



The Dress Lodger

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In Sunderland, England, a city quarantined by the cholera epidemic of 1831, a defiant, fifteen-year old beauty in an elegant blue dress makes her way between shadow and lamp light. A potter's assistant by day and dress lodger by night, Gustine sells herself for necessity in a rented gown, scrimping to feed and protect her only love: her fragile baby boy.

She holds a glimmer of hope after meeting Dr. Henry Chiver, a prisoner of his own dark past. But in a world where suspicion of medicine runs rampant like a fever, these two lost souls will become irrevocably linked, as each crosses lines between rich and destitute, decorum and abandon, damnation and salvation. By turns tender and horrifying, *The Dress Lodger* is a captivating historical thriller charged with a distinctly modern voice. . . .

The Dress Lodger Details

Date : Published January 2nd 2001 by Ballantine Books (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9780345436917

Author : Sheri Holman

Format : Paperback 291 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, European Literature, British Literature, Literature, 19th Century

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From Reader Review The Dress Lodger for online ebook

Adelina says

I thought it was just ok. I mean.... It was interesting to see how all of the characters interacted without anyone really knowing each other but other than that, boring. It did not have what I wanted from the book at all. I wanted late night hunting for corpses, running with the dirt still sticking to the coffins, excitement, chases, and just dead corpses. Instead I got Henry, a boring character that had no substance to him that was haunted by ghosts of his past, but nothing really good or interesting about him. I want to be able to hate or love a character, him...boring. Gustine the main character was just flat. She had this baby that she loved more than anything but---blah. Nothing. Her character did nothing for me at all. Sad to say. I wanted a heroine, and instead I got a tree stump.

Suzanne says

There are many pleasant fictions of the law in constant operation, but there is not one so pleasant or practically humorous as that which supposes every man to be of equal value in its impartial eye, and the benefits of all laws to be equally attainable by all men, without the smallest reference to the furniture of their pockets.

—Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

I can't decide if this is a 3 or 4 star novel. The Dress Lodger was very effective in drawing the reader into the 19th century. But it was creepy. Many times I felt like a peeping Tom.

Gustine is a 15 year old potter's assistant by day and a prostitute in a rented dress by night. Her pimp and landlord, Wilky, has hired a one eyed hag, Eye, to keep her eye on Gustine and the dress. In turn, Gustine hires Wilky's daughter, Pink, to keep an eye on Gustine's "special" infant son and to keep Eye's eye off of the unnamed baby. Pink, whose eyes are lined in red from infection, prefers the company of her father's ferret, Mike. All of this occurs in a boarded up, fetid rooming house which shelters about 30 of Sunderland's poor. Fos, short for phosphorescent, like her decaying jaw from the phosphorus used in painting matchsticks, brings cholera into this shelter. This is just the beginning of the horrors. Remember, the cholera epidemic starts slowly, but soon speeds through house after house, town after town and then country after country. Living conditions, misunderstandings about how disease is dispersed along with superstitions and cultural rites, like wakes, are accurately shown.

Holman also lets us see how the other half lives. Their homes are of course larger, heated, cleaned and attended to, by workers a step or two higher than Gustine. Dr. Henry Chiver, suffers because of a scandal, but has a home with servants, bottles of wine and money in his pocket. Yet, doctors need cadavers to study.

What better place to find them them, but in the slums and grave yards of the poor. It may seem cold hearted and sinister to the bereaved, but science is more important, isn't it? Yet the poor, illiterate and fallen (prostitutes, pimps,etc.) believe that their dead deserve peace in a final resting place.

The creepy part is when Holman takes us along to dinner, whether it be a hardened piece of bread, a fish scrap, a bit of candy or a picnic lunch of chicken and wine. She steers us through the toilet pails which contain urine for washing and the waste slop which is saved in pails. We watch as Gustine, the dress lodger, meets men and is used by them in a corner, against a rock and in a chair next to her infant son. Chiver yearns for Gustine's baby because his heart is visible, for Gustine because her heart is strong and true and because Chiver knows that he is heartless. Why is this creepy? I just felt that I was privy to too much. I tasted the hunger, felt the cold, the heat and heard the silent cries of the disturbed dead. The smell of the sick, the unwashed, the human waste was pervasive. The blindness and lack of feeling by the healers, the doctors, is apparent to lowest class.

Watching Gustine, a single mother, juggling two jobs in order to care for her son, though she has no hopes or goals for herself was voyeuristic and uncomfortable because I read it while sitting on a soft couch while munching on a cookie, safe and warm as it rained outside.

Lyndsey says

As a neo-Victorian novel, *The Dress Lodger* does a great job of immersing the reader in the world of a cholera-infected English town. Most of the characters are interesting and the dialog is engaging. That said, I found the narrative voice particularly annoying and oftentimes distracting. There were only one or two moments in the book where I was truly engaged and emotionally connected to the work. Had I not been required to finish this book for a class, I probably wouldn't have made it past the first couple of chapters.

Anika Ferguson says

So far I love the unique voice this book is told in. VERY original narration! What fun!

I finished this book today. I loved it. It does remind me of Dickens and his dark view of society. The cholera epidemic makes for a bit of a downer! I wish I could study this book with a class. I know there are a ton of metaphors and great comparisons within the story that would be fun to delve deeper into with a group. If it weren't for the prostitution story line I would think it would be great for classroom study. BUT the author doesn't dwell on this in any way. There is much more story to this than that!

Copperfield Review says

For lovers of historical thrillers, *The Dress Lodger* is the novel for you. Bold, sassy, at times dark, sinister, and disturbing, it is the story of a young dress lodger—a prostitute who solicits eager men while wearing a rented fancy gown owned by her landlord, who is also her pimp. During the Cholera epidemic in 1831, young Gustine bravely endures the distresses that life has sent her way because she needs to support her

sickly son. She befriends Dr. Henry Chiver, who has his own problems during the Cholera epidemic. It is a time of great superstition, and the medical profession is the subject of great suspicion. Together, and then separately, Gustine and Henry work to save her son, and they are caught up in a whirlwind of circumstances that will leave your head whirling as you begin to put the pieces of this gothic puzzle together.

The narration is intrusive in a Dickensian way, Gentle Reader, but it is understood and even appreciated by the end of the novel. Well written and cleverly articulated, *The Dress Lodger* is an amazing trip back to 1830s England, with its soot and its rivers and its eclectic cast of characters. Anyone who enjoys the works of Charles Dickens, has an interest in pre-Victorian England, or just loves an engrossing historical novel will enjoy *The Dress Lodger*.

Amanda says

A poised, accomplished, and frequently touching historical novel about a poor part-time prostitute and potters' drudge who crosses paths with a high-minded body-snatching doctor while she's trying to eke out a precarious living in the north of England during a cholera epidemic. Full of quasi-Dickensian lowlifes with strange physical deformities, and practically reeking with atmosphere. The author, who has read widely in Victorian literature, both fiction and nonfiction, has an authoritative grasp of period that only occasionally falters (no one in the nineteenth century would *ever refer to a beau, or a suitor, as a "boyfriend"*). *And she manages to present a situation that's perilously close to bathos -- the prostitute's fierce devotion to her deformed baby, born with his heart outside his body -- both unflinchingly and tenderly, so it brings real tears, not dreadful fake ones. Maybe a little too self-consciously written and structured, with a bit too much fog, stench, and stage dirt -- but absorbing and fully imagined.*

OLT says

This is very good, but don't read it when you're feeling down. I love historical fiction, especially set in 19th-century England. This book is beautifully detailed and tells it like it really was in Victorian England for the lower classes. Relentless poverty, filth and squalor, illness. It's all here and could be a quite a downer but for the exceptional writing and the exceptionally hopeful heroine. It's educational and such an eye opener, especially for the reader of historical fiction mostly about kings and queens. This is better than Dickens' work in depicting the realism of life for the poor. It's worthy of re-reads. I highly recommend it but, as I say, don't read it when you're down.

