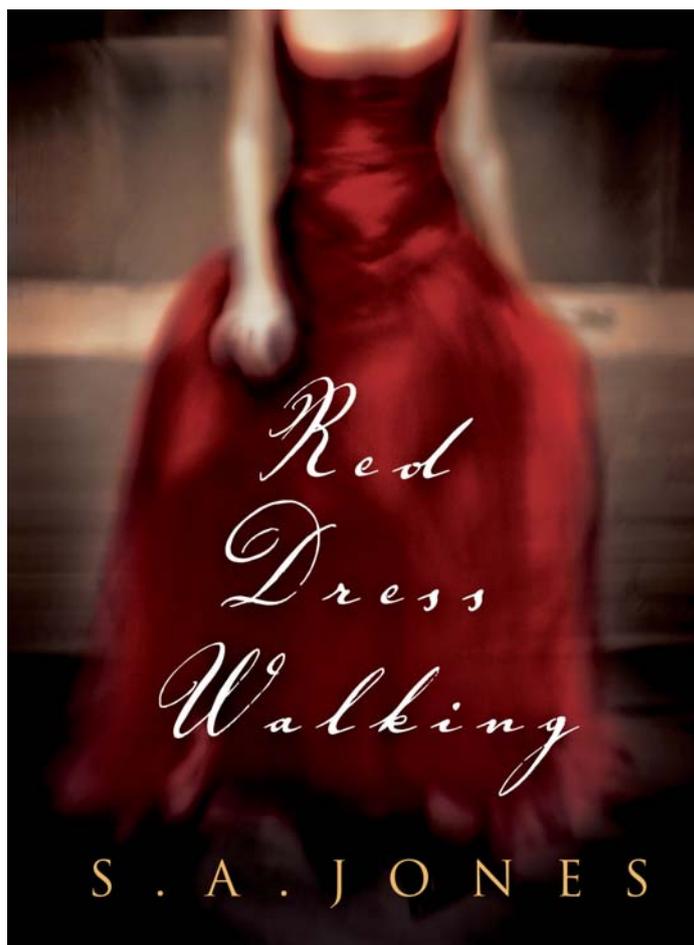


ALLEN&UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

When Will gives Emily a stunning, deeply sexy red dress, somehow everything changes ... a playful, modern, engrossing novel of ideas, books, love, relationships, breakdowns and break-ups.

The dress haunts my steps. Flashes of red on the street mesmerise me. I am alive to red cars, red shoes and the red of Suella's lipstick. It is silken laudanum that has thrown a distorting film over everything. The dress flutters through my dream life like a taunting red banner. Dreams innocuous and surreal are sure to be punctuated by a crimson flash. Sometimes there is just the barest hint of it so I am not even certain that it flared at all.

This is the story of an intimate circle of friends and one couple, Will and Emily, who are very much in love with each other. But one day Will gives Emily a stunning, deeply sexy red dress, and somehow everything changes.

A thought-provoking novel of beauty, books, love and desire, *Red Dress Walking* is a playful, clever and sexy novel about men and women, breakdowns and break-ups, the fierce friendships that women have, and what certain books mean to us.

About the author

S.A. Jones was born in England, moving to Australia at three years of age. At fourteen she acquired the nickname that would haunt her forever after - "Serje" - a legacy of a childhood obsession with all things Russian that she has never quite surmounted.

Serje has enjoyed an eclectic career including academic, public servant, management consultant, vocalist for a rock band and freelance researcher.

To date, Serje has completed two novels and is currently working on her third. She is also branching out into non fiction, working on the tentatively titled *How to Read: A Guide for the Curious, Ill-Educated and Downright Intimidated*.

Her great passions in life are reading, writing and quaffing chardonnay with her girlfriends. She is a great advocate of Book Group, which enables her to enjoy all three passions simultaneously.

S.A. Jones on writing *Red Dress Walking*

What prompted you to write *Red Dress Walking*?

I must admit I dread this question because if I am to answer it truthfully I sound horribly pretentious and artsy - even to myself. In all honesty, I write because I am compelled to. I always have been. I've dabbled in poetry, criticism, academic writing and drama as well as prose. I find it difficult - not to say impossible - to explain why I write. I do it because I have to. Because I can't imagine not doing it.

My subjects come from all manner of sources. Some of *Red Dress Walking's* themes grew out of ethico-sexual

dilemmas I'd been wrestling with for a long time. I had completed a PhD in gender studies and history at the University of Western Australia that explored modern discourses about pornography. I was interested in questions around desire, personal subjectivity, power, sexual ethics and corporeality. When I came to the end of the thesis my mind remained unquiet. I felt as if I hadn't reached the logical conclusion of my thinking. I began exploring the themes in more narrative terms and that is how *Red Dress Walking* was born. Fiction allowed me a much richer, more intimate canvass than academic writing did. I also felt that it was only through fiction that I could enter with good grace into what it is to be a modern man. I wanted to understand the Williams of the world and how they relate to their own desire for women.

