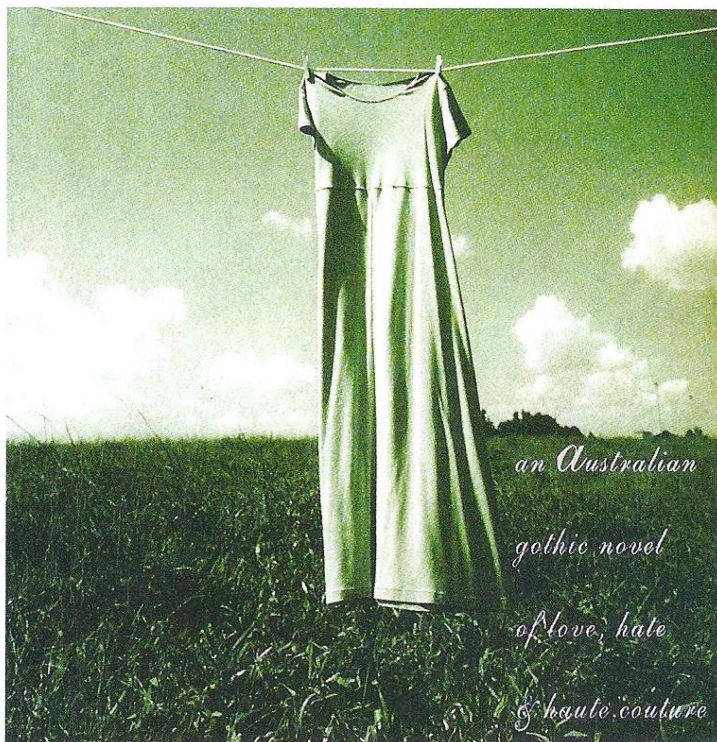


The Dressmaker

by Rosalie Ham

Love, hate and haute couture descend on the small town of Dungatar when Tilly returns to her hometown after twenty years.

By Hayley Penrose



THE DRESSMAKER

Rosalie Ham

Everything isn't as it seems in the fictional town of Dungatar in Victoria. There are secrets behind every door, but the residents aren't as good at hiding things as they think. When Myrtle 'Tilly' Dunnage returns home to care for her reclusive mother, the people of Dungatar are quick to bring up the past, not least being her illegitimate birth and the accusations of murder which forced her to leave town at the tender age of ten. In the intervening years, Tilly honed her dressmaking skills, returning from work in Paris and Milan, an expert with needle and thread. As the ladies of the town benefit from Tilly's exquisite styling and use of lavish fabrics, the past seems forgotten, but as she falls for the town's star football player, things start to go terribly wrong.

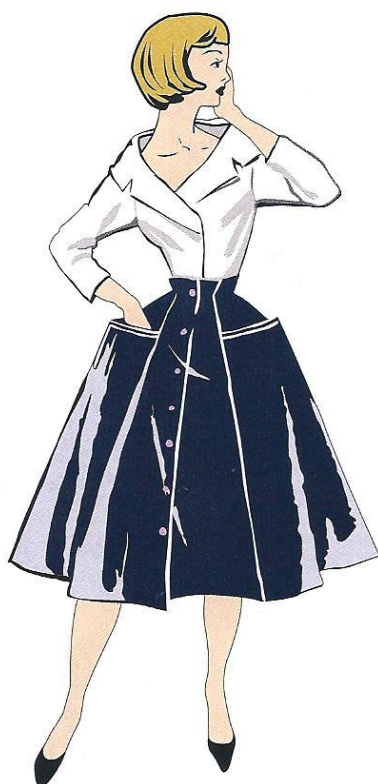
The Dressmaker is Australian author Rosalie Ham's debut novel, written over three years as part of a creative writing course. The students were advised to write a marketable idea and Rosalie quickly realised that her story was not what they had in mind. Her story lacks the happily-ever-after found in most published works and doesn't follow a standard story arc. This begs the question – what inspired such a tale? "Disguise!" Rosalie exclaims. "The way couture or a fabulously well-crafted frock can disguise flaws and make someone look good, and therefore feel 'better', and so that same frock can exacerbate the wearer's flaws - like vanity, competition and jealousy - and make them behave badly," she explains. "Throw in a bit of small-mindedness, a couple of lies and some Haute Couture, dramatise the whole lot in an isolated community and the inspiration for the story becomes bigotry, love, revenge [and] tragedy."

The people of Dungatar certainly do behave badly

LITERARY THREADS

behind closed doors and Tilly's return reopens old wounds and thrusts many of their secrets into the open. Although she spent her childhood in the town, Tilly never fit in, nor did her mother, Molly, who has become increasingly mad as the years pass. Tilly's return to the house on the hill to look after her ailing mother places her in a unique position to exact revenge on those who wronged her.

There are so many great characters in the book, from the town snoop Beula Harridene to the not so faithful Faith O'Brien. Even the town's police officer, Sergeant Horatio Farrat has a secret side. Most of the women of the town, including Elsbeth Beaumont and her daughter-in-law Gertrude, band together in a snobby group and work hard to maintain an image of importance. The large McSwiney family who live on the outskirts of town are considered outcasts by those who live in town. Mother of 11, Mae, is the only one to check in on Molly during Tilly's absence. Her son Teddy is the full forward for the local football team, and sets tongue wagging when he and Tilly start a relationship. Each



Images: Yoko Design

person in the town adds a little something to the greater story of Tilly's revenge, whether they know it or not.

