The Midnight Dress

Karen Foxlee

The award winning author of The Anatomy of Wings
The Midnight Dress

Karen Foxlee

Fiction

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It’s the mid-1980s when lonely 15-year-old Rose Lovell and her recovering alcoholic father wash up in a tiny Australian beach town. Against her better judgment, she allows herself to be befriended by exuberant, beautiful Pearl Kelly, who sweeps Rose up into various whims and projects. The procurement of a dress for the upcoming Harvest Parade brings Rose to Edie Baker, locally considered to be a witch. As Edie teaches a reluctant Rose to sew a gorgeous midnight blue dress to wear in the parade, she recounts tales from her past that become the backdrop for both the deepening of Rose and Pearl’s friendship and its eventual dissolution. Not unlike an expert seamstress herself, Foxlee (The Anatomy of Wings) skillfully weaves multiple stories throughout this novel, including eerie, reader-directed chapter openers that portend future tragedy for the girls. The casual beauty of the language (“She leans forward. There’s a sudden applause of rain on the roof”) and the complex storytelling style create a haunting, atmospheric novel about friendship, betrayal, and loss.

REVIEWS

Bookseller+Publisher

This suspense novel took me by surprise—not just the ending but how enjoyable it was! This is the second novel from Karen Foxlee, who won several awards for her debut The Anatomy of Wings. The Midnight Dress is the story of a misfit teenager, Rose Lovell, whose mother has died and whose father drinks too much and moves around Australia with reckless abandon. Father and daughter move to a place called ’Paradise’, where Rose forms a friendship with popular, pretty Pearl Kelly, who just wants to leave her small town. The story starts out with a disappearance that leaves the reader wondering what exactly has happened. It’s not clear who has gone missing and how each of the characters are involved. This is a beautifully crafted story that builds in tension to the final page. It starts out as a quiet read, but it sneaks up on you and leaves quite an impression. Foxlee has described the places and the people immensely well. I would recommend this novel for suspense readers and those looking for something well written.

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DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. The novel opens in second person; the fictional narrator addresses herself directly to the reader, as she does in all the ‘flash forward’ sections in the novel. This technique creates an intimacy with the reader, but also allows the narrator to manipulate how much she tells the reader about the events which have unfolded; to tease the reader with only parts of the truth. As in her previous novel Karen Foxlee uses young protagonists as the focal point, but here she uses third and second person rather than first. What effect does this have on the telling?

2. This novel is focussed on Rose and her complex identity. “If you were a meteorological phenomenon, Rose, which would you be?” asks Pearl to annoy Vanessa even more. “A summer hail storm,” says Rose quietly.’ (p 14) Pattie Kelly tells Rose her aura is ruby red, but Rose doesn’t believe her, ‘she feels angry because she knows Mrs Kelly can’t see anything at all. She’s just making it up. If she could really see inside her she’d know her aura is black. Onyx black. Tar black. Black as the burnt-out insides of a scorched tree.’ (p 30) What do these contrasting remarks by Rose suggest about her self-image?

3. Read these two quotes: ‘In the book she keeps a column of words she hates. First is the word grief. She hates the sound of it. It reminds her of a small wound, half healed. The word doesn’t encompass at all the emotion that has no edges. The feeling rises like a giant cumulus cloud. It surrounds her, dark and magical.’ (pp 6-7) ‘Rose thinks of the words she keeps in her notebook. She loves them and hates them at exactly the same time. They aren’t exactly poems, she’s not sure what they are. She has no control over the words. Those words control her.’ (p 47) What function do Rose’s jottings have in her life? Are they a means by which Rose deals with her feelings, or bottles them up?

4. “You look full of secrets,’ Pearl says. ‘You’re a real closed book.’” (p 29) Rose may be full of secrets, but so are all the characters in this novel, including Pearl. Are all these secrets resolved? Discuss.

5. Edie Baker is regarded as a witch by the local townspeople, and no one has seen her for years. This is a common fate for the elderly or reclusive in small towns, where they are dismissed as being crazy far too easily. Discuss.
DISCUSSION STARTERS (CONTINUED)

6. ‘He’s handsome in a way, although old, as old as her father easily, thinks Rose. He has a pale face and his hair falls in a foppish way. He could be an English explorer, or a visiting missionary, Rose isn’t sure which; whichever, he doesn’t look like he belongs in Leonora.’ (p 49) Is Paul Rendell a bad man or a weak one, or both? This novel is full of absent or neglectful fathers, jaded older men, and thoughtless young ones. Are there any redeeming male characters in this narrative?

7. The story of Jean-Claude Mercier, Edie’s great-great-great-great-grandfather, is magical and enticing (p 64). The novel is littered with such stories, or pieces of personal histories. What effect do these sections have on the thematic development of the narrative?

8. Nature is very present in this book; the rich tropical seasons and the humid nights; the cacophony of sounds such as flying foxes and of things literally growing through the soil reaching to the sky. This provides the background to the human drama unfolding: ‘All this does not change. It is the preordained nature of things. And in the schoolyard at Leonora High, it is exactly the same. All through the wet season girls dream a plumage of dresses, and the prettiest girls are expected to go out with the best looking boys, and this has never changed.’ (p 73) How does nature reflect the emotional action in this novel?

9. ‘The problem with Pearl Kelly is that she thinks the whole world is one big romance novel. She thinks love is the only important thing. She thinks everyone is just waiting for the one big moment when they fall in love. Fall. Why is it falling in love? Falling implies an injury or a trap. Splatting, slamming, plummeting. Rose thinks she couldn’t stand to feel like that, all nervous and butterfly fidgety, all pale and swooning.’ (p 217) Pearl’s life is lived in both the hope of rescue by a handsome prince, and in the shadow of the dream of finding her lost Russian father, whose one night romance with her mother has remained one of the fundamental myths in her life. Romance novels are referred to often in this novel. Are the values perpetrated in such novels emotionally destructive for women, or are they simply innocent escapism?

10. “I’ve never had a home,” says Rose, wiping her nose. “You don’t understand, I’ve never had a home.”’(p 263) Is this the source of Rose’s angst and anger? Rose ‘feels’ her mother’s presence (p 310) and knows that she must escape her father just as her mother had done years before. There is a sense of personal revelation and liberation in this, too, for finally Rose must acknowledge that her mother wasn’t abandoning her; she was simply escaping an impossible situation and abandoning her father instead. Discuss.

Reference: