



Painted Dresses

Patricia Hickman

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In this story of sisterhood and unexpected paths, Gaylen Syler-Boatwright flees her unraveling marriage to take refuge in a mountain cottage owned by her deceased aunt. Burdened with looking after her adult sister, Delia, she is shocked to find a trail of family secrets hidden within her aunt's odd collection of framed, painted dresses. With Delia, who attracts trouble as a daily occupation, Gaylen embarks on a road trip that throws the unlikely pair together on a journey to painful understanding and delightful revelations.

Steeped in Hickman's trademark humor, her spare writing voice, and the bittersweet pathos of the South, *Painted Dresses* powerfully captures a woman's desperate longing to uncover a hidden, broken life and discover the liberty of living authentically, even when the things exposed are shrouded in shame.

Painted Dresses Details

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Mel says

The story and characters were intriguing enough to keep me reading. Gaylen's sister's grammar annoyed me at first, but her child like behavior becomes likeable in the end.

But for me the end becomes too preachy and I didn't know it was a "Christian" type book, which doesn't come through until the end. Not what I would expect of a Christian book, nor would I approve it as such. Even though I don't recall any swear words in it, because (spoiler) the main character cheats on her husband, I wouldn't recommend this book to Christian readers.

Melissa says

I liked this more after finding out that it is largely based on the author's life. In some ways it was a really sad story but at the same time I liked the metaphor's that were throughout the book that could be applied to the trials of life in general. I also am intrigued by learning about people's thoughts and how their experiences lead to the choices they make in life, which this book is full of, so I gave it 4 stars.

Carla Stewart says

One part Southern Fiction. One part mystery. One part journey of self discovery. Painted Dresses brings all my favorite elements of fiction together in a delicious mix of wounded characters, breath-taking prose, and a unique angle to the classic road-trip story.

I was drawn into the story immediately by the tangy descriptions of Gaylen Syler-Boatwright's cousins and aunts who Gaylen encounters on her return to Boiling Waters, North Carolina, for her father's funeral. With her marriage on the rocks and a shaky relationship with her impulsive sister, Delia, Gaylen flees with Delia to a deceased aunt's mountain cottage to ponder their future. There she becomes intrigued with her aunt's collection of "painted dresses" and embarks on a journey to uncover family secrets and the source of her own nightmares.

There are delights at every turn as Delia's antics keep them on the move and one step closer to the truth about their pasts. Along the way, Gaylen discovers the value of living authentically and gains surprising new insights about herself. Painted Dresses is a book to savor for the beautiful writing and to assure the reader of rest and hope even in brokenness. Highly recommended.

One part Southern Fiction. One part mystery. One part journey of self discovery. Painted Dresses brings all my favorite elements of fiction together in a delicious mix of wounded characters and breath-taking prose. Following her father's funeral, Gaylen, whose marriage is in ruins, flees the confines of her family with Delia, her impulsive, downright annoying sister. In their deceased aunt's mountain cottage, they find a collection of "painted dresses" and embark on a journey to uncover family secrets and the source of Gaylen's nightmares. There are delights at every turn as each leg of the journey brings the sisters closer to the truth about their pasts. Painted Dresses is a book to savor for the beautiful writing and to assure the reader of rest and hope even in brokenness. Highly recommended.

Barbara says

Interesting, but several times lost the train of thought and who was speaking. Seemed to jump around a lot. Gaylen and her sister, Delia, went on a road trip, but somehow I missed where they were going until they got there. Also, there was not much religion in the story until you got to the end and that seemed forced. The book was a quick read and intriguing which is why I stuck with it. I would recommend it if you like intrigue and self discovery.

Melissa A Comer says

Too many secrets to unearth, too many fences to mend--and, a long tiresome road trip.

Sharon says

Though the writing was exemplary and evocative, my problems with this book were in two major things and one...well, not as a big deal but still meh.

Firstly, it's just not my kind of story. Life is hard all the time and there's this aura of depression and desperation hanging over everything. But that's just a YMMV thing.

Secondly, I didn't like Delia and she got away with way too much. She was more or less completely unaffected by her consequences and was selfish to the end, even getting off from shooting a woman. So yeah, didn't like her, didn't like that Gaylen put up with her and-- well I mean she's just there to be annoying pretty much. Granted I know some people are just like that but Delia provided no resolution for Gaylen either. Gaylen started off taking care of her sister without being appreciated for it and--ended up the same way, giving her sister the excuse that oh, she just doesn't have it in her. Just no.

Also, granted I didn't do a particularly close reading but, the religious message seemed crammed into the end without much of a set up in the beginning and--well-- didn't really seem to effect her much overall. It's sort of an afterthought, as she only is like at the end, well I guess I'll try God now. Religion plots in books are fine, not my cuppa, but I'll read them if they are well done. Yet it would have been stronger if this was something she'd been pushing and pulling a bit throughout.

I guess that was my main problem with the story was that she's just kind of feckless, driving around with these painted dresses and then just--driving around. They really didn't play that much of a role in the story other than remind of her of a terrible incident when --once she realized it had happened, the nightmares stopped and that... just seems sort of a copout.

Either way the prose was good and kept me reading until the end but I wouldn't read it again.

Rupine says

A journey through flea markets, bargain basements and crazy psycho killers. When gayle arrives in boiling water to bury her father & settle his estate, she learns she inherits the one thing she truly doesn't want, her somewhat unusual and absurd sister Delia who is often blunt and reckless and knows no boundaries. In order to escape jail and death due to Delia's reckless ways they embark on a life changing journey to an old deceased aunts house away from franchised restaurants and strip malls, away from the buzz of city life up to shimmering mountains and luxurious weather. A journey comprising of sausage buns and coffee houses shadowed by sycamore and oak, Delia and gaylen unearth shattering family secrets through a series of painted dresses on canvas they discover in the house amidst concrete yard art, melted snow and winter pansies. Upon returning each painting to it's prospective owner, the two girls discover numerous home truths, the power of strong memory, the importance of goodness and the mark we leave behind at life's final call. I personally love the charchter of Gaylen, despite her boring, somewhat good girl image, we realize that with time she opens up and she too has struggles in life and love just like the rest of us however she doesn't let her seperation with her husband Braden destroy her zest and inner fire which is what kept me interested in the novel long after I read it. The characters are so vivid and almost lifelike sometimes I feel I already know them..

Deb says

This book focuses on Gaylen's internal struggles as she discovers the truth about her childhood and her relationship with her sister.

My biggest complaint about this book is the character of Delia, Gaylen's sister. It appears that Delia is supposed to be mentally challenged in some way, either mild retardation, or some sort of bipolar type disorder. Unfortunately, she just always came across as undisciplined, spoiled, and enabled. As great a job as the author does creating a complex and layered character in Gaylen, she does an equally poor job of creating a character in Delia that you can understand and sympathize with.

Despite that short coming, I enjoyed this book, and had a difficult time putting it down.

Lindsey says

This book was so hard to finish. Nothing about it drew me in, and yet, I couldn't leave it unread because I wanted to know how everything worked out in the end. I kept hoping that it would magically get better (it didn't) and when I finished the final chapter I was left with equal parts bewilderment and relief. The characters were annoying, the plot just kind of skipped all over the place leaving me dizzy, and yet the premise had potential. It was a novel that could have been great, but sadly, somewhere, missed the mark.

Beth says

Nothing to do with art

Theresa says

Those who have not read "Painted Dresses" need to know that there will be some uncomfortable and sad situations in the book.

Gaylen has been having nightmares and can remember as a child, pulling her hair out in handfuls (you can see where this is going, right?) But that is not *all* that is happening in this book.

Ultimately, Gaylen, the main character in the book, is trying to reconcile three huge issues in her life. There is a LOT going on here. Gaylen has separated from her husband, is called back home to her father's deathbed, and from there on in, is going to try to come to terms with her childhood memories that haunt her. Besides all that, Gaylen has been made to feel (for most of her life), responsible for her very irresponsible (and behaviorally challenged), younger sister Delia.

"This isn't the life I wanted, Noleen. I can't seem to get away from my family's volatile way of life. I see someone like you, making simple plans, ordering your life around a family meal and a Christmas tree. You make it look so effortless. How do I get from here to normalcy?"

"Every family has a broken link. But, girl, what makes you think that you're responsible for keeping your sister's life smoothed over?"

"It's what my father did. He passed it on to me."

"You can choose not to do that, to live your own life."

"Just like that? Delia will disintegrate." I imagined her, like Truman, spending the rest of her life in prison.

"People fail one another. I've failed my kids lots of times. They fail me double that. We can't keep one another from choosing to drop to the bottom of life."

Gaylen and Delia find a stash of paintings of dresses that have instructions on them to deliver to various relatives, and since this ties in very neatly with Delia's having to flee the state, they take this on. In the process, Gaylen has a chance to ask her relatives many questions about her childhood.

