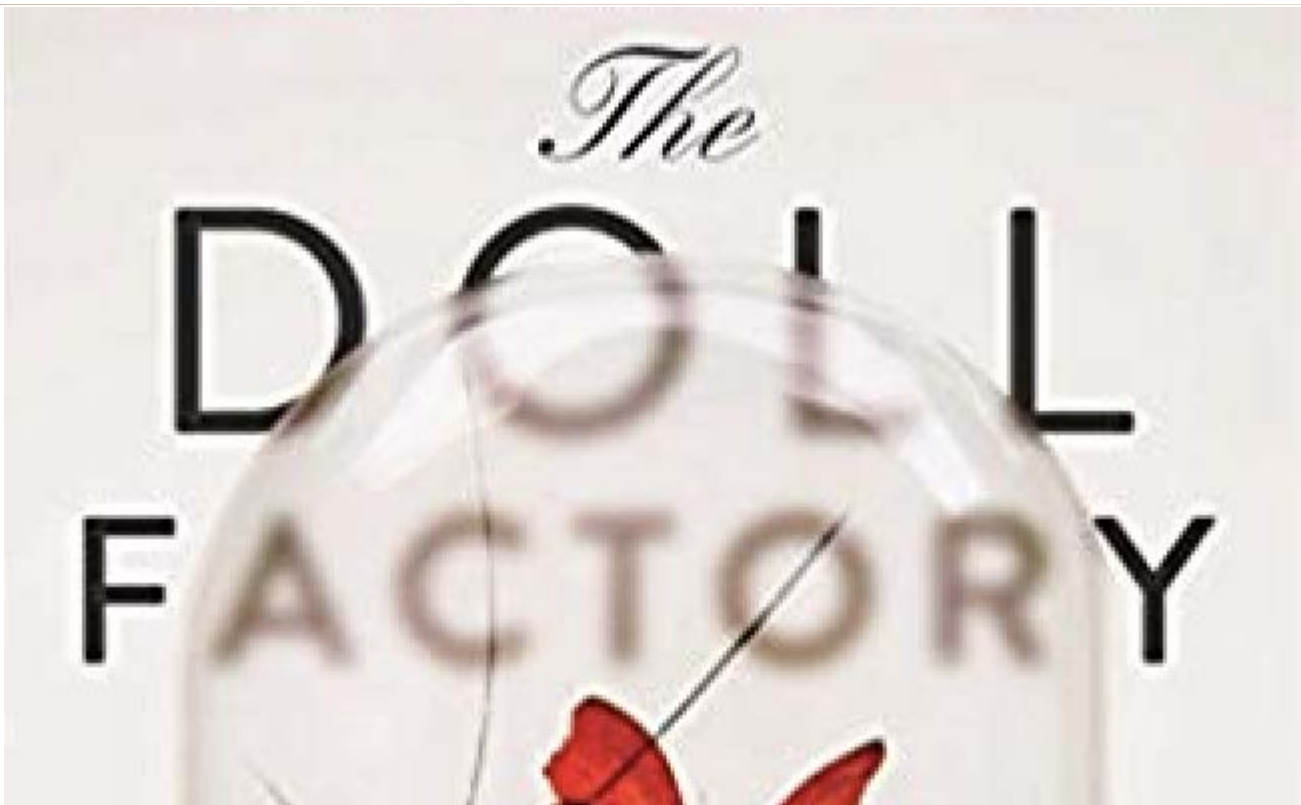


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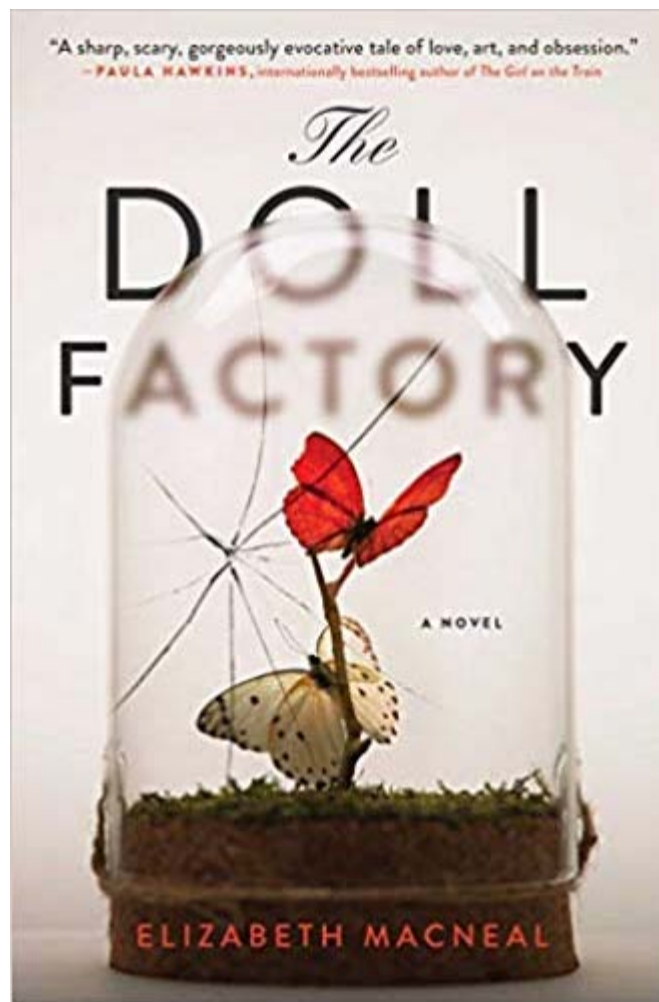
Paper Doll

