Ladies in Black

Madeleine St John

ISBN 9781925603996
FICTION, TRADE PAPERBACK

Praise for Madeleine St John and Ladies in Black

‘Seductive, hilarious, brilliantly observed, this novel shimmers with wit and tenderness.’
Helen Garner

‘A major minor masterpiece, a witty and poignant snapshot of Sydney the year before yesterday.’
Barry Humphries

‘A delicious book. Funny and happy, it’s like the breath of youth again.’
Jane Gardam

‘St. John casts an airy spell with the deftness of her prose, which moves gracefully, swiftly and with perfect manners.’
Delia Falconer

‘Funny, affectionate, moving and written with a light, comic touch.’
Monica McInerney

‘A pocket masterpiece. A jewel.’
Hilary Mantel

‘Brimming with elegance, uncannily modern and sparkling with mischief.’
Zoë Foster Blake

About Madeleine St John

Madeleine St John was born in Sydney. She graduated from Sydney University in 1963 and lived in London for most of the succeeding years, until her death in 2006. The Women in Black was her first novel (adapted for the stage and screen as Ladies in Black). She also wrote A Pure Clear Light, 1996; The Essence of the Thing, 1997; which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize; and Stairway to Paradise, 1999.

About Bruce Beresford

Bruce Beresford is one of Australia’s best known film and opera directors. His films include The Getting of Wisdom, Driving Miss Daisy and Breaker Morant. His film Ladies in Black will be released in September 2018.

About Christopher Potter

Christopher Potter published the novels of Madeleine St John at Fourth Estate. He is the author of You Are Here.

A Reader’s Introduction to Ladies in Black

‘Mrs Williams, Patty, and Miss Baines, Fay, worked together with Miss Jacobs on Ladies’ Cocktail Frocks, which was next to Ladies’ Evening Frocks, down at the end of the second floor of Goode’s Department Store in the centre of Sydney. They wore the black frock supplied by Goode’s, ‘…designed to flatter both the fuller and the thinner figure and truly enhanced neither…’

With humour, wit and tenderness, Madeleine St John draws the reader into the worlds of her characters. Sydney during the 1950s is beautifully recreated: the setting, the mores and the clothes. Even better observed are the small details of life and relationships.

Miss Jacobs had been working at Goode’s since ‘…before the war…’ She was a mystery to her fellow workers.

Mrs Patty Williams was married to Frank, ‘…a bastard of the standard-issue variety, neither cruel nor violent, merely insensitive and inarticulate.’

Fay Baines, twenty-nine years old, lived in a solitary flatette. She was searching for love and desire and marriage. ‘Somehow the sight of Fay was not one which
inspired thoughts of marriage….men were forever
going the wrong idea..’

‘Magda, the luscious, the svelte, the full-bosomed…’
was a contrast to them all. She did not wear the
regulation Goode’s frock; she wore black on her own
terms. Magda guarded the ‘…rose-pink cave…’ that
housed the Model Gowns. She and her husband, both
survivors of hell in their countries, planned to start their
own business. Australians, according to Magda, ‘knew
nothing.’

Lisa Miles, Sales Assistant (Temporary) worked at
Goode’s for the Christmas rush while she waited for the
results of her Leaving Certificate exams. She dreamed
of winning a Commonwealth Scholarship to attend the
university. She dreamed of being a poet.

Through the overlapping stories, St John explores the
conventions that trapped men and women during this
era. She writes about the strangeness of intimacy—how
it can be a tangle of fear and need and love.

The gorgeous Magda and her world are the catalyst for
change in Fay and Lisa. She is all things rich—clothes
and food and art and equality in love. Fay and Lisa
change Magda, too. Some Australians do, in fact, know
the location of Yugoslavia. Or at least they are happy to
learn.

As Clive James comments, ‘In [The Women in Black],
Madeleine St John evoked the collision of modern
European history and the still-awakening Australian
culture with an economical intensity that no other writer
has quite matched.’

Evoked too, is the collision within the characters of what
they have and what they yearn to have.

Questions for discussion

1. Lisa thinks to herself on page 52 that ‘…life was, in all
manner of possibilities, truly now and almost tangibly
beginning.’ Discuss the idea that it is only when the
characters have the courage to enter into an honest
dialogue that the possibilities for their relationships
begin.

2. Frank might be ‘a bastard of the standard issue’ but
as the novel progresses Frank becomes a man we
ache for in his ‘unarticulated anguish’. Do you agree?

3. The growing intimacy between Patty and Frank is
acutely observed. Discuss the night that Frank left
and the day that he returned. Discuss the hungers in
their relationship. Discuss the hungers in other
characters.

4. Discuss the idea that like the Southern suburbs,
which are described as ‘terra incognita’, many things
are not yet mapped or documented in the lives and
relationships in the book.

5. Stefan and Rudi stand in stark contrast to the
Australian men in the novel. Discuss the ways that
the Australian men in the text are as trapped as
their wives. Do any of the men break the roles set
for them?

6. Magda and Stefan each survived hell and yet they
are colour while the women in Goode’s are black.
How does St John create this contrast and for what
purpose? How do the clothes and food parallel the
characters?

7. Clive James comments that ‘In [The Women in
Black], Madeleine St John evoked the collision of
modern European history and the still-awakening
Australian culture…’ Discuss this idea.

8. In what ways does Lisa symbolise the awakening
Australian culture? What comment is St John
making about the importance of art?

9. This book has been described as a comic
masterpiece. Discuss some of the funniest lines
and moments in the text. How does St John create
scenes of warmth and humour?

10. Christopher Potter, publisher of Madeleine St John’s
novels at Fourth Estate, comments that ‘Beneath
the sly and witty veneer of her writing, she explores
questions that are basically theological: we must do
the right thing, but how can we tell what the right
thing is?’ In what ways does St John explore this
theme in Ladies in Black?

11. For Lisa, Blake’s poem is mysterious and enticing.
Discuss why St John might have made reference to
Blake’s work in her novel. Discuss too, her reasons
for including references to Anna Karenina, Emma
and Tender is the Night.

12. In some ways St John explores how family and
connection can limit people. In other ways she
shows the emptiness of life without connection.

13. What idea is St John exploring through the
character of Miss Jacobs?

14. Mrs Miles comments to her daughter, ‘Lisa. If
only you knew what being grown up can be like,
you wouldn’t want to do it any faster than you
have to.’ How do some characters change their
circumstances? Despite the sadness in the text,
humour and hope dominate. Do you agree?

15. Kaz Cooke comments that the novel ‘…evokes
another time while being mysteriously classic and
up-to-date…’ How are the themes raised in the
novel relevant today?