

Holman's novel an enthralling read, driven by unique storyline

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COPY EDITOR

"Grave: A place where the dead are laid to await the coming of the medical student."

Any novel that uses Ambrose Bierce's "The Devil's Dictionary" for its epigraph had better be good. And Sheri Holman's "The Dress Lodger" is very, very good.

The problem with modern historical fiction is that the author usually never does a good job at describing the time period and setting. Let's not forget that the past wasn't so pretty or romantic as the movies would have us believe.

In "The Dress Lodger," Holman does an amazing job at directing us through Sunderland, England, circa 1831. Every smell, the hints of dirt and disease, dozens of social injustices and every other detestable and perverse variant of human living conditions is rendered in gritty, believable detail. You'll almost want to take a shower after reading this novel.

But Holman's descriptions of the past neither overtake nor compete with her characterizations and plot. She could have really went overboard with certain aspects of this novel, but she keeps it all in an elegant and beautiful stride.

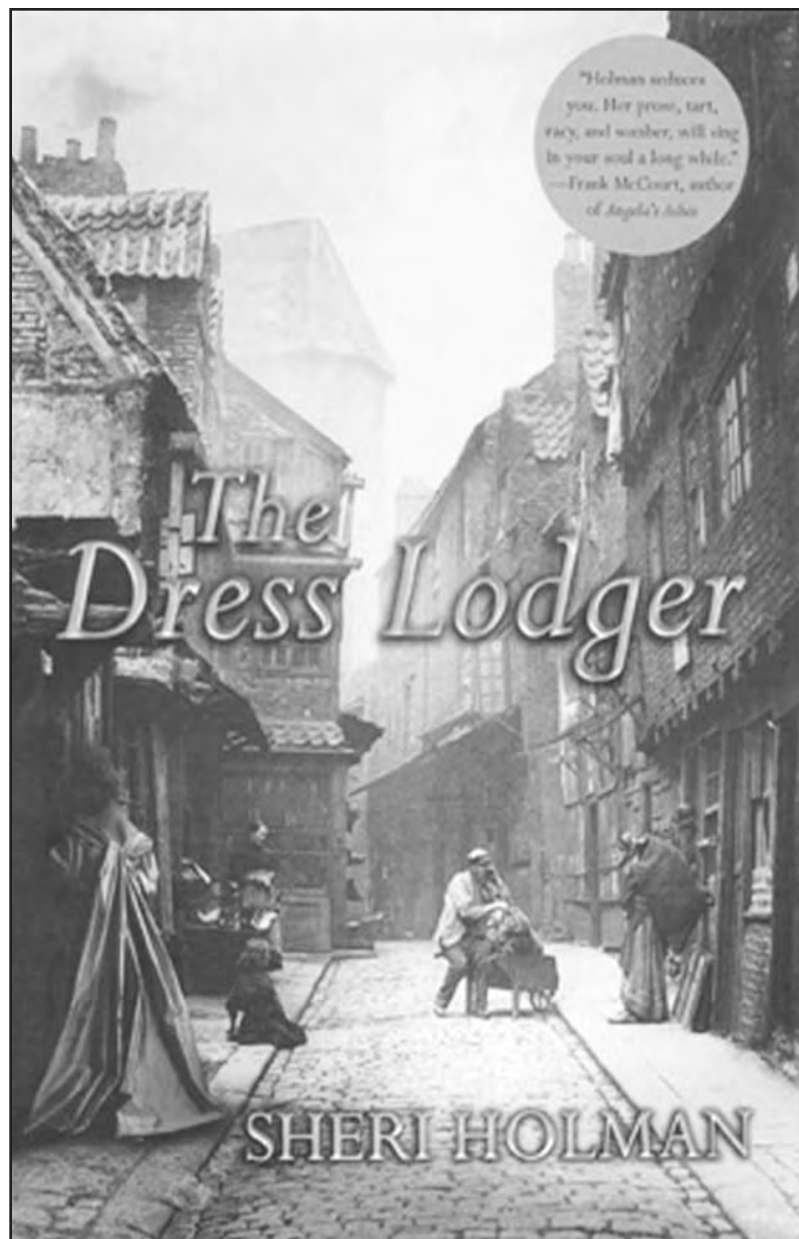
The protagonist of the novel is 15-year-old Gustine, the dress lodger of the title. By day she's a meager potter's assistant, by night, a prostitute. Her pimp, Whilky Robinson, also happens to be her landlord. He allows her to stay in his run-down inn by letting her rent a beautiful blue gown to wear while she's walking the streets. The idea is that by pretending to be a high class lady, she'll attract high-class (i.e., rich) clients.