Diane Barnes says

This was a February book club assignment, from one of our members who loves well-written historical fiction. As far as I'm concerned, she gave us a real winner this time. Pitting poor against rich in a quarantined town during the 1833 cholera epidemic, we learn that some diseases don't give a damn how high born or wealthy you are. Also at issue are the doctors and researchers who employ grave robbers (resurrectionists) to provide dead bodies for students to learn anatomy. Mix this all together with a 15 year old prostitute who is also the mother of a baby with a very rare medical deformity, a doctor who is only concerned with "the greater good", and a cast of supporting characters right out of Dickens, and in my opinion, you have a

whopping good story.

I was intrigued all along with the voice of the narrator, which gave it an otherworldly feel, and the revelation of the identity late in the book was most satisfying.

This book is not for everyone, as evidenced by the other reviews I've read, but I loved it. Our discussion this month will be interesting, to say the least!

David Abrams says

Turn the pages of *The Dress Lodger* and you're turning the dial on a time machine. Destination: England, 1831.

Sheri Holman's novel is one of those rare pieces of historical fiction which thrust you so completely into another time, another place, that the modern world—with all its bright, sparkly conveniences—melts away. Welcome to the Industrial Revolution, dear reader. You'll feel the mud, you'll smell the rotting wharf life, you'll taste the bitter cholera on your tongue. You'll also want to shower afterwards.

The Dress Lodger is part thriller, part character study, part social treatise. But it's all good.

Written in the florid style of Charles Dickens, but with the darkly ick-factor of a modern-day Stephen King, the book follows several characters through the port town of Sunderland during a horrific cholera epidemic in the fall of 1831. Gustine is a potter's assistant by day, a 15-year-old prostitute by night. As she walks the streets of Sunderland looking for a “quick poke” from any man with coins in his pocket, she's trailed by an ugly old hag known only as the Eye. The one-eyed crone is paid by Gustine's pimp to “keep an eye” on her while she plies her private wares. Gustine is one of those prostitutes who's known as a “dress lodger”—each night, she wears a blue gown to attract men. Her pimp hires the Eye spy to make sure the valuable dress isn't stolen. Here's how Holman describes the arrangement:

Dress lodging works on this basic principle: a cheap whore is given a fancy dress to pass as a higher class of prostitute. The higher the class of prostitute, the higher the station, the higher the price. In return, the girl is given a roof over her head and a few hours of make-believe. Everyone is happy.

Except everyone in Sunderland is miserable. The town has been quarantined, strangling the city's economy. Ships must remain off-shore while their cargo rots in the holds below. Meanwhile, most of the residents believe the cholera epidemic is a government conspiracy created to scare the poor classes. Most people don't even believe there's such a thing as the deadly disease. To the working class citizens, doctors are the real villains in early 19th-century England—after all, they're the ones who go around robbing graves and dissecting corpses, all in the name of science.

This brings us to our next character: Dr. Henry Chiver, a zealous young surgeon who's recently fled Edinburgh where he was involved in a famous case of two anatomists—Burke and Hare—who were convicted of murder and grave robbing. Holman paints Henry in some pretty unflattering light—he's selfish, self-righteous and chillingly devoted to the pursuit of science...even at the expense of human life.

Henry and Gustine collide early in the course of the novel as each discovers the other has something they want. For Henry, it's a chance for more bodies as Gustine leads him to corpses she discovers during her street peddling. For Gustine, the possibly deranged doctor represents her last best hope for her infant, a little boy who was born with his heart on the outside of his body (yes, literally...you have to read it to believe it).

