

A decorative gold floral border with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns, framing the central text.

# MOLLY

*Rosalie Ham*

READING GROUP NOTES

## ABOUT MOLLY

It's 1914 and Molly Dunnage wants to see change: at home, at work and in underwear.

Her burgeoning corsetry business is starting to take off, thanks to some high-profile supporters. She's marching with Melbourne's suffragists for better conditions for women everywhere. And her family – her eccentric, confounding, adored father and aunt – are turning their minds to country retirement.

But as the clouds of war gather and an ominous figure starts skulking in the shadows of her life, Molly's dreams begin to falter. Then, when true love drops out of the sky and into her arms, her hopes for her life and the world are entirely upended.

With the dark humour, richly detailed settings and vividly drawn characters we've come to expect from Rosalie Ham, this prequel to the international bestseller *The Dressmaker* is an unforgettable story of hopes lost, love found – and corsets loosened.

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## ABOUT ROSALIE HAM

Rosalie Ham is the author of *The Dressmaker*, *Summer at Mount Hope*, *There Should be More Dancing*, *The Year of the Farmer* and *The Dressmaker's Secret*. Rosalie was born and raised in Jerilderie, NSW and now lives in Melbourne. She holds a Master of Arts in Creative Writing and teaches literature.

## PLOT SUMMARY

\*\*Note: spoilers! \*\*

The novel follows the titular character, Molly Dunnage, as she navigates her professional dreams, the fight for women's suffrage, impending war and true love over the course of roughly a year in her life – the year 1914.

We are introduced to Molly Dunnage, a young woman in her early 20s from Carlton, Melbourne with dreams of studying fashion in Paris. Molly and her family – her father, August, and her aunt, April – are ostracised by the neighbourhood for their poverty and unconventional ways, but this does not deter her from being outspoken and wanting more for herself. Molly finds comfort in her childhood best friend, Gladys, an orphan and ward of the Dunnage's antagonistic neighbour Mrs Sidebottom. Following two failed attempts at pursuing her dream of Paris, Molly finds employment at a corset factory where she is heavily disliked by the manager, Mr Addlar (also known as 'Snakelegs'). Facing terrible working conditions, Molly and Gladys follow Aunt April in supporting the suffrage movement. In their spare time, Molly and Gladys also attend a choir, where they meet the scheming Evan Pettyman, and painting classes, where they meet Constable Horatio Farrat. Gladys is sent away after a secret encounter with Evan but promises Molly she will write to her when she is happy.

At work, Molly's skill captures the eye of Alatheia Pocknall, the factory owner's rich daughter, who is recently engaged. Molly is then enlisted to create a new form of corsetry that is fitting but comfortable and allows movement. Through Alatheia, Molly meets famed opera singer Dame Lily Pert and is asked to create underwear with similar properties to Alatheia's. When Alatheia's father dies in scandal, her cousin, Norbert Poke, and her fiancé try to take the company away from her, but Alatheia holds the key to the safe and her father's will. Evan Pettyman and his mother hear of Alatheia's woes and hope to help her (and eventually swindle her out of her inheritance) via their connection to Molly. Molly is wary of Evan but hopeful that Alatheia taking over the factory will progress her corsetry career.

However, Alatheia's father's death sees Molly fired so she and her aunt go on a trip to Yaamul in country Victoria, where they have family and they used to visit when Molly was young. Here, Molly secretly works on a Queen of the Night costume for Dame Lily's upcoming concert, and also reunites and falls in love with childhood friend Leander Behan. But their blossoming romance is marred by Leander's conservative family, who disapproves of Molly's modern ideas, and the pressure for Leander to enlist in the war that is brewing overseas. Leander promises Molly they will marry when he gets back, and she returns to Melbourne with her aunt.

Molly's despair about being separated from Leander is compounded by August's failing health and the loss of expected employment opportunities: Dame Lily is impressed by her Queen of the Night dress, but does not commission further work, and Alatheia is being very evasive about the deal with Evan. It looks like Molly's fashion dreams may be coming to an end. But Leander comes to visit and they are able to spend time together in Melbourne. Molly finally receives a letter from Gladys now engaged to a widowed farmer in the Northern Territory. With this letter, Molly reflects on their shared childhood and comes to terms with never seeing Gladys again. Molly determines Leander is her future, despite her fears of the collision of her ambitions and convictions with the institution of marriage, as she has seen the power of love in the life of her aunt and father. Molly takes her family, Leander and Horatio to Dame Lily Pert's concert, which is a rousing success.

Meanwhile, Alatheia has been working with her family lawyer to undermine Evan Pettyman's scheme and avoid handing over the factory to her cousin and now ex-fiancé. Successful in turning the tables on the scam, Alatheia departs for America with Evan's money – taking Molly's dream of manufacturing her corset designs with her. When Evan realises the truth, he allows his mother to die from a fall and, determined for revenge, begins watching Molly and her family from a hotel across the street from their home. August succumbs to his poor health and dies at home, and Leander gives into the pressure of his family and community and enlists in the war. Severely injured on the way to New Guinea, Leander and Molly are separated forever by his mother.

Grieving the loss of two loved ones and her dreams, Molly is taken advantage of by Evan Pettyman, and she falls pregnant. As an unwed mother with no prospects, Molly decides to join her friend Constable Farrat in the country town of Dungatar, where he has been exiled by headquarters after a misunderstanding with police uniform design, and live off her dressmaking and seamstressing skills. She had learned that society will not accommodate those who do not conform, and Molly wonders if the compromise she would have had to make to marry Leander might have ultimately tainted their life together. In Dungatar, she will live as she pleases.

Evan follows Molly to Dungatar and, sensing a better opportunity, marries the shire president's daughter. Meanwhile, Aunt April leaves Melbourne for Yaambul.

Molly gives birth to a daughter, Myrtle Dunnage, and lives in the house on the hill. Bitter and angry, Evan ruins Molly's reputation in the town once he gains some power, but the story ends with Molly determined to persevere and create a better life for her daughter.

The events of this book are a prequel to *The Dressmaker*, which is centred on Molly's daughter Myrtle.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Themes

1. Set in 1914, Molly touches on many themes: suffrage, clothing, war, love and ambition to name a few. Is there one that is most vital to Molly's life and story? Was there one that was most impactful to you as a reader?

## Fashion and clothing

2. Molly works at a factory making corsets and dreams of revolutionising women's underwear. How does Molly's environment impact her fashion dreams? Do you see her as ahead of her time? And what do her sartorial interests reveal about how she relates to society?
3. How do the various characters in this story express themselves through their clothing? Consider for example Gladys's refusal to wear march-appropriate attire, Mrs Pettyman's rigid corset and Alatheia's experimental honeymoon attire.
4. How does Dame Lily Pert's Queen of the Night costume, created by Molly, influence your experience of her concert performance? What does the visual element add to the scene, even if you don't know the context of the aria?
5. Horatio Farrat believes that updating the police uniform will improve the performance and public opinion of the police. While his methods are unconventional (and unsuccessful), do you agree with his premise? How might a uniform convey authority, or create trust?

## The rights of women and workers

6. Molly, Gladys and Aunt April go out marching for the suffragist cause together – and are often taken by police. What motivates these women? And do you think they have any chance of making significant change?
7. After complaining about insufficient toilet breaks, Molly becomes a frequent target of her manager, Mr Addlar. How does the factory show the interaction between women's rights and worker's rights? Which is worse in that environment, sexism or worker oppression?
8. On page 77, Gladys is seen erecting an Equal Pay & Financial Independence for Women banner yet her dream is to marry rich. What does this contradiction say about a woman's options at the time – especially one without money or connection?
9. Molly and Mrs Sidebottom have an ongoing ideological feud via housefront signage, with Molly often altering Mrs Sidebottom's conservative signs. Were there any signs that stuck in your mind? How does this reflect the political scene and the power of women's voice in the early 1900s?

