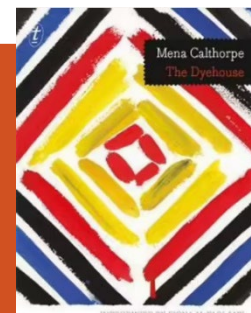




The Dyehouse

Mena Calthorpe



Text Classics

Book Club Discussion Notes

Author Background

Mena Calthorpe was born in Goulburn, New South Wales, in 1905, and grew up there. Educated at St Bridget's and Our Lady of Mercy College, she became a schoolteacher and taught for nearly ten years.

After marrying, Mena moved to Sydney and lived most of her life in the Sutherland Shire.

Working in office jobs and writing in her spare time, she was active in literary groups and in the Labor Party - for some years she was a member of the Communist Party.

The Dyehouse (1961) which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, was followed by *The Defectors* (1969), which dramatised unions' internal power struggles. Mena's third and final novel was *The Plain of Ala* (1989), an Irish migrant story, which was published in 1989.

Although some of her short stories were published in newspapers and literary journals, most remain unpublished and the original works and her various interviews and biographical cuttings are stored in the local history collection of the Sutherland Library, the State Library of New South Wales and at the National Library of Australia.

Mena died in 1996.

Book Summary

The Dyehouse is a masterly portrait of post-war Australia when industrial work was radically transformed by new technologies and society changed with it.

Mena Calthorpe, who herself worked in a textile factory, takes us inside a mid-1950s drab Sydney suburb, vividly bringing to life the people who work in the factory.

It follows the interacting stories of the men and women who work at the textile-dyeing factory, 'Southern Textiles', exploring the lives of the bosses, middlemen and underlings, their dramatic struggles, and their loves. Calthorpe has a tragic apprehension of its harsh sexual politics, and an intimate understanding of the price her characters will pay for the rewards of their labour.

This is a powerful and affecting novel, written with unerring skill and insight.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ The 1950s in suburban Australia has historically been perceived as a time of prosperity, economic growth, and happiness. In *The Dyehouse*, Calthorpe paints a picture of poverty, futility, misogyny, poor working conditions, and the ever-present threat of unemployment. Calthorpe's evocative prose expresses this:

“To the south of the sandy waste a row of dilapidated houses with broken windows looked out to the sea. In these shambles human beings lived. They went to work. They were known in factory and mill. They helped create beauty and colour that found no echo in their own lives.”

Why do you think these divergent histories exist? Which is more true?

- ❖ What do you think the message of the book is? What are the main themes? Do the themes resonate with today's society? If so, in what ways?
- ❖ *The Dyehouse* is considered an Australian classic. Why does this book matter in the context of Australian literature?
- ❖ Calthorpe describes an 'us-and-them' relationship between the factory management and the workers. Does this culture appear in today's workplaces? Has workplace culture improved since the 1950s?

References

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