

## White Dresses

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By Mary Pflum Peterson  
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### Introduction

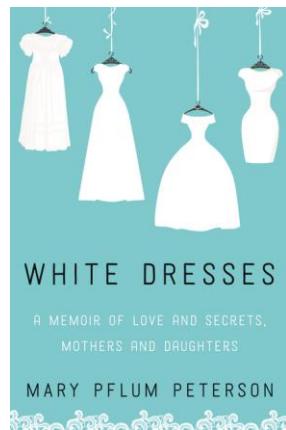
In this riveting, poignant memoir of three generations of women and the white dresses that adorned them—television producer Mary Pflum Peterson recounts a journey through loss and redemption, and her battle to rescue her mother, a former nun, from compulsive hoarding.

As a successful television journalist at Good Morning America, Mary Pflum is known as a polished and highly organized producer. It's a persona at odds with her tortured childhood, where she watched her emotionally vulnerable mother fill their house with teetering piles of assorted "treasures." But one thing has always united mother and daughter—their love of white dresses. From the dress worn by Mary's mother when she became a nun and married Jesus, to the wedding gown she donned years later, to the special nightshirts she gifted Mary after the birth of her children, to graduation dresses and christening gowns, these white dresses embodied hope and new beginnings.

After her mother's sudden death in 2010, Mary digs deep to understand the events that led to Anne's unraveling. At twenty-one, Anne entered a convent, committed to a life of prayer and helping others. But lengthy periods of enforced fasting, isolation from her beloved students, and constant humiliation eventually drove her to flee the convent almost a decade later. Hoping to find new purpose as a wife and mother, Anne instead married an abusive, closeted gay man—their eventual divorce another sign of her failure.

Anne retreats into chaos. By the time Mary is ten, their house is cluttered with broken appliances and stacks of unopened mail. Anne promises but fails to clean up for Mary's high school graduation party, where Mary is being honored as her school's valedictorian, causing her perfectionist daughter's fear and shame to grow in tandem with the heaps upon heaps of junk. In spite of everything, their bond endures. Through the white dresses, pivotal events in their lives are celebrated, even as Mary tries in vain to save Anne from herself.

Unflinchingly honest, insightful, and compelling, *White Dresses* is a beautiful, powerful story—and a reminder of the unbreakable bonds between mothers and daughters.



## Questions for Discussion

1. “I think of white dresses as a way of starting over. They’re sort of a way of wiping the whole slate clean. Just like what happens in the wintertime when the snow comes. It wipes away everything in preparation for a new year, a new spring.” Anne tells a young Mary that white dresses are often worn to “start over...white is great for beginnings.” In what way do each of the dresses in *White Dresses* signify a beginning for Anne and Mary?
2. Aurelia, Anne, and Mary all share a love for reading and writing. What role do literature and writing play in each of their lives? At what points in their lives do they turn to books for solace or escape? In what ways does their shared passion help bring them together?
3. Anne confesses that one reason for her hoarding is that she wanted to find a way to make the house into something that was truly hers, while Mary resented that the mess made her childhood home no longer feel like it belonged to her. What is the importance of having a place that belongs to you? Why is it so difficult and painful to have these places taken away?
4. Anne’s childhood blanket is described as her “one true constant,” and the idea of having a constant comes up multiple times throughout *White Dresses*. What is the importance of having something solid you can count on during times of change? In what ways do the characters hold onto constants throughout the story?
5. “From the time she was old enough to read, Anne Diener had craved every bit as much the unconditional love of a dashing suitor as she did the affection and approval of a mother she couldn’t seem to reach.” In what ways did Anne’s frayed relationship with her mother spark her desire for unconditional love? How does this desire eventually lead her to join the convent, and what effect does it have on her relationship with religion?
6. Although *White Dresses* focuses primarily on the relationships between parents and children; Anne, Mary, and Dale also have complicated relationships with their siblings. What are each of these relationships like, and how do they reflect or influence their family dynamics? Do the relationships continue to affect them as they grow older, and if so, how?
7. Anne sees two options for her life: join the convent, or become a wife and mother. What does this say about society’s view of women at the time? How much of this thinking stems from Anne herself, and how much is influenced by the culture she lives in?
8. “The dress was so pure. If only life could be as unblemished. How delicious that would be – to feel as perfect on the inside as this dress appeared on the outside.” In what ways do the characters in *White Dresses* rely on creating “perfect” outsides to mask their unhappiness and troubles? How effective are they in doing so? How does this keep them from opening up to others, even to the people closest to them?

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9. "Trust me on this one, sweetheart: stick with those who understand life is all gray and that most of us are, too. The people who see the gray are more fun anyway." In what way have Anne's past experiences and family history allowed her to see past the black and white way that others see the world? How does this way of thinking help her forgive more easily and understand people better? Does Mary inherit her mother's same ability?
  10. How do different characters in *White Dresses* define "home," and how do their ideas on the subject differ from each other? What is the importance of home in the book?
  11. "Every child reaches that point when he or she realizes the parent is fallible." Compare the two moments when Mary and Anne first come to see of the fallibility of their respective mothers. To what extent do these new realizations alter their mother-daughter relationships? Why is the realization that their parents are imperfect such a monumental event for children?
  12. "Her philosophy: something good could always come out of something bad." Which characters best exemplify this life philosophy? In what ways is the very act of writing *White Dresses* itself an attempt to make "something good come out of something bad?"
  13. For all the white dresses they own, Mary never wears any of Anne's old dresses; even at her baptism she wears a dress passed down through her father's side of the family. Why is it significant that although white dresses are something they have in common, they each have their own, separate dresses?
  14. Why does Anne continue to have faith in the church even after it has rejected her more than once? Are we meant to respect her for her unwavering devotion or find her faith misguided? How does her faith influence other aspects of her life?
  15. In what ways is Anne's parenting style and her relationship with her daughter a response to her relationship with her own mother? How is she trying to avoid making the same mistakes her mother did? How is Anne trying to keep Mary from making the same mistakes she made?
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