Red Dress Walking is also my homage to the great love of my life: literature. I relished creating Emily because she is the ultimate reader. So much a reader in fact that it tips her into a kind of pathology which I thought begged some interesting questions about art and subjectivity. My model for this conundrum was Emily Bronte (hence the character's name) who seemed to submerge herself into her visionary/fictional world so entirely that 'reality' barely impeded on her. I love the description she gave of a trip to York with her sister Anne where she mentions not one word about the Abbey or the scenery and instead lists all of the characters (from their fictional world of Gondal) that they acted on the journey.

I myself found it increasingly difficult to 'come back to' the 'real world' when I was immersed in my writing. I found (and still find) the stubborn requirement to be worker+housekeeper+daughter+friend Serje gut-wrenchingly difficult at times. The idea of total effacement/escape into fantasy beguiles me. So I am a bit conflicted in my views on Emily. On the one hand I think she is most functional at the start of the novel, before her breakdown. She so effortlessly assimilates her visions/art with the real/experience. At the same time her total immersion in art barricades her from intimate connections with other people. By the end of the novel, Emily has embraced her subjectivity. But Art has become sweaty hard work. I'm not sure which predicament I think preferable.

Was it difficult finding and maintaining the voices of the two different characters?

Once I felt I understood the characters, maintaining their individual voices wasn't hard. What was hard was moving my personal sympathies between Emily and Will. In retrospect I think I was technically ambitious with this, my first novel, because I had to develop two complex characters with very distinct personal lexicons each telling the same story from their unique perspective. Having found the characters, speech patterns and world view I had to move between and around them in a way that pushed the plot, was clear on the temporal relationship of various events and didn't tip the scales of sympathy too much towards any one character. I think I failed in my first few drafts because my readers always said that Emily was much more sympathetic than William. (Most of my readers are women so I wonder if this accounts for it!). I felt I had the balance right when my readers said they felt equally for both characters.

The structure, whereby I alternate between the two voices, made me feel almost schizophrenic at times. I developed the habit of closing my eyes and taking a few deep breaths as I sat at the computer to help me submerge myself into either Emily or William's psyche. As a general rule, I only wrote from one character's perspective during a single writing session. When I wrote I excised that part of myself that knew what the other character was thinking and feeling. When I wrote Emily, I kept William at arms length, almost pretending I had no acquaintance with him.

Similarly with Emily. When it came time to write the next chapter it was sometimes wrenching to immerse myself in the other character and slough off my former sympathies. Yet although it was technically challenging I think it works a lot better than a third person narrative would. I hope that the reader can empathise equally with both characters because I think both of them tell the complete truth as they see it.

Is the story autobiographical?

It is to the extent that I am passionately and personally interested and invested in the themes that I explore.

But is it a true and faithful representation of events in my life?

No.

Only one event in the book is drawn from life and that is the protest where Emily meets Will. When I was at university I went to the Network of Women Students Australia conference (NOWSA). The conference was mostly stimulating and provocative but the climax was supposed to be a protest at a particular office building. Everything in the book - from the ridiculous discussion about symbols to the wearing of the stockings on the head and the storming of the wrong building - is drawn from life.

The whole incident was just too deliciously farcical not to find its way into print.

Suggested points for discussion

☞ What is the significance of the red dress? Why do William and Emily find it so impossible to 'connect' their different interpretations?

☞ William argues that he alone really understands the deeper significance of E.M. Forster's famous phrase 'only connect' and that Emily understands it only on a superficial, philosophical level. Is this true?

☞ Emily's world of visions has several key characters - Lydia Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, Sylvia Roehampton from *The Edwardians* and the Arcadios from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Why would Emily gravitate towards these particular visions?

☞ In the chapter 'The Unseen Guest', Tash exhorts the dinner party guests to let Katya 'speak for herself'. Does Katya ever 'speak for herself'? Or is she always a cipher for other characters' insecurities and desires?

☞ How are we to understand the 'haunting' of the dress?

☞ Do you agree with Emily that 'beauty unhinges us all'? How?

☞ By the end of the story Emily has become more conventionally 'feminine'. At the airport, William notices that she is wearing earrings and lipstick and is visually arresting to the waiter. Has Emily capitulated to masculine concepts of desire? Or has she become a more expressive, more 'present' human being?

☞ At the close of the book Emily suggests that she will wear the red dress to the dinner party hosted by her

father and Milicent. Considering her wardrobe options, Emily says 'The occasion, though, perhaps calls for something a degree or two more complex. Something more steeped, more compromised and blooded. Like the rusted, chafing chain mail one is wearing when the bugle sounds to mark the end of battle.' How accurate is this as a description of the dress?

Recommended Reading

The Blind Assassin, Margaret Atwood (2000)

The Broken Book, Susan Johnson (2004)

Lovesong, Nikki Gemmel (2002)

Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë (1847)

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, Mary-Ann Schaffer (2008)