## Social class and mobility

10. *'The girls had assumed their lives would be better than those of the generation before.'* (p 22) How does this quote encapsulate Molly's life, and her wishes for the future? Thinking of Molly's mother, and if you've read *The Dressmaker* and *The Dressmaker's Secret*, do you see any sense of the Dunnage women's lives improving over generations?
11. Molly meets women who are sympathetic to the women's movement, but not as active: for example, the wealthy Alatheia Pocknall and Dame Lily's assistant, Pernina. How does social class impact their relationship to women's rights?
12. What are the signs that Molly's family is from a low socioeconomic class? On the other hand, what do they have that the upper-class characters, like Alatheia and Dame Lily, do not?

13. Do you think Molly ever had any chance of escaping her life and making it big in the Paris fashion scene? What would have been a 'reasonable' ambition in fashion for someone of her social class?

### Love, friendship and family

14. *'Molly Dunnage would have chosen Leander over her own convictions, whatever that might have meant for their union.'* (p 368) For the majority of the book, Molly has been a staunch supporter of the suffrage movement, but she is ready to throw this away for love. What does this say about Molly's priorities? Do you agree with her decision here?
15. Molly is devastated to lose her childhood best friend, Gladys, realising she will never see her again. How did losing her one true friend impact Molly's actions over the course of the novel?
16. Contrast Molly's relationships with the two main men in her story: Leander and Evan. How do these relationships reflect the motivations behind each character and the norms of the time?
17. *'True love is the lightning rod for life force, Molly.'* (p 301) How true do you think this is? Is true love the motivating force behind any of the characters or storylines in this book? Can it conquer anything?
18. How might Molly's relationships with her father and aunt, and the mother who died when she was young, impact her decisions regarding her daughter, Myrtle?

### Deception and truth

19. Much of the plot hinges on conspiracy and deception: Evan and Alatheia conspire against each other, and deceive Molly; the lawyers deceive as part of their job; Pernina deceives Dame Lily to bolster her self-esteem. How does this drive the plot? Who is the worst deceiver, and why?
20. Do you think Molly ever truly trusts Evan and Alatheia? What in her character, or her circumstances, makes her accept their proposition? What is her reaction when their deception is revealed?
21. The corset and clothing that Molly makes for Dame Lily are intended to conceal her bulk and support her bosom. How does clothing hide or reveal the truth about the Dame, and other characters?
22. Horatio's inability to lie about his updated uniform – or to spin it to gain the support of his superiors – causes his exile from the Melbourne police force. What do you think about this aspect of his character? Does it make him a good person, or a good policeman?

### Fate, ambition and tragedy

23. As modern readers, we know the implications of the looming war – for women, for Leander, for society – whereas the characters in the novel cannot know for sure. How do you think this changes your perspective of the story's events?
24. *'To seek is to find.'* (p 116) Molly says this after becoming determined to find Gladys. What do you think of this statement? How does 'seeking' work out for Molly, both personally and professionally?
25. Aunt April is an avid and ambitious scientist who was denied further education and has her research plagiarised by men. But she still continues her work. What motivates her? And how does she influence Molly's ambition?
26. Would you say that the Dunnage family has a history of tragedy? Consider Aunt April's short-lived romance with Hurtle, and the too-late revelation about August's illness.
27. What would have been different in Molly's life if she had married Leander? Is there a version of events where she could have been happy, or did her circumstances guarantee a sad fate?

