of Dungatar, Tilly is able to discover her true self. What does she learn about herself? What does she want her future to look like?

CHARACTERS

Myrtle Dunnage

27. Serenity, the hostess of the Hippocampus Club, mentions the story of the Greek priestess Myrrha when she hears Myrtle's name (Page 27). How does this myth reflect Tilly's life?
28. What does Tilly want for her son, Joel Edward Dunnage? Why do you think she chose this name?
29. Tilly is viewed by the people of Dungatar as *'confronting...beautiful and exotic'* (Page 358). What aspects of her personality do they refuse to see?
30. Which of the tragic events of Tilly's life, if any, were caused by her? To what extent is she a victim of fate, or bad luck?

Sergeant Horatio Farrat

31. Horatio Farrat compares himself to *'Hamlet's fearless, trusted friend'* (Page 26). Is this an appropriate description for him?
32. Even though he has left the police force, Horatio is referred to mainly as the sergeant. He also admits to missing the uniform. How does he maintain his status as a peace keeper?

33. Sergeant Farrat experiences love at first sight with Julie, but isn't able to share his story with her – which leads to misunderstanding and heartbreak. Why do you think he hesitates to tell her his secrets?

The McSwiney family

34. The McSwiney family are seen by the authorities as *'itinerants who secrete umpteen children into poverty'* (Page 83). They may be poor, but how would you describe their family life?

35. Teddy McSwiney was the star of their family, their pride and joy. How has the family recovered from his death? How are they moving on?

36. Why do you think the author chose the name 'McSwiney' for this family?

Nita Orland and Arlen O'Connor

37. Nita Orland gives her family history at the Salon Mystique (Page 60–61). What does her name mean? Why does Tilly compare her to Greek goddess Hecate?

38. After a difficult childhood with Tilly, Arlen O'Connor is now a lawyer who dresses well and commands respect. What suggestions are there that he may be involved in unsavoury work? Does that make him untrustworthy?

39. Nita and Arlen, along with Sergeant Farrat are part of the *'new emerging bohemian class of refugee artists and displaced elites'* (Page 118). What do they have in common? How do they differ from the other characters?

The people of Dungatar

40. After renaming herself as Trudy, Gertrude Beaumont reinvents herself again as a dressmaker and seamstress – in imitation of Tilly. What does Tilly have that Trudy wants?

41. How do the people of Dungatar function without their outcasts, now that Tilly and Molly are no longer living on The Hill? What are the reasons they want Tilly to return?

42. William Beaumont is the most reasonable person in Dungatar. How does he handle the townspeople? Can he change anything?

43. Dungatar's production of *King Lear* – a play about injustice, madness, family and ambition – is fitting for this novel. Which characters best exemplify the themes of the play, both in New Dungatar and in Melbourne?

SETTING

Melbourne

44. Salon Mystique sells imitation European styles to the '*hoi polloi of suburban Melbourne*' (Page 9). What kind of woman is their customer? How do they compare to Tilly's clients from Dungatar?
45. The author describes coronation mania taking over every aspect of life, from women's fashion to food, household products to social events (Page 159). What role do image and display play in Melbourne life? Consider characters like Mr Hawker and Mrs Flock.

The Hippocampus Club

46. Sergeant Farrat explains that 'hippocampus' refers to the seahorse, not the brain – hence the underwater theme of the décor. Why do you think the author chose this name for the club?
47. With poetry night, art and music, how does the Hippocampus Club represent the highest ideals of human nature?
48. The Hippocampus Club is where Tilly and her friends are able to relax and be themselves, where Nita Orland goes '*to feel ordinary*' (Page 28) – but they are at constant threat of exposure. In what ways is it a safe space, and how is it not?

Dungatar

49. Visitors to Dungatar – like Mrs Flock, Arlen, and the welfare officer – might expect 'a quaint rural village in a vast peacefulness' (Page 4). What do they find instead?
50. The only parts of Dungatar to survive Tilly's fire are the grain silo and The Hill, reminders of Teddy's death and Mad Molly, who were both failed by the people of Dungatar. How does the burnt out landscape reflect the moral character of the town?
51. Why do you think the townspeople want to rename Dungatar as 'New Dungatar'? Do they really want '*a new future for all*' (Page 152)?

WRITING STYLE

52. This book is written in a gothic style, like *The Dressmaker*. What aspects of the story fit the gothic tradition? Consider the references to curses, the setting of Dungatar and Tilly's frequent flashbacks and memories.

53. In this book, characters quote from many literary sources, not just *King Lear*. Sergeant Farrat quotes from *The Tempest* (Page 26), Tilly from writer George Meredith (Page 373), and Arlen from *Artistotle* (Page 326). What do these references say about the inner lives of these characters?

54. In this book, Tilly and her friends often discuss contemporary events of the 1950s: not just the coronation, but the Korean War, Marilyn Munroe, and US purchases of Australian uranium. What does the social context add to the story?

55. There are many instances of foreshadowing: for example, when the asylum superintendent asks '*What harm can two impaired old hags from Dungatar do?*' (Page 24), or William's many thwarted attempts to build a fire station. Even when you know or suspect what is going to happen to these characters – Mr and Mrs Short, the town of Dungatar – do you find their stories satisfying? Why?

56. The story ends with another fire burning Dungatar to the ground, and only the chimney on The Hill remaining. What do you think the author is saying about the people of Dungatar? Is there hope of rebuilding the town for the better?