



# The Doll Factory

*Elizabeth Macneal*

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**'A sharp, scary, gorgeously evocative tale of love, art and obsession'** Paula Hawkins, author of *The Girl on the Train*

*The Doll Factory*, the debut novel by Elizabeth Macneal, is an intoxicating story of art, obsession and possession.

London. 1850. The Great Exhibition is being erected in Hyde Park and among the crowd watching the spectacle two people meet. For Iris, an aspiring artist, it is the encounter of a moment – forgotten seconds later, but for Silas, a collector entranced by the strange and beautiful, that meeting marks a new beginning.

When Iris is asked to model for pre-Raphaelite artist Louis Frost, she agrees on the condition that he will also teach her to paint. Suddenly her world begins to expand, to become a place of art and love.

But Silas has only thought of one thing since their meeting, and his obsession is darkening . . .

## The Doll Factory Details

Date : Expected publication: May 2nd 2019 by Picador

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Author : Elizabeth Macneal

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## From Reader Review The Doll Factory for online ebook

### Pauline says

The Doll Factory by Elizabeth Macneal is the story of Iris who works in the Doll Factory and dreams of being an artist. She becomes a model for the artist Louis Frost and she embraces the world of art. Iris meets Silas who becomes obsessed with her and the story becomes very dark and sometimes scary. I would like to thank NetGalley and Pan Macmillan for my e-copy in exchange for an honest review.

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### Julie Parks says

THE DOLL FACTORY was captivating and authentic. Set in historic London of 1850, it is both dark and beautiful.

The story can become scary at times but overall it's a joyride for your imagination.

Thank you NetGalley for the chance to read this in exchange for my honest review.

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### Nadia says

#### 3.5 stars

Set in Victorian London in 1850, Elizabeth MacNeal's debut novel, the Doll Factory, depicts a story of Iris, who despite her parents disapproval decides to follow her dream of becoming an artist. She meets Luis who is a painter from Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and he is completely smitten by her. Luis wants to paint Iris and also agrees to give her painting lessons. However, Luis is not the only one who has their eyes on Iris. Iris and Silas are briefly introduced at an exhibition. While Iris forgets Silas in an instant, for Silas this moment represents a lifechanging encounter. Socially awkward Silas dreams about Iris day and night. Completely delusional about her feelings, he believes she feels the same.

I found the pace of the novel a bit slow to start with. Despite the book being atmospheric and the writing reminiscent of the Victorian era, it took me some time to get into it. It wasn't until about 80%, that my heartbeat finally increased. The story takes a sudden turn and I felt like I was reading a thriller. From this point I could not put the book down. To then come to an abrupt end, leaving me wishing for more, was frustrating and unfortunate.

*Many thanks to Pan Macmillan and NetGalley for my ARC in exchange for an honest review.*

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### michelle says

Set in London in 1850, sisters Rose and Iris work for Mrs Salter at the Doll factory painting the faces and hands of porcelain dolls. But Iris dreams of becoming an artist. One day she meets Louis Frost. Who she agrees to become a model for him, in return for Louis to teach her how to paint. She leaves her sister behind,

and moves into the room whilst modelling. Her sister Rose disapproves so much, that they end up not talking. As they spend so much time together Iris and Louis all in love.

Whilst Louis and Iris go to an exhibition, they meet Silas a taxidermist by trade, but because Iris is so overwhelmed by the exhibition she soon forgets him. But it's not the same for Silas. As soon as he has met her he is smitten and he fantasises about the life that he could have with Iris.

I love gothic Victorian novels and I was excited to given a chance to read the one. The story was well written, describing the Victorian era and made me feel that I was actually there but, I thought the start was quite slow and for me personally a bit over the top at times. I am glad though that I preserved with this. I like the darkness of the story and the creepy character of Silas. Yes, he is a bad person but, I also felt sorry for him as, he did what he did, only to find someone to love him.

Thank you NetGalley and Pan Macmillan for a copy of this book for an honest review.

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### **Zuzana N says**

Fabulously written historical fiction set in London in 1850 with this eye catching cover will become the best seller of 2019!

I don't tend to go for historical genres very often but this one just grabbed my attention from the first chapter. Iris, an aspiring artist, lives her repetitive life working in the doll factory with her sister. Every evening ends the same way every morning began. Painting dolls faces is not quite what Iris wants to do, she wants to paint and create, wants to express herself but with limited resources and money there is very little she can do.

When she receives an offer to be a model for upcoming artist she accepts even if being a model is connected to so much stigma, risking losing her parents and sister but gaining freedom and just going for her dream. Little did she know that short encounter with a collector Silas will change both their lives forever.

Story of love, dreams but also dark imagination and obsession. I have no doubt that this book will do brilliantly and although it was dark and little creepy at times, it was really engaging and uplifting at times.

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### **Ova - Excuse My Reading says**

Review soon

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### **Maureen says**

Richly evocative of Victorian London, 'The Doll Factory' revolves around Iris, who together with her sister Rose, works for the cruel, laudanum addicted Mrs Salter. Iris dreams of being an artist, expressing herself on canvas, giving vent to her talents, rather than spending long hours of monotony painting dolls faces. When she meets pre- Raphaelite artist Louis Frost, and he asks her to model for him, she agrees, on condition that he teaches her to paint professionally.

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This is London 1850, and a crowd of people are watching the construction of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, and it's here that Iris has another meeting (albeit very fleeting) - his name is Silas, (a taxidermist by trade) - for Iris this is a meeting that's immediately forgotten - but for Silas this is the beginning of an obsession that knows no limits - Iris will be his, of that he is certain, and in his own little world, he believes that she feels the same way too.

This is a richly dark and gothic book, with Silas's creepy obsession becoming ever more frightening as the story evolves and picks up pace. There were certain parts of the book that involved animal cruelty, which for me personally, is really difficult, and I therefore had to skim through these particular parts, but that said, it was a well written debut novel featuring art, romance, obsession and possession, and was ultimately a dark but gripping read.

\* Thank you to Netgalley and Pan Macmillan for my ARC. I have given an honest unbiased review in exchange \*

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### **Aimee Walker Editorial says**

Packed full of things I love to read about...Victorians, The Great Exhibition, Pre Raphaelite Brothers, the history of art and criticism –along with some romance and a bit of creepy gothic horror – what's not to like?! Highly recommend!

Thanks to Netgalley and the publisher for this ecopy in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Beadyjan says**

Oh yes!! this will surely be a huge success. Two sisters Iris and Rose work together making dolls. It is the mid 19th century and whilst nearby the great exhibition is being planned, their days are long and repetitive, working for a hard taskmistress the girls dream of escaping to a more congenial life, Rose wants her own genteel little shop and Iris dreams of learning to paint. But both girls bear the scars of living in an era where medical care wasn't great. Rose has lost her beauty to the scarring of smallpox whilst Iris has a hunched shoulder, due to a break in her collarbone at birth.and both girls fear no man will even look at them now.

Iris's beauty, however, attracts the attention of two very different men. She is approached by artist Louis Frost, a member of the burgeoning pre Raphaelite brotherhood who begs her to model for his painting for which she barter art lessons in return.

Whilst in the shadows of the grimeiest rookeries of old London, lurks lonely Silas, a taxidermist who admires Iris from afar and whilst his shyness prevents him voicing his admiration for her, he remains on the periphery of her world fantasising about when they eventually meet, sure she will eventually love him as he adores her.

As we move between the courts and shops of Victorian London, we glimpse everyday life at its most brutal the descriptions are superb and I felt as though I was one step behind Iris throughout her journey. The reader meets several wonderful characters and young Albie, a street urchin who longs only for some false teeth to replace the one worn stump of a tooth which is all that remains of his gnashers, earned a place in my heart.