The novel is filled with bodysnatching, crude dissections and scenes of primitive medical horror that Hannibal Lecter would probably read like pornography. The weak-stomached are warned that some pages are rather hard to...well, stomach. But, thanks to Holman's incredible eye for detail, the language is always vivid and rich. Here, for instance, is one particularly memorable grave-robbing scene:

Henry drops the body sharply against the coffin and scrambles back to the surface. This isn't happening. Calm down. Calm down, he tells himself. Men far less competent and careful than you have dug up bodies and not been driven mad by it. Reach in, feel under her armpits. Pull. Yes, this is not the smell of rye, but merely a ripening body not yet preserved in salt. This heaviness I understand; it is not a frantic pulling back to the grave but the purely scientific phenomenon of blood pooling in the extremities. He lies flat on his belly and tugs the young woman free of the earth.

Holman's way with words is so good that it overshadows some of the book's problems—namely, the unlikable Henry who takes center stage in the narrative like a raving Dr. Frankenstein, and the pitiable Gustine who blindly and resolutely walks toward tragedy even as we're clenching our fingers where they grip the book and calling out, "No, no, no!" The Dress Lodger ends in a heap of grim, cluttered tragedy which almost literally hurts to read. But I can see Holman's point: this wasn't the best of times, it was the worst of times.

Bev says

Once upon a time, (I don't remember what prompted me to do so...a review I read somewhere, a synopsis of the book, perhaps both of these or neither) I put The Dress Lodger by Sheri Holman on my TBR wish list. And there it sat until I came across a nice, gently used copy at my local library's used book shop. I promptly brought it home and put it on the physical TBR pile(s) gracing my back bedroom. Then, this week I found myself at loose ends. I've finished all my formal book challenges for 2010. It's not yet time to begin those that I've signed up for in 2011 and I wanted a little break from Georgette Heyer. So, I picked up Holman's book in anticipation of finally reading what I expected to be a fine book.

Oh. My. This book has what I can only describe as one of the most god-awful opening two chapters I have ever read. And the weird, omniscient, yet second person point of view is incredibly irritating. Stilted writing. Bore you to tears historical detail about beating clay for pottery for heaven's sake (among every other detail about the early 1800s that you never wanted to know). This book has all the right elements for an extremely fascinating historical read used in every way to their worst advantage.

Set in Sunderland, England during the cholera epidemic of 1831, it follows the stories of a beautiful 15 year old girl who works at the pottery yards by day and as a dress lodger by night (read prostitute in a fancy dress) and a doctor who wants to find a way to provide bodies for research and knowledge to better combat the diseases that face the people of this tragic time. She is trying desperately to support her frail young son....a son who could benefit from the doctor's help. The two lives become entwined....but the suspicion that follows those who dare to be doctors make life difficult.

As I said...if you read the synopsis, this book has all the elements for a terrific historical story. Except the one thing every piece of fiction needs...engaging story-telling. At no point did I ever really care about Gustine and her baby. I didn't really care if Dr. Henry Chiver was able to help her or anyone else. The reader was meant to feel the heartbreak and become invested in the tragedy of these lives. I found myself wishing I

had invested my time elsewhere.

I have always said that I am perfectly willing to praise a book to the skies or reveal how badly it stinks. I have no problem giving a poor review. This one rates half a star...and I'm not sure that this isn't being generous. There are only 16 days left in this year....I will be hard pressed to find another book which will be a greater disappointment to me. At this point, *The Dress Lodger* has the dubious honor of being the worst read of 2010.

This review was first posted on my blog *My Reader's Block*. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

Celeste Noelani McLean says

I adored this book, but couldn't get beyond the first few pages until the second try, over a year later. It sat on my bookshelf until I had absolutely nothing else to read in my house, and in desperation I decided to go ahead and start it again until I could get to the library or bookstore. Two days later, I gave it a 5 star rating here. Not too bad for a book I thought I'd be hating...