I did enjoy reading about Gaylen and Delia's travels together. Delia has her own issues of course and this author certainly does not run out of creative plot stratagems!

Delia is quite the challenge. She has no sense of how to conduct herself properly in public and often says (and does) shocking things that embarrass and cause Gaylen to constantly make her excuses for her. Delia is going to cause Gaylen, on top of everything else she is trying to handle, to make the choice to hide her from the law as she flees a shooting. (Delia's behavior really does not impress the reader. At all.)

"I have to see Delia through this trial. I can't leave her to flounder. She wouldn't know what to do," I said.

"Maybe looking out after Delia gives you purpose."

"You make it sound as if I thrive on Delia's dysfunction."

"I didn't say that."

"I do get weary of her...."

"What do you want, Gaylen?" Noleen echoed Braden.

A naked moment of clarity caused me to mutter, "Peace."

Gaylen's almost-ex, Braden, is just a nice guy. I really liked him. I also liked Gaylen's cousin Tim (who ends up getting injured while on tour duty in Iraq). There is just so much happening in this book, but there are also long spurts when nothing much seems to happen (except internally). I am interested in reading more from this author, just to see how her other books compare. Certainly this kept my interest!

How the author ties up all the loose ends is quite creative, and I kept reading to find out what would happen to Gaylen, to Delia... would Delia ever learn? Would Gaylen find out the truth about the past, and how will she handle it? certainly the issues brought up at times were hard for me to read (there are references to adultery, some promiscuity, and child molestation figures big -- although not graphically so -- in this novel.) But there are also good things happening too. They meet some wonderful cousins, Noleen and Jackson, who take them in over the Christmas holidays and make them part of the family. Braden comes through and learns to help Gaylen as he takes on her burdens. Ultimately, Delia and Gaylen learn to handle life as it comes, to roll with the punches, and to move on in their lives.

"I woke up that first morning after I had seen Effie and sent the ashes of that last dress into the ocean. My senses had come awake to the fact that i was no longer dead. I had forgiven my mother. I laid to rest the idea that Truman might ever confess. Whether he did or didn't was not going to change me a bit. That was when I first realized that I was no longer practicing at loving my husband as Tim had said. I lay there in my bed listening to my roommate headed off for parts unknown realizing that I could finally belong somewhere just by my act of will."

Sara says

I felt the author took a bit too long to get into the heart of the story. I thought the family secrets and the sisters' relationship was handled very well and much differently than most other novels.

Calista says

Love, loss, change, adapting, and family. Letting go of the past, forgiving yourself, knowing when to run and when to stay...every theme in this book spoke to me. Beautiful and deep, the story kept me interested, and the characters were more than just fiction to me by the time I finished the book.

Holly (2 Kids and Tired) says

Let's see: well-written...check; compelling...no; interesting...check; did I like it...not really.

I had high hopes that I would enjoy this novel. Set in the south, it's the story of Gaylen and her sister Delia. When their father dies, Gaylen returns to small town North Carolina for the funeral. Her marriage is in disarray and she needs some time away. She and her sister travel to their aunt's mountain cabin for some solitude. Her sister is a bit wacky and attracts trouble.

Gaylen uncovers many questions about her deceased mother and the family secrets. At her aunt's cabin, she discovers a collection of painted dresses: actual dresses her aunt mounted and painted over, and then framed. Each dress is marked with a note of to whom the painting should be given. On the run from a hit man after her sister, the two of them embark on a journey to return the paintings. Along the way they have some adventure and each time they drop off a painting, they find another answer to their family story.

Predictably, they reconcile their own differences, Gaylen and her husband reconnect, and they find out the answers to their questions.

In theory, it sounds like a great story. And, in some ways, it is. I just didn't connect with the characters. I didn't care if Gaylen reconciled with Braden. I didn't care if they ever found Truman and found out why he was really in prison.

I had to force myself to finish it, and truth be told, I skimmed the last part. It was easy to do and I still didn't miss any details.

I can't recommend it.

Deb says

Gaylen's life is all topsy turvy, her father just died, her husband wants a divorce, and she has inherited the care of her free-spirited sister Delia. She embarks on a journey to keep Delia out of trouble, to deliver her mother's painted dresses, and to discover a few things about herself. This story was told in a disjointed style as the reader is plunked down in the middle of it and has to figure out what it going on from Gaylen's rambling narrative. So it took me a while to catch on and I never did really get into it. If you like that kind of writing style give it a try, but otherwise I wouldn't recommend this one.