As Iris begins to shake off her shackles, Rose remains in the doll factory, modelling tiny faces and fitting miniature gowns to dolls for rich little girls. Iris grows further apart from her sister and whilst she does begin to feel love for one of the men in her life, in the other, builds an unhealthy obsession.

As she falls in love, she also becomes the object of a dangerous obsession.

This is a wonderfully atmospheric historical novel, woven around a world of art and creativity with lots of details about pre-raphaelite artists, and a tense thriller and mystery which will have you on the edge of your seat. Its a creeper, beginning slowly until you are immersed in it ad it just won't let go. I loved it and feel the characters will stay with me for a long time.

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## SueKich says

### The ruptured mind.

London 1850: Iris and her disfigured twin sister Rose are trapped working brutish hours for the nasty owner of a doll shop. "*Seed pearls, ruched sleeves, passementerie trimmings, tiny velvet buttons as small as mouse noses.*" Iris yearns to be an artist. When she meets Louis Frost, one of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, she is persuaded to model for him on the condition that he teaches her to paint.

Meanwhile, the weirdly sinister Silas Reed is involved in his own 'close work' of taxidermy. On a visit to the Great Exhibition, he is introduced to Iris by a mutual acquaintance, a young toothless scamp who supplies Silas with dead animals for his models. Silas is gruesomely attracted to Iris's warped collarbone and becomes instantly infatuated with her. It's not the first time he's been held by the grip of such an obsession.

This is Elizabeth Macneal's impressive debut in which she gives us glimpses of a Victorian London thrusting forward with new inventions, new art, new vision and yet stuck in squalid filth and antiquated attitudes. She is enlightening on the ambitions of artists and craftsmen, and the importance to them of selection into the great exhibitions of the day. She's also very good on Iris's love for Louis: "*She wants all of him. She wants to be as close as she can to him, to be a part of him – to give herself to exquisite disgrace.*" (Modelling for an artist in those days being just one step up from prostitution.)

But it is Macneal's insight into the mind of a psychotic that is the most convincing. "*He imagines her bladder within her, wet and pink like the inside of a peach, and then apart from her, dried out and white like a crisp pig's ear.*" His creepy curiosity shop which comes to reflect "*the rupture of his mind*". Though the last part of the novel is perhaps a little over-extended, the author's portrayal of Silas is positively chilling.

My thanks to Picador for a review copy courtesy of NetGalley.

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## Emma says

This was a great book. The descriptions and historical details were realistic and some were new to me. I've read quite a lot of Victorian historical fiction, so new ways of thinking about this era are always welcome: a boy saving for a full set of dentures; the fascination with natural history and taxidermy as the scientific discoveries of anatomy multiplied. The symbol of the Great Exhibition as the visible part of an iceberg, while the gritty filth and ordinariness of Victorian Street life lies below the surface, was an image that came to me while reading. The revelations as the book goes on of the depths of Silas' madness was very well done. Those mice!

Many thanks to Netgalley for an arc of this book.

## Hayley (Backpacking Bookworm) says

Set in 1850 London, this evocative book expertly intertwines themes of love, art and obsession. Iris and her twin sister Rose paint dolls for grouchy Mrs Salter in her Doll Emporium. Iris dreams of becoming a painter and is shocked when she is approached to model for Louis - an up and coming artist who thinks Iris is the perfect muse for his current project. Torn between leaving her sister and following her dream, she finally relents and leaves the Doll Factory.

In another dingy store, Silas works alone as the strange taxidermist, collecting dead animals and preserving their remains. He is an unsociable character who longs for company. Upon glancing Iris, he realises she is the one. He pursues her love, truly believing she loves him back. His dark obsession takes a sudden twist and Iris finds herself in a situation she never anticipated, with no way out.