The story is dark and gruesome, but the writing is so enveloping and pert that I didn't feel as if I was reading some overwrought, swooning gothic novel. The story moves at a fast clip without sacrificing imagery or robust secondary characters; both can be found in great abundance. I really did feel immersed in the town of Sunderland, trapped by the quarantine and fearful of the cholera epidemic. The town's citizens effectively helped convey the everyday life of our primary characters, and some of the more outlandish actions taken by them had more impact and seemed more realistic when taken in context of their surroundings.

I did find the events at the end to move along a little too quickly, much like the end of Ken Follett's *Pillars of the Earth* when I wanted to relish one antagonist's grisly comeuppance, but just as in that novel, it actually seemed like the point here. Being swept away by the momentum of the mob mentality, there was little time for reflection on the intensity of the action, which was a beautiful contrast to the very descriptive writing used to convey previous dissections of sneakily acquired cadavers. To me, however, the pace did seem a little too frantic. Rushed.

Gustine's son is an interesting plot device rather than a character, but I have to admit that I didn't think that his passing was conveyed with enough intensity. True, it triggers the whirlwind action of the rest of the story and maybe it was the writer's intention to have that moment spark the frantic energy that would take the reader almost to the very end of the book. But still. Same as the action mentioned above.

Speaking of the end, I found the resolution of this story very satisfying. Having learned much about the character of The Eye and her similarities to the young girl Pink, it was wonderful to leave the book feeling hopeful for Pink's future. I found her to be completely annoying throughout the novel and could not even feel sorry for the lack of attention that led to her, well, stupidity. But as I was happy to hear in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that moving away from Longborn and staying close to the Elizabeth's influence at Pemberly helped mature and change Kitty, I was relieved to read that Pink may have had a chance, with Gustine's help and away from her own father's lodging house. And, in the end, I felt horribly sorry for The Eye, misunderstood, even by herself, until the very end.

If you've picked up this book and couldn't get into it immediately, I encourage you to at least give it a good

try again. That is, if frank discussion of human dissection and grave robbing isn't reason enough for you to turn away.

Isabella says

I would probably also put this at 3.5 stars, but when forced to choose, I bumped it up instead of down. It was a really interesting book, if confusing in certain parts.

The Good: Gustine was a kick-ass heroine. She could have had a depressing, pitiable, weak position, but she didn't. She was a prostitute. She worked two jobs. She was dirt poor. Her baby was on the edge of death. And yet...and yet, she feels no shame, she needs no pity or charity, she unsqueamishly views death and pain and deals with them. She is pretty darn awesome. Her weakness comes not from loving a man (annoying, at best) but from viewing a man as a miracle worker who could save her son (more interesting). She never falls desperately in love. She can be all-business or a sweetheart mother or an adolescent, but she is always strong. And that's my favorite thing to see. Other good: For the most part the writing was beautiful, sometimes ironic or funny, and enjoyable to read, and I loved Pink and Mike (I didn't like him as a person, but rather as a character). I liked seeing all the different perspectives--and I sympathized with Audrey and Pink and Gustine and even Henry. I was able to feel sympathy for almost all the characters, which was cool, even when I didn't always *like* all the characters. I liked how the central conflict wasn't a simple good-guy-versus-bad-guy scenario. I also think there's something a little beautiful about a book that inevitably ends in tragedy, as this one does.

The Less Good: *includes some spoilers* Sometimes the narrative became confusing or off-putting, especially when the spoke in second person and almost seemed to be switching between past and present tense. Also, I was a little disgusted by some of the dissection, but I guess that was kind of the point. The ending, while not necessarily rushed, had a different feel than the rest of the book, which I wasn't sure I liked as much. It was very distant from the characters. Yes, there were many details about the time that could be exhaustive to other readers, but I wasn't bothered by it. The cholera was described in a way that made it seem a little unrealistic (not being an expert on the subject, I can't judge, and it probably was described well, but it just felt a little fantastical). The only other thing I wasn't fond of was the "revelation" of who the narrator was. It just wasn't as cool as I think the author expected it to be.