## Characters

### Molly Dunnage

28. 'You keep saying that, Look. I won't look, or listen, or anything else you command of me.' (p 142) Molly is very forthright, strong and wilful. What does this tell us about Molly's character? Is it a strength or a weakness?
29. After Molly defends a mistreated waitress at a café, she and Leander are abruptly and rudely thrown out by the proprietor. What makes Molly so capable and willing to stand up for others, even when it's hard?
30. Molly is frequently presented as a scapegoat for many characters and their problems. Consider Evan Pettyman and Mr. Addlar. Why do you think this is?
31. Why do young Horatio Farrat and Molly become friends during art class? What parallels can you draw between the two of them?
32. By the end of the novel, Molly is a 'young woman at the end of her best years and defeated, possibly bitter' (p 377). If you've read *The Dressmaker*, how is the younger version of Molly similar or different to the middle-aged Molly we see in *The Dressmaker*? What traits of Molly's do we see in her daughter, Tilly?

### August and April Dunnage

33. As father and aunt, August and April can be seen to be supportive of Molly's fashion dreams. Why do you think they are so supportive, and what are the limits of their support?
34. 'She knew her aunt was apologising to August, saying she should never have abandoned him, and she heard her father's mumbled response, consoling his sister.' (p. 251) Why do you think August and April have such a close and supportive relationship? What made them stay together for all these years?
35. How does August's death affect April, his sister? Do we see any changes in the relationship between April and Molly because of August's death?

### Alathea Pocknall

36. Do you see Alathea as a genuine ally for Molly? How much of her character is selfish, and why might that be the case?
37. How is Alathea trapped by her own circumstances, despite growing up with money and connections? Do you ever feel sorry for her?
38. Before leaving for America, Alathea makes one last visit to the Dunnage's house to pick up letters. August reveals they were from Marguerite. How do you interpret Alathea hiding these letters with Molly's family?

### Leander Behan

39. Leander is caught between his family's expectations and his love for Molly. Do you think he ever gets to express and do what he wants? How do the varying pressures, especially to join the war, affect him?
40. Why was Leander attracted to Molly, despite his mother's opinion of her? How did they complement each other?

### Evan Pettyman

41. Following Alathea's betrayal, Evan blames Molly for his debt and mother's death, to the point of obsession. What does this say about his character?

42. 'Evan felt fear, so familiar to him, and nausea. His buttocks started to sweat and he fought an urge to flee.' (p. 324) Evan is frequently seen looking down on women but is desperately, almost pathetically, afraid of his ageing mother. What role does his relationship with his mother play in how Evan interacts with and views women?
43. Why do you think Evan follows Molly to Dungatar? What does he hope to achieve?

## Setting

### Melbourne, 1914

44. The suffragists march in the streets of Melbourne, as well as an assortment of people from other causes – some of the suffragists are historical figures, while other attendees are fictional. How do these scenes paint the Melbourne of this time period? How do they provide added context for Molly's struggles?
45. The death of Freddy Sidebottom, who struggled after returning home from the Boer War, also adds historical context to the impending war in Europe. What does Freddy's story show about Melbourne at this time, and what protections were in place for the downtrodden and suffering?

### Country towns

46. How are the rural towns of Yaambul and Dungatar – and their inhabitants – portrayed in the novel? How do they differ from Melbourne?
47. Several times throughout the novel, country towns such as Yaambul and Dungatar are alluded to as being places where one can rest or have a break from the city. What do these towns offer that a place like Melbourne cannot?

## Writing style

48. How do the references to classical art and music elevate or impact your reading of the story? Why do you think the author chose to include them? Consider Mozart's 'Queen of the Night' aria from the opera *The Magic Flute*, which is about a queen exhorting her daughter to assassinate her rival or be disowned and cursed.
49. Comparing Molly with *The Dressmaker* and *The Dressmaker's Secret*, do you feel it has the same gothic style? What elements are seen here, and where does it differ? Why might this be the case to convey Molly's story?
50. How is irony used in this novel, to either humorous or tragic effect? For example, consider Mrs Sidebottom's morals, Alatheia's legal troubles, August's death and the impending war. Do you see irony in Molly's story of being overpowered by everything she fights to overcome?