Whilky doesn't completely trust Gustine with the dress, though, so he has a mysterious old woman — known simply as the Eye — follow her while she works, making sure she's staying on task and not ruining the expensive gown.

Gustine eventually crosses paths with Henry Chiver, an overly ambitious young surgeon who's obsessed with the human heart. Henry recently fled from Edinburgh under a cloud of doubt after his name was implicated with murderers and grave robbers.

Henry is quite desperate to have his reputation cleansed by almost any means necessary. He hopes to make some sort great medical discovery, but in order to do experiments and keep his restless young students interested in their studies, he needs a fresh body to work on.

Unfortunately for Henry, the Anatomy Act, which would allow doctors to legally obtain corpses,



has yet to be passed in Parliament. To make things worse, the cholera-stricken public is suspicious of seemingly all doctors and is terrifying itself with all the grave-robbing gossip.

Gustine eventually helps Henry out by directing him to a corpse she's found washed up on the beach. But later, Henry demands something else of her: Her nameless baby has a strange heart condition that sets Henry's mouth watering at the very thought of treating him. This is just the sort of case that would make his name, but Gustine is protective of her son to a fault.

The relationship between Gustine and Henry, and how they each perceive their relationship, is well developed and thought provoking. There are several moral questions attached to this relationship, and Gustine's and Henry's true characters are revealed through their interactions with each other.

Holman has a way with her characters. None are stereotypical and each has a surprise waiting for them. It's especially amazing to see Henry's downfall unraveling right before him, though he's oblivious to it.

He's a character that starts out amiably enough—he's a snob, but he still wants to keep the town safe

from cholera—but when we finally see his true colors, and how he's made to pay for them, it's nothing short of genius.

Gustine is a true heroine, one we constantly hope the best for. She has a hard life but she lives it entirely for her young son. Her attachment to him is endearing, as is Gustine herself.

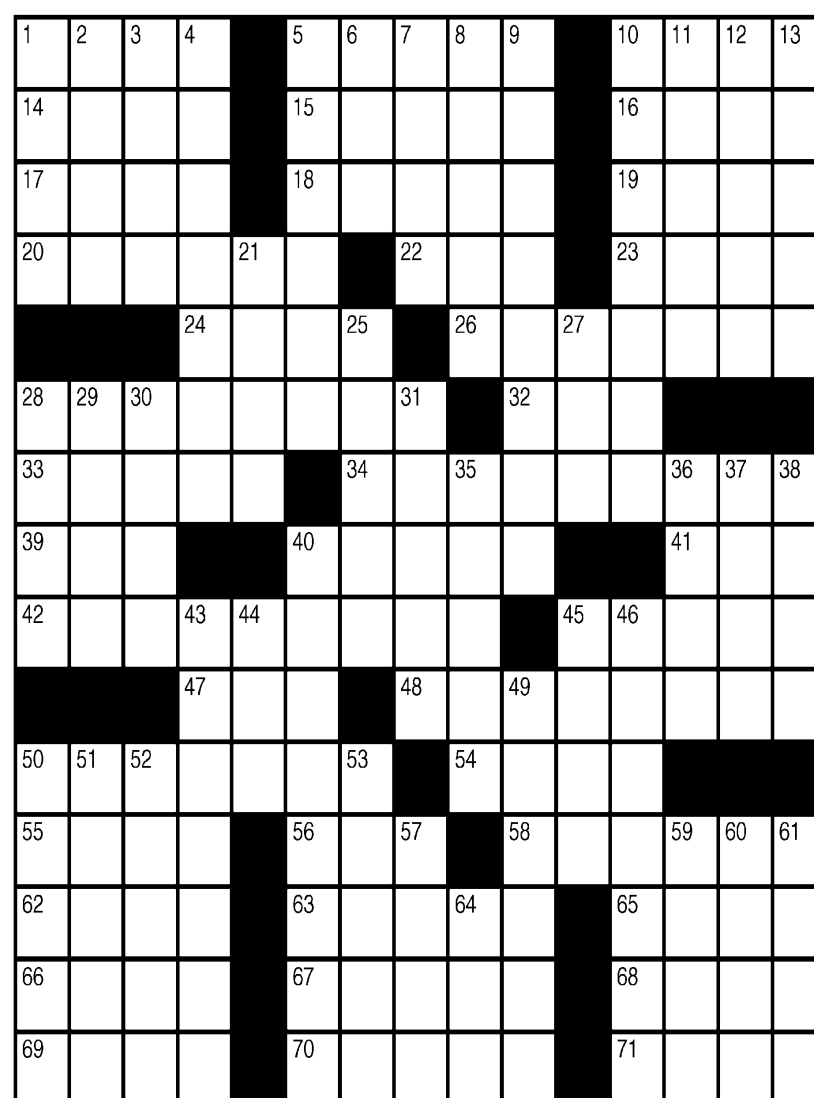
The rest of the characters are great, from Whilky's mentally-retarded daughter Pink (who thinks she's a rat) to the Student of Life, who adds some well-timed comic relief to the tale. Even the mute and dogged Eye, we learn, was once a happy lass.