Anyway, I liked the book overall. I stayed up pretty late finishing it, and was able to lose myself in it, despite the sometimes-awkward narration. I don't read that much historical fiction, but I would recommend it to people who are interested in history.

Terence says

A very strong 3.5+ stars, which I'm rounding up to 4 because I enjoyed it more than other recent books I've given 3 stars to (damnit GR, give us $\frac{1}{2}$ stars or more of them to play with!).

The Dress Lodger takes place in 1831 in Sunderland, an industrializing seaport on the northeast coast of England, as cholera gains its first foothold in the kingdom. It's a decidedly grim novel, uncompromising in showing the desperate and dehumanizing poverty of the city's denizens, and the callow and callous indifference of the better off.

Holman follows six characters:

Gustine: Gustine is the “dress lodger” of the title. (A dress lodger is a prostitute who rents a fine dress to attract a better class of customer.) She’s the fifteen-year-old mother of a boy who’s born with an ectopic heart – it’s outside his ribcage, protected only by the skin and muscle of his chest. Since age nine, Gustine has worked six days a week in a pottery factory, and now to support her son, she walks the streets wearing a dress rented from Whilky Robinson, her landlord and pimp. Her desire to secure a safe life for her child seems within reach when she meets Dr. Henry Chiver.

The Eye: The Eye is Gustine’s “shadow,” hired by Whilky to follow the girl so she won’t steal the dress. An ancient, one-eyed hag, The Eye becomes the focus of Gustine’s hatred, anger and fear for her child’s life as she believes the old woman is responsible for the baby’s deformity and wants to finish the job started at his birth by killing him.

Dr. Henry Chiver: Chiver was a student of Dr. Knox, the Edinburgh physician who benefited from the murderous acquisitions of Brendan Burke and William Hare, serial murderers who provided doctors with bodies for dissection. His reputation ruined, Chiver has moved to Sunderland, where his fiancée’s uncle, also a doctor, lives. Circumstances conspire to bring Chiver and Gustine together one night where he tells her of his need for bodies and she realizes he could be the means to save her baby.

Audrey Place: Audrey is Chiver’s fiancée. She’s only a couple of years older than Gustine but her life has been comfortable and fenced off from the horrific conditions most Sunderlanders live under. Intelligent but naïve, her innocent charitable efforts have far reaching and tragic consequences.

Whilky Robinson: Robinson is the ignorant, brutal landlord of 9 Mill Street and Gustine’s pimp. He’s a pretty despicable character and it’s not easy to muster much empathy for the man but Holman avoids making him a cardboard villain.

Pink: Pink is the eight-year-old daughter of Robinson, called so because she has conjunctivitis, and her reddened eyes constantly weep tears and pus.

The story is told in a gently sardonic, third-person omniscient voice that we learn toward the end is the collective voice of the dead poor who fill the paupers’ graves of Sunderland’s churches.

I enjoyed the book. Perhaps because – despite it’s depressing subject and depraved plot – hope remains. Gustine and The Eye achieve epiphanies of understanding and compassion that lift them above the self-centeredness and/or apathy of their neighbors. There’s no happy ending but they are better people for what they’ve endured.

The only false note I found in Holman’s Gustine comes in the final pages in the final confrontation between Gustine and Chiver. Gustine’s baby has died from the cholera, and Chiver has stolen his body from the cemetery. Gustine has come to his house looking for the body and is in the process of trashing the home when the following exchange occurs:

“‘If it were for the greater good, I would so willingly,’ he says.