The setting of this story is vivid from the start and draws the reader straight in which is an immediate appeal. The characters are well-crafted, with insight into each of the main character's innermost thoughts and feelings. This was particularly interesting for Silas, as we see him darkening obsession start to take over his life and we begin to understand his 'reasoning' behind his erratic behaviour. The story has many strands and time is taken to build tension, mirroring the slow rationale of Silas's mind which then quickly unravels. It is realistic and frightening, with gothic elements and gruesome images of everyday life in this era. The inclusion of Albie's character gives perspective from a poor child's point of view and the result is disturbing, chilling and all too real.

For a debut novel, I sincerely felt like it had all the components for a 5 star read and it was executed brilliantly. One of my favourite historical novels to date that I will definitely be recommending.

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## Andrea Hicks says

My thanks to Picador/Pan Macmillan and Net Galley for giving me the opportunity to read THE DOLL FACTORY.

I want to say 'wow' but I'm not sure it's even good enough for this amazing novel.. Elizabeth Macneal took me into her world and kept me there. I felt totally immersed in the story and by the end I was cheering, willing Iris to succeed. I read a lot of historical fiction, but this was so very different. What a debut!

The story is set in London in 1850, when The Great Exhibition is being erected in Hyde Park. Iris is introduced to Silas by little Albie, an urchin. To her it was just an ordinary introduction, forgotten in moments, but Silas saw it as something else completely. He is unable to forget her and wants to possess her. He is utterly obsessed by her and his raison d'etre becomes making her his. Silas is a taxidermist, a collector of bones and deformed animals. For him Iris is but another specimen to add to his collection.

Wanting to change her life from the drudgery of Mrs Salter's Doll Emporium, she throws caution to the wind and becomes a model for pre-Raphaelite artist Louis Frost. Iris also loves to paint and she agrees to model on the condition that he will also become her teacher. This is the life she has longed for, but Silas' desire is overwhelming him and he won't be satisfied until he has her in his grip...

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## Joanne Harris says

Overall, a nice piece of atmospheric Gothic work, set in the world of Pre-Raphaelite art and featuring, among other things: artists' models; estranged twins; an endearing urchin; domestic tragedy; a deranged collector, plus various pieces of Romantic art, bad Victorian taxidermy, stained silk and bodily fluids. Well-written, evocative, and with just enough research detail to make the story pop, without descending into interminable descriptions of paint pigments. Not entirely sure the ending quite merited the long build-up, but then I'm more than usually picky about pay-offs. Definitely worth a read.

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## Liz Barnsley says

The Doll Factory was an immersive, authentic read with an undertone of darkness and a great Historical setting that you just sink into.

It is a pacy read that is part historical drama and part thriller – it has a slow burn start that immediately engages you with this small group of humanity all living around the build up to the Great Exhibition. It is a novel about art and creativity, but also a story of love and obsession, of wanting to escape the bounds of your social standing, about hopes and dreams...

Iris wants to be an artist, she is judged harshly by her family, but when she is asked to become a model for Louis Frost suddenly life takes a turn for the better. However hovering in the background is the strange and menacing Silas – who in one moment of time has singled out Iris for his particular attention..

This novel, despite it's fairly gentle start, is immediately gripping and vaguely unnerving. Iris, painting in the cellar trying to avoid discovery, Albie, a boy who only wants new teeth, Silas, whose shop of curiosities is the go to for artists of the time, Rose, sister of Iris who suffered a terrible childhood illness and Louis Frost – pre Raphaelite artist and part of a group of like minded friends. We follow this eclectic group and their interactions, meanwhile under the surface there is a feeling of doom, of something dark approaching, which when it comes will leave you breathless...

I loved this because it was different, strangely charming and the author gets over the sense of the time brilliantly. The setting pops and the intricate layers of the story are cleverly woven. I enjoyed the art theme very much, not overdone but set within the character drama unfolding. Descriptively it is beautiful, plus the two halves work so well with the first half being more historical fiction than thriller but then throwing you into an ending that is brutally realistic and heart stopping.

Overall a really excellent debut. Highly Recommended.

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