'The Doll Factory' is a Facsimile of a Dickensian Novel

August 19, 2019 · Michael Giltz

Debut novelist Elizabeth Macneal sets *The Doll Factory* in Victorian England, with the backdrop of both the Great Exhibition of 1851 and an artistic revolution led by the self-dubbed Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Iris, a striking and talented would-be painter who is trapped by circumstance, connects the two worlds. She wastes her talents by crafting dolls in the window of a little store, on display side by side with her pox-scarred sister.

One of the artists in the PBR becomes determined to paint Iris, bewitched by her unusual looks and, soon, her talent. Another man, Silas, is obsessed with displaying his taxidermy skills at the Great Exhibition and adding Iris to his “private collection.”



It's a Dickensian novel, with a clutch of promising characters like the laudanum-addicted owner of the doll factory, a street urchin who finds dead things and sells them to the taxidermist, and, of course, two sisters trapped by fate in their miserable jobs and straitened lives.

But the more time we spend with these people, the less interesting they become. The characters never surprise us for a moment, never truly spring to life. And the longer they go without surprising us, the more two-dimensional they seem until the entire plot is fit only for a melodrama performed on the stage. At the climax of the tale, all that's missing is a moustache for the villain to twirl and a train to barrel down the tracks where a heroine wails for help.

Nonetheless, Macneal sets up her story well enough. She spends her best effort on the twin sisters Iris and Rose. Iris is the homelier of the two until smallpox afflicts Rose, robbing her of both her beauty and her beau in one fell swoop. She spurns Iris but they must work shoulder to shoulder all day long at the doll factory.

Salvation arrives for Iris when the artist Louis Frost asks the shy woman to model for him. Of course, this is really damnation for her since a model is little better than a whore, however noble Louis's intentions may be (and his intentions are noble, tiresomely so). Yet Iris risks it when he offers to teach her to paint. But Silas always lurks in the background. He obsessively follows Iris around town, imagines an intimacy between them that never existed and vows revenge when she "rejects" him.

It's hard to say when the novel lost me. Was it the street urchin with a heart of gold, a lad prevented from warning of danger only by the most random of acts?

Was it the artist Louis? Yes, he's wealthy and unconventional. So we can maybe forgive his cluelessness about how much Iris risks by saying yes to his desire to paint her. But can he really be so daft as to consider it a reasonable plan for Iris to blossom from a promising student into a major artist that might well exhibit her work alongside his in just one year's time?

Worst of all are the novel's plodding "revelations" about Silas' madness. He seems bonkers from the start, and I soon realized the truth about the lies Silas tells himself, which stretch back to his childhood. So when Macneal reveals towards the end how mad he really is, I couldn't help but think, "I know! I know!" It's OK for readers to be a few steps ahead of the characters, but we shouldn't be miles ahead of the author.

And did everyone have to be quite so precisely what they seemed at first blush? Mightn't Louis have been a little less noble in his desires? Did every hooker need to be tragic and kind? Wouldn't the creepy Silas have been creepier still if he seemed more human and less mad?

Macneal is a talented potter as well as a successful author. But I fear her first work seems a bit of a crock. I wish she'd taken the raw material, kneaded it all together, tossed it back on the kiln, and had another go.

(Atria/Emily Bestler Books, August 13, 2019)

Tags: Elizabeth Macneal, The Doll Factory



Author Elizabeth Macneal

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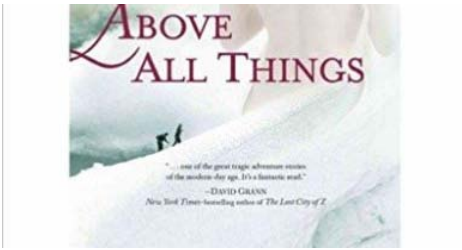
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Michael Giltz

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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