‘The greater good?’ Gustine shrugs. ‘Good and Evil are opposite points on a circle, Dr. Chiver. Greater good is just halfway back to Bad.’” (p. 266)

I don't have a problem believing that an uneducated, fifteen-year-old girl could intuitively grasp such a concept but I don't think an uneducated, fifteen-year-old girl could express it so eloquently and assuredly. In this case, I think the author's voice displaced the authentic voice of her character. But aside from that minor discordance, I very much liked *The Dress Lodger* and would recommend it.

Katie says

I read the first half of this book in a tremendous rush, totally engrossed by the story and both horrified and fascinated by Holman's depiction of the cholera epidemic of 1831. I'm not sure exactly what happened in the second half of the book, but somehow the spell was broken. Holman (inconsistently) employs a fair amount of narrative trickery that didn't seem to add much to the book, and the lack of subtlety became frustrating after a while. I've recently read several books set in the drawing rooms of the Victorian upper classes, so it was fascinating to get a look at the other side of life at that time--disease, prostitution, foul living conditions, crushing poverty, social unrest--but it's unfortunate that Holman's book wasn't as good as it could have been. Still, there are powerful images in *The Dress Lodger*, particularly of the toxicity that seems to lie in wait in every part of the book... Also, cholera is no joke. I didn't know very much about the disease before reading this book, but it is not to be taken lightly! I was amazed to learn about the way cholera swept over Europe in waves throughout the 19th century, and the way a person who is infected with it can go from perfectly healthy to dead in a matter of hours.

All in all, the book is a decent, mostly engaging read. The prose is a bit heavy-handed at times and is weighed down by Holman's odd narratological choices. Holman's ambition seems to be greater than her talent, but the book is worth reading nonetheless.

L. says

Absolutely brilliant. So utterly and absolutely brilliant. Historical fiction like this is so very, very hard to come by. One of the best modern books I've really enjoyed in a long time. I read this in two sittings, the first one of eight hours where I could not put it down. One of those books that I set down after finishing and had to catch my breath and let everything sink in. One of those books where all the threads tie together at the end and you just marvel at her narrative skill. Nothing is wasted. Everything is relevant, everything dragging to a heart-pounding conclusion.

Holman's narrative voice makes me weak with envy. It's like reading a book where all the best things about Dickens are condensed into one, excellent story. She remains witty and wickedly playful in spite of the horrifying things she describes with such vivid clarity that I'm still shaking images from my head. I want to pick it up and read it again.

In short, beautifully horrifying.

Karo says

I've recently embarked on a historical novel kick -- a satisfying read with the added bonus of learning a little chunk of history, what could be better? I came across Sheri Holman's novel on the "paperback favorites"

table when I was browsing in a local bookstore. It looked intriguing, so I thought that I'd give it a try. The book is about a 19th century cholera epidemic in an English town, and features Gustine, a poor girl with a very ill child who works as a potter's assistant by day and a prostitute by night -- she is provided with a fancy blue dress to attract higher-end clientele (hence the title). Also featured is Henry Chivers, a young doctor who is trying to escape a grisly past. It's really the secondary characters that make the book though -- Eye, the old woman who follows Gustine around to make sure she doesn't abscond with the dress; Pink, the daughter of Gustine's conspiracy-theory crazed landlord who is desperate for a little love; and Mike, the landlord's prize ferret, treasured above all, and much above Pink.

The novel is not a cheery one; death lurks around every corner and loathsome characters abound. Even each of the main characters is deeply flawed in some way, and the reader is left without anyone to truly cheer for. Dr. Chivers, especially, is hardly the hero the reader might have initially expected him to be. Holman employs an interesting technique to tidily wrap up the plot, leaving open the possibility that it *doesn't* get tidily wrapped up. She is a gifted writer; the novel is darkly humorous at times, and very well researched. Also recommended is *A Conspiracy of Paper* by David Liss.

Jamie Collins says

The best part of this strange little book is the writing. I see that some readers are annoyed by the second-person present point of view and the "dear reader" business, but I was charmed by the quirky narration. The prose is rich and atmospheric; the story is a gripping melodrama, certainly over-the-top in places, but crammed with fascinating historical details which will make you glad not to have been born poor 200 years ago.

