



# Tales of THREAD

*Michelle Rowley explores five fantastic novels  
with dressmaking at their heart*

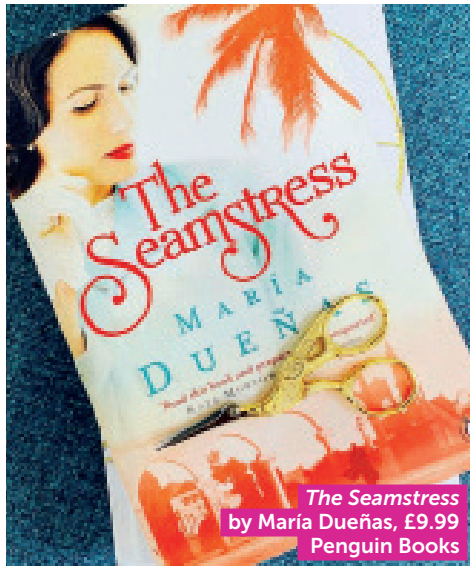


Michelle

**T**oo late in the day to start sewing? Feeling a little under the weather? There are moments of free time when, as much as we would love to be sewing, the time just isn't right to get behind the machine or start cutting out our next big project. When your appetite for sewing needs feeding, but time, space

or mood doesn't permit it, there's a number of great contemporary novels to provide a healthy dose of dressmaking sustenance. Here are five novels I recommend for next time you need to unwind, but without a bobbin insight. With titles such as *The Dressmaker*, *The Seamstress* and *The Dressmaker's Gift*, how can we resist?

World War Two provides the historical backdrop for three of the five novel recommendations, perhaps reflecting the importance of sewing skills during the war efforts. These stories transport us to a Parisian couture house in 1940, the horrors of the dressmaker's workshop at Auschwitz and a seamstress's shop in Franco's Spain.



**The Seamstress**  
by María Dueñas, £9.99  
Penguin Books



**The Dressmaker's Gift,**  
£8.99 Amazon Publishing



**The Red Ribbon** by Lucy Adlington,  
£7.99 Hot Key Books

## THE SEAMSTRESS

by **María Dueñas**

María Dueñas's *The Seamstress*, a former Richard & Judy book club choice, has sold over a million copies to date. It's a story of espionage, love and war with plenty of descriptions of dressmaking and beautiful clothes to delight a dressmaking reader.

Abandoning her seamstress life in Madrid, Sira flees to Morocco with a new lover who betrays her and leaves her penniless. Unable to return to a Spain now engulfed by civil war, she uses her sewing skills to rebuild her life. Her dressmaking leads her to be recruited by the British Intelligence to work undercover in Franco's Spain, carrying out dangerous espionage as she sews beautiful dresses for Nazi wives. It is fascinating to read how she hides Morse code messages in pattern pieces and assistants note down more than just measurements.

The book has also been published under the title *The Time in Between*, a translation from the original Spanish version *El Tiempo Entre Costuras*, the same name as the fantastic Spanish television adaptation. The series is available on Amazon and is worth watching for Sira's incredible wardrobe alone.

## THE DRESSMAKER'S GIFT

by **Fiona Valpy**

Seamstresses hiding secrets during World War Two is also the basis for Fiona Valpy's novel *The Dressmaker's Gift*. Opening with a wonderful description of a beautiful silk dress sewn from off-cuts on display

in a Parisian museum, the reader is left intrigued by its history. We learn the story behind the dress as we follow the lives of three young seamstresses in 1940s Paris and one of their English granddaughters.

After securing a job at a fashion agency, in the very building that her grandmother worked in, Claire sets out to discover the truth about her grandmother's life and those of her friends. The book explores female friendships and relationships, weaving their stories together to give a detailed insight of life in Paris under Nazi occupation and its lasting impact. If you like stories rich with historical detail, have

a love of Paris and an interest in couture, then this is the novel for you.

## THE RED RIBBON

by **Lucy Adlington**

*The Red Ribbon* is a young adult novel written by costume historian, novelist and actor Lucy Adlington. With beautiful descriptions of fabric and dressmaking processes, it has evidently been written by someone with a passion and appreciation for textiles and their importance in our lives.

The novel tells the story of 14-year-old Ella, working as a seamstress





## THE DRESSMAKER

by **Kate Alcott**

Kate Alcott's novel *The Dressmaker* tells the tale of another talented seamstress using her skills to change her life. Tess embarks on a new adventure; working as the personal maid to the famous designer Lady Lucile Duff Gordon aboard the ill-fated Titanic. Rescued separately, they are reunited in New York, where fiery Lady Gordon allows Tess to sew for her new collection.

Tess's dream is in her grasp but rumours concerning her mentor's actions aboard the Titanic leave her with a moral dilemma. Dressmaking readers will appreciate the descriptions of Tess's work in a tale based on a real-life scandal.

## THE DRESSMAKER

by **Rosalie Ham**

Rosalie Ham's gothic-tale *The Dressmaker* tells the story of Tilly Dunnage (played by Kate Winslet in the 2015 film adaptation), a phenomenal dressmaker with an incredible back story. After working as a courtier for the Paris fashion houses, Tilly returns to her hometown in rural Australia to take care of her mother, having left the town years ago under suspicion and disgrace.

It takes Tilly's exceptional dressmaking skills for the suspicious locals to slowly start accepting her again. However, after using Tilly for her incredible talent, the people turn on her again, setting Tilly on the dark path to retribution. The story is dark but anyone interested in 1950s fashion will love the descriptions of the dresses Tilly sews. The time in which she is supposed to have sewn them though, will make you smile knowingly!

All of these reads offer a headstrong talented dressmaker as their central character, what's not to love?

in Birkenau-Auschwitz. Adlington's descriptions of the fabric Ella uses to sew dresses for the guards' wives, such as 'an emerald silk that rippled like cool water under dappling trees' offer a stark contrast to the descriptions of the horror and atrocity occurring around Ella. From the moment Ella is stripped of her clothes and given a "stripey" uniform, we are reminded of the key role clothes play in shaping our identity.

Ella joins the seamstresses of Auschwitz in a bid to survive, now every dress she sews could mean the difference between life and death. "Usually I love the sound of scissors cutting, and the flutter of excitement that goes with it. This time I felt pure fear. Once fabric is cut, it can't be uncut. You have to be sure where you want those flashing blades to slice the weave." As Ella sews she thinks

of her grandmother, their time spent sewing together and her dressmaking tips. Weaving fond sewing memories into the story further emphasises the current hell she is living in.

Despite dealing with an ugly subject matter, it is a beautiful book in both story and presentation. The red ribbon of the title is a gift of hope, which not only weaves its way through the story but also across the printed pages. The hardback edition of the novel is a dressmaker's dream; with pages decorated with scissors, buttons, needles and the eponymous red ribbon.

The final two novels, move away from World War Two and are both titled *The Dressmaker*. They are, however, two very different tales. One lets us set sail to New York aboard the Titanic and the other takes us to a small town in 1950s rural Australia.



**The Dressmaker**  
by **Kate Alcott**,  
£8.99 Little, Brown Book Group



**The Dressmaker**  
by **Rosalie Ham**,  
£8.99 Profile Books

## ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

Michelle is a sewing teacher, writer, maker and passionate reader. Follow her latest dressmaking accomplishments on Instagram [stitchywhitney](#) and [booksatmybedside](#) to see what Michelle is reading next