



I am a Red Dress: Incantations on a Grandmother, a Mother and a Daughter

by Anna Camilleri
Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004

Review by Lisa Foad

"This story is the pink of recent incision. A scar that stretches across abdomen, ocean, time," writes Toronto-based queer femme writer and performer extraordinaire Anna Camilleri in her debut novel, *I Am a Red Dress*. It is a melodious and haunting red siren of text culled from Camilleri's own life, which unravels the complexly woven threads of love, silence and betrayal through which she, her mother and her grandmother are bound.

They are three generations of women whose histories are riddled with abuse quietly suffered at the hands of Camilleri's grandfather. Infused with the potency of memory and imagination, Camilleri's story is stitched together through the powerful trope of the red dress: insistence of brazen defiance, fearless strength and entitled autonomy. "Grandmother notices a red dress. Mother imagines wearing a red dress. Daughter becomes the red dress. The redress."

Divided into three segments-Grandmother, Mother, Daughter-*I Am a Red Dress* traces Camilleri's childhood in Toronto's Little Italy, where she derives nourishment, security and empowerment through her matrilineal connections.

She ultimately finds the strength to defy the familial code of silence, and pieces together her own narrative. As Camilleri attempts to make sense of irreconcilable silences and betrayals, she explores the complicated convergence of cultural custodies on female bodies: "In the language of don't, shouldn't, never, not, shouldn't have, won't, abstain, protect, guard, carry, bury, hide, dominate, scavenge, scurry, hurry, hurry, hurry, a story is told-a woman's story, my mother's story, a femme's story."

A celebration of the perennial state of becoming, within and through fracture, *In Am a Red Dress* is a poignant testimony. Evocatively written through the lushly rouged and split lip of poetry, Camilleri deftly "remakes language, profane, and delicate," and writes herself loudly and vividly from the gaps cloaked by and within the red dress.

"The real story is everything in between the seams; the flow of fabric taut across round of belly."