There are delightfully ironic twists and turns throughout the novel, and the ending ties everything up nicely. Holman's narration is clear and tight and wonderfully evocative. Once you realize who the narrator is, you'll be floored, as you will be during the second chapter, when we learn all about Henry's unpleasant past.

"The Dress Lodger" is simply amazing in every sense of the word. With this novel, Holman shows not only can she create a bunch of interesting (and intersecting) ideas, but she can really tell a great story about interesting (and intersecting) people.

Crossword

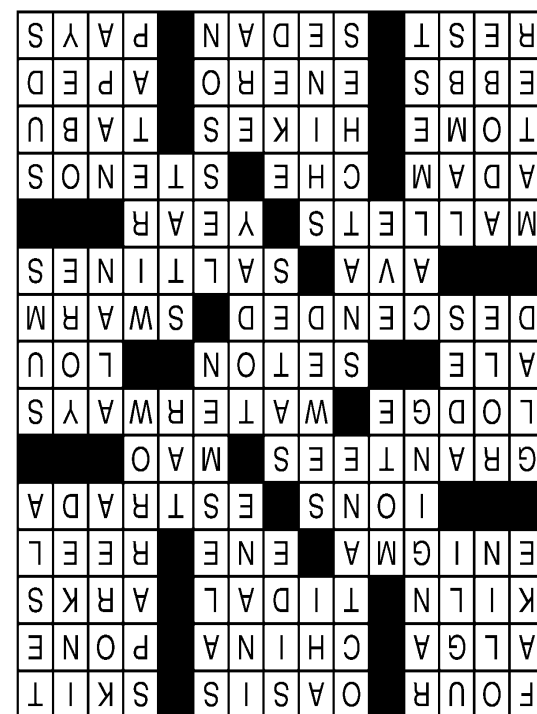
- ACROSS
- Two squared
 - Desert spring
 - Revue part
 - Pond scum
 - Porcelain plates
 - Johnnycake
 - Drying oven
 - Kind of bore or wave
 - Places of refuge
 - Perplexing puzzle
 - Compass dir.
 - Stagger
 - Charged particles
 - Erik of "CHiPs"
 - Financial aid recipients
 - __ Zedong
 - Rustic inn
 - Rivers and such
 - Pub drink
 - __ Hall University
 - Singer Reed
 - Climbed down
 - Bunch of bees on the go
 - Artie's Gardner
 - Some crackers
 - Croquet needs
 - Twelve months
 - P.D. James' Dalglish
 - Ernesto Guevara
 - Memo takers
 - Scholarly volume
 - Trips in the woods
 - No-no
 - Flows out
 - Calendario starter
 - Mimicked
 - Remainder
 - Family car
 - Foots the bill
- DOWN
- Phony
 - Lena or Ken
 - Wrinkled citrus fruit
 - Varying within specified limits
 - Gas pump figure
 - Type of tuna
 - Lateral part
 - Silly
 - Peddlers
 - Small songbird
 - Chosen, now
 - Signed, as a contract
 - Inventor Nikola
 - Minute spot
 - Used a needle
 - La Brea pit fill
 - Elated
 - Part to play
 - Summer coolers
 - Fills to excess
 - The present
 - Alda of "M*A*S*H"
 - Yesteryear
 - Bottom-line numbers
 - Seizes illicitly
 - Most tranquil
 - Ms. Arden
 - RBI, e.g.
 - Bug



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3/28/07

Solutions



- "A __ from Aloes"
- Alma __
- Baked brick
- Gentle ones
- Geoffrey Rush movie
- __ out a living (scraped by)
- California valley
- Comply
- Lather
- Period

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