"I like every character in all three of my novels – you have to, otherwise they don't work in the story – but I guess my absolute favourite is Molly," Rosalie confesses. "She's just so rude, feisty and her journey from the start of the story to the end is heart-wrenching and wise. But both Tilly and Molly are odes to all who have suffered unfairly, then triumphed."

The novel was well received when it was published in 2000 by Duffy and Snellgrove. The next year it was short-listed for the 'Christina Stead Prize for Fiction' at the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and was nominated for 'Vision Australia's Braille Book of the Year' and the 'Booksellers Association Book of the Year Award.' In 2007 *The Dressmaker* was a finalist at the State Library of Victoria's Most Popular Novel.

Earlier this year, Rosalie's story reached another milestone as *The Dressmaker* made the leap from page to screen. It was a lengthy process as the film rights were snapped up quickly following the book's release but nothing happened and they expired. This turned out to be a



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The *Dressmaker* was published by Duffy and Snellgrove in 2000 and is available in stores or online. It has since been republished by Penguin Books (USA and Canada), Macmillan Publishers (Australia) and Serpent's Tail (UK) as a tie-in-edition with the film.

blessing in disguise as Rosalie's childhood friend, and now producer, Sue Maslin could take on the project. "I'm still amazed by the whole thing. And I'm happy with the film," Rosalie says. "It was produced by my school friend Sue Maslin (*Japanese Story*, *The Road to Nhill*) and adapted for screen by Jocelyn Moorhouse (*Proof*, *How to Make an American Quilt*) and like Sue and I, Jocelyn is from a small community, so they understood the themes and the characters and made a film version of the story that's faithful to the spirit of the novel and a

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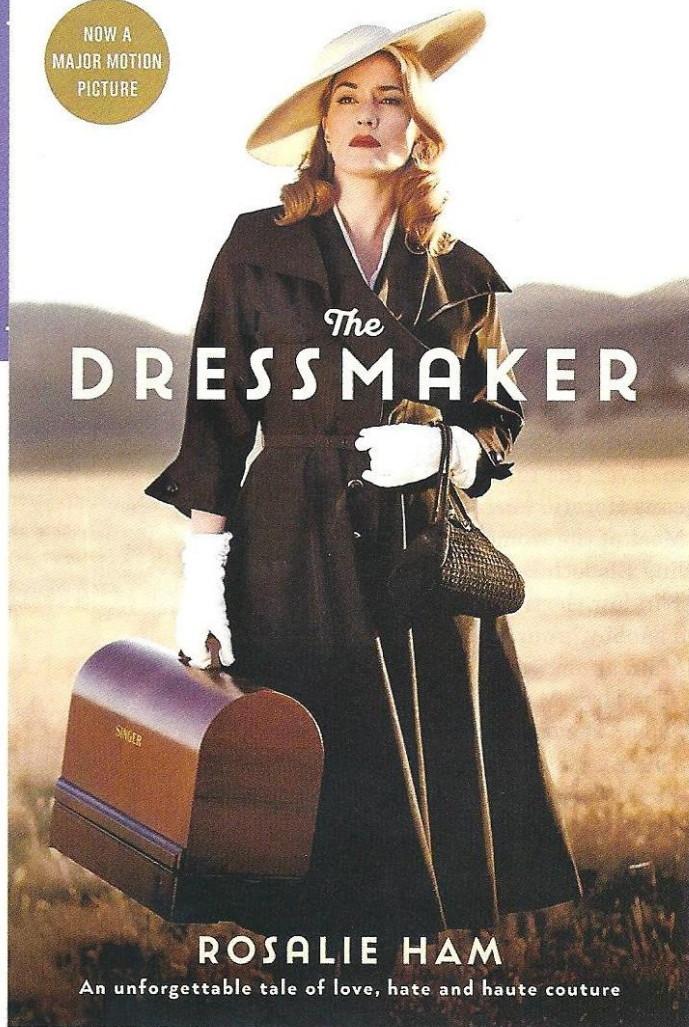


Image: Parfiteleva Olga

beautiful thing to watch."

The film stars Kate Winslet in the title role of the dressmaker, Tilly Dunnage, supported by a stellar cast including many Australian actors. "The actors have made the characters theirs and carry the glorious costumes against the rural backdrop beautifully. I think Judy Davis's interpretation of Molly is going to win many hearts. Kate Winslet understood Tilly and gives her an edge I wholeheartedly support. Liam Hemsworth is a very funny and tender Teddy and Hugo Weaving did Sergeant Farrat and his wardrobe proud," says Rosalie, praising the cast.

"The support cast surprises – it's like every Australian actor you've seen on telly and stage there in Dungatar being very naughty. The extras are pretty good too – especially myself, my

friends and family, all there as blurry 'people in the crowd.' We had a terrific time on set," she recalls.

Being on the set of the film adaptation of her first novel, Rosalie has come a long way from her early days and 'unmarketable' idea. "It was my first novel (I'm working on my fourth), so I never thought I'd ever finish it, let alone have it published," she admits. "You just have to write something every day, and that way, you end up with a body of words that you can craft into something else. *The Dressmaker* went onto bookshelves and started to sell, then it was put on the VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) Literature list and then optioned for a film and now the book's being published in many overseas countries and will be on screens all over the planet."