

"The Dress Lodger," by Sheri Holman, Atlantic Monthly Press, 291 pages, \$24.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

It's 1831 in Sunderland, England, and 15-year-old Gustine is a "dress lodger" — a poor woman who works by day and prostitutes herself at night, donning fancy gowns to attract a higher class of gentlemen.

Gustine's gown is provided by her despicable landlord, Whilky, in exchange for a cut of the profits. Whilky also employs a haggard old crone known as "the Eye," who shadows Gustine everywhere to make certain she doesn't run off with the valuable dress. The poor girl endures it all for the sake of her frail, deformed baby.

Gustine soon crosses paths with Dr. Henry Chiver, a surgeon and ardent teacher of anatomy who, fresh from a scandal in another city, has settled into Sunderland with a lovely fiancée.

But Chiver is distressed to find himself attracted to Gustine, a slattern who's surely far beneath his station. She, however, can provide his anatomy school — due to her late-night trolling of

the cholera-plagued city — with fresh cadavers for dissection. In return, Gustine hopes to win the favor of Chiver, the only man who can keep her baby alive.

Holman, the author of "A Stolen Tongue" (another historical fiction), certainly makes Sunderland come alive. She delights in morbid details, like the well-preserved eyes and brains that line Chiver's operating room, and the lice-infested hovels that serve as breeding grounds for cholera.

Holman also does well by keeping her characters frustratingly real. Chiver, for instance, remains incapable of seeing Gustine as anything other than a whore.

"The Dress Lodger" falters a bit at the end, devolving into Victorian melodrama, complete with angry villagers brandishing pitchforks. And the depiction of Gustine, so convincing throughout, is undercut later in the novel by insights that are clearly beyond her uneducated mind. (When the doctor pleads with her to think of the "greater good,"

Gustine tosses off the retort: "Good and Evil are opposite points on a circle, Dr. Chiver. Greater good is just halfway back to Bad.")

Holman's desire for a big finish is a minor disappointment in an otherwise enjoyably morbid tale of sickness and resurrection.