The setting is northern England in 1831, just as the "cholera morbus" enters the country, and not long after the infamous Burke & Hare were discovered to be murdering people in Edinburgh in order to supply corpses to Dr. Knox for dissection. The poor are terrified of grave-robbing doctors; the doctors are afraid of what will happen when the plague encounters the unspeakable living conditions of the poor.

Janet says

This summer I'm working through books handed to me throughout the year by those I love with their breathless assurances that this is "the best book EVER." My friends are many wonderful things but hardcore readers they are not. So when they hand me a book I'm relatively certain it is one of maybe two they've read in the past year. Books selected in the airport on the obligatory trip home to visit the family.

As a desperation read, The Dress Lodger fares better than most. Set in Sunderland, England the central character is the cholera epidemic of 1831 and its impact when the city is put on lockdown by a government mandated quarantine. It is a story of economic and class struggle underscored by the rhetorical science *vs.* morality struggle.

The dress lodger is 15 year old Gustine, potter's assistant by day and prostitute by night - she's resourceful, flinty and unsentimental. It warrants mention that the term, dress lodger, refers to a rented dress whose sole function is to give the impression of belonging to a higher class thereby attracting a better clientele. Since 'renters' had a propensity to bolt chaperones were often assigned to shadow them ensuring the dress's safe

return. Gustine has named her chaperone 'The Eye' and she's as multi-faceted as any misunderstood villain penned by Dickens, Collins or Hardy. Representing the privileged is Henry Chiver, a young surgeon, with a dark backstory and warped moral compass.

Holman's so deftly captures early 19th c. England that I actually found myself verifying the 2000 publication date. While this wasn't a story of significant appeal to me it did keep me turning the pages and I would definitely read another novel written by her.

And those incredible friends who don't read so much? They're the ones who lift their sorry asses off the couch to hike Mt. Rainier, kayak in Patagonia and build wells in fifth world countries. Sometimes I get to tag along when they go out for ice cream....

Tippi says

I was drawn to this book by certain keywords in its description, such as "cholera" and "grave-robbing." Sadly, the potential of the material was never fully reached; it was just the backdrop for a poorly written piece of middle-school level tripe.

The narrative method is forced and overdone, too clearly a gimmick. "We walk down the street and see you, friend. Will you tell us about our main character? For in a story such as this, we must not trust ourselves, because blah blah blah." Yawn. Her reasoning behind the use of a plural narrator did not impress me. I think it's meant to conceal the fact that her writing isn't strong enough to stand alone.

Also, I hate novels with unnecessarily vulgar language and imagery. It must be a reliable method for drawing in light readers of pop-fiction, but it just makes me feel like I'm wasting my time on trash.

When reading the author's remarks at the end (among the discussion notes) I had to admit that she accomplished everything she set out to do with her characters. In the beginning, I did sympathize with the doctor, and feel his frustration at the ignorance and superstition which forced him into grave-robbing and increased the spread of the disease. But by the end, Holman had slowly turned things around to show how unfeeling and judgmental those "progressive" doctors were, and he got his comeuppance in a creative and brutal way I didn't see coming.

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Two stars, because of the ending and the snippets about medicine.

Amalia Gavea says

This is a novel that takes you in the heart of Victorian London. The nightmarish prose, Dickensian and haunting at the same time, introduces Gustine, a very interesting character, and Dr. Chiver who is controversial and fascinating. At the heart of the story lies Medicine, and the well-known practice of stealing the unfortunate dead bodies in order to perform autopsies. There are echoes of the Burke & Hare events and the coming of the plague that troubled Britain in 1831 claiming about 52,000 lives. Amidst the bleakness, Gustine must protect her baby, an extraordinary child with a curse that is also a gift.

One of the best books set in Victorian England, a time of a society full of progress and tumultuousness.
