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made with a cheaper cover price ($79.95 seems very high for a paperback), that would undoubtedly increase its appeal.

David R. M. Irving

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It is the night of the Harvest Parade and a girl has gone missing . . .

Since her mother’s death, Rose Lovell has travelled with her father from town to town, never settling down and leaving as suddenly as they arrive. Expecting to be uprooted any day, reluctantly attending a new school, and with little interest in the town’s inhabitants, Rose takes to exploring the town’s surrounds. As she does so, Rose becomes unwillingly drawn to some of the townspeople, whose stories in turn connect to the environment she is discovering.

Karen Foxlee, award-winning author of The anatomy of wings (2008), has created a compelling and evocative mystery novel. The midnight dress is a single story, crafted from the tales within tales of a small town’s inhabitants and told from two points in time: the night of the Harvest Parade, for which the dress of the title is sewn, and the day Rose arrives in town with her father. The dual timeline throughout the book allows the novel to take its time with detailed descriptions without risk of losing the reader’s attention and instead adding to the intrigue that already exists. The book is stitched together both literally and figuratively. Each chapter is named for a stitch and, like the dress itself, the novel is meticulously composed: the stories within are blended to produce a beautifully crafted whole. The reader engages with the story in an effort to unpick the mystery even as the mystery is being sewn together.

Foxlee paints a vivid picture of a tropical northern Queensland town complete with snake-infested sugar-cane fields and a white sandy beach fringed with rainforest that creeps back over a mountain. Her vibrant descriptions include all the senses — the sound of rain on a tin roof, the smell of mangoes fallen from the trees and the rough, sodden wood of a fallen branch — powerfully conveying Rose’s new environment. The landscape is a vital element of the story. True to the sublime nature of the book, it is at once hostile and inviting. This paradoxical presentation not only adds depth to the setting, but reflects the complicated natures of the novel’s main characters. The novel echoes this in a number of ways, leaving the reader with a text of powerful resonance.

It is not surprising to learn that Foxlee is a lover of fairy tales. I’m tempted to describe the book as such, not because of any surprise unicorns, but because of the truly ethereal quality of the writing. Characterised by both people and place, the enchantment of the novel comes from no mystical event, no fairy godmother waving a wand to make a dress (the dress requires hard work!), but the sort of magic that comes from everyday objects, each of which has its own tale to tell.
The midnight dress is a coming-of-age novel, the story of an unlikely friendship, a love letter to the landscape of far north Queensland, a mystery both woven and unravelling at once and ultimately, and — most importantly — a jolly good read.

Helga Erichsen

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The importance of this novel is demonstrated by its timely launch, just a week after Julia Gillard issued a national apology for Australia’s forced adoption policy — a policy that was in place in Queensland until the 1980s. While this is the story of a child abducted by his father, rather than a child adopted, Kristina Olsson’s novel shows how a culture of separating mothers and their children lies at the centre of this very personal family memoir. This book is an act of speaking out about something that has remained an uncomfortable subject among the wider population: in Olsson’s words, ‘the wholesale abduction of children over centuries’.

Olsson’s lyrical prose and sensual descriptions capture the absurdity of life in post-war Queensland. At once idyllic and full of opportunities, North Queensland is also a place where Yvonne is beaten and starved by her husband — acts that are ultimately disregarded by authorities and the wider community. The split-narrative style means that both Yvonne’s and Peter’s stories are included, giving greater insight into the effect of the separation on the entire family. An afterword self-reflexively ties Olsson herself back into the story as writer, sister and daughter, reiterating the novel’s focus on personal effects.

Although the book is beautifully written, I sometimes felt detached from the individuals or situations being described, and would have liked a few more subtle clues about the characters’ emotions. There were also a few awkward phrases that could have done with another edit. In a sentence I found particularly jarring, we are told that Peter stays ‘in a series of hospital wards that smell of confusion and pain’. However, these are minor criticisms. The most important moments in the book are conveyed with careful precision, clear and unsentimental prose, and emotional impact — the moment when Peter is taken, the first time he runs away from his father and the moment he sees Yvonne after nearly forty years:

They watch this woman — she seems the right age, that’s all they can tell — and for some reason they stop talking. As if words, sounds, might impede their vision, one sense diminishing the other. It seems important to be quiet. So they’re silent, their faces turned to the gate near the roses. The roses, the roses. Oh my god, Peter breathes. That’s my mother. (p. 209)

It is clear that Olsson is an experienced and talented writer, who has crafted this story with great care. This book should appeal to people for many reasons. Not only is it well written but it tells an important story — one that should resonate