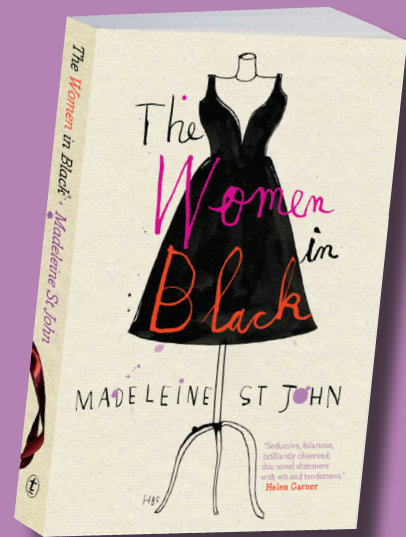


# The Women in Black

Madeleine St John

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Fiction Trade Paperback



## Praise for *The Women in Black*

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

'A great writer. Those of us who knew her at Sydney University back in the late 1950s are still trying to forgive ourselves that we never guessed what she would become.' Clive James

'A comic masterpiece...acute, touching and very funny.' Bruce Beresford

'This book is like the perfect, vintage little black dress. Beautifully constructed, it evokes another time while being mysteriously classic and up-to-date, and it makes you feel happy. I love it.' Kaz Cooke

'A delicious meringue that I devoured in one sitting. Wry, whimsical and wistful.' Lee Tulloch

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

'As sparkling as cold champagne, as layered as a tiered skirt of white organza. It's a national treasure.' Toni Jordan

## 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* is her first novel. 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*.

## 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 *The Women 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 a wry humour and a gentle hand, 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—that utterly legendary and even fabulous era.' 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 getting 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 variety' 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. *The Women in Black* 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 *The Women 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?