



The Dressmaker's Secret

Rosalie Ham



Author Background

Rosalie Ham is one of Australia's most successful authors, her novels are international bestsellers and have been translated into a number of languages. Her debut novel, *The Dressmaker*, published in 2000, was adapted into a film starring Kate Winslet, Liam Hemsworth, Judy Davis and Hugo Weaving in 2015. Her other novels – *Summer at Mount Hope*, *There Should Be More Dancing* and *The Year of the Farmer* – also deal with social relationships and rural life in Australia.

Rosalie lives in Melbourne with her husband but was born and raised in Jerilderie, New South Wales, where her family still farms. She holds a Master of Arts in creative writing and teaches literature. She also writes for stage and radio and has written short stories for various Australian publications, including *Meanjin*, *The Age* and *The Bulletin*.

Book Summary

It is 1953 and Melbourne society is looking forward to coronation season, with 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...

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Tilly started her career in the *schmatte* (the Yiddish term for 'rags') trade of Melbourne but her dressmaking skills took her to the elegant sophistication of Europe, and back. Would you describe her journey as rags to riches? Why or why not?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ As a designer, Tilly is adept at reading people's desires and personalities, and translating that into clothing. How does she do this?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ We might think of the 1950s as a time of traditional gender roles in Australia, where 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?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ 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?

References

- ❖ Pan Macmillan – <https://www.panmacmillan.com.au/9781760982027/>
- ❖ Wikipedia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosalie_Ham
- ❖ Litcharts - <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-dressmaker>