

# Fiona Davis

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About this Person

**Born:** November 14, 1966 in Canada

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Novelist

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## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born November 14, 1966, in Canada. **Education:** College of William and Mary, B.A., 1988; Columbia University, M.S., 2000. **Addresses:** Home: New York, NY. Agent: Stefanie Lieberman, Janklow & Nesbit Associates, 285 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10017.

## CAREER

Writer, journalist, and novelist. Professional stage actress on Broadway, off-Broadway, and in regional productions for ten years; WNET-Thirteen (public television station), New York, NY, associate producer, 2000-01, senior associate producer, 2001; *Stage Directions* (magazine), New York, managing editor, 2002-04, editor at large and columnist, 2004-07; freelance journalist, 2007-.

## WORKS

### WRITINGS:

- *The Dollhouse* (novel), Dutton (New York, NY), 2016.
- *The Address*, Dutton (New York, NY), 2017.
- *The Chelsea Girls*, Dutton (New York, NY), 2019.
- *The Masterpiece*, Dutton (New York, NY), 2019.

Contributor to periodicals, including *American Way*, *O, Pilates Style*, and *Women's Health*.

## SIDELIGHTS

Fiona Davis was born in Canada and raised in the United States. She attended university in Virginia before moving to New York City to pursue an acting career. In 2000, after earning a master's degree in journalism, Davis traded life onstage for behind-the-scenes work as a television producer. Two years later, she became a managing editor of *Stage Directions*, a print and online magazine. By 2007, she was earning her living as a freelance writer.

While looking for an apartment to rent, Davis stumbled across Barbizon 63. The comfortable condominiums bore little resemblance to the warren of little rooms for women who lived in the original Barbizon Hotel for Women in 1927. The historic Barbizon was an exclusive residence and safe haven for single women who could pass a stringent background check and adhere to the stiff rules of conduct. Over the years it sheltered secretaries, models, actresses, and writers, including Sylvia Plath, who used it as a setting in her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*.

Davis was surprised to learn that a dozen or more of the ladies who boarded at the Barbizon in the 1950s continued to live there after its 2006 renovation, in legacy apartments protected by municipal rent control policies. "I realized I had the makings of a novel," she commented at her home page. Davis immersed herself in research on life in the city at mid-century, especially for women, including interviews with some of the women who actually lived at the Barbizon during its heyday.

*The Dollhouse* is the story of two women whose lives intersect at the Barbizon in 2016. Rose Lewin is a thirty-something journalist who lives in one of the condos with the man she hopes to marry, but the relationship is in trouble and so is her job. Her boyfriend decides to reconnect with his ex-wife and their daughter, and Rose's new boss is pressuring her to develop attention-getting stories for his online media start-up company. One day in the elevator Rose notices a reclusive elderly resident named Darby McLaughlin, whose face is covered by a heavy veil that covers a prominent scar. Her journalistic curiosity is aroused, and Rose learns about the mysterious ladies who live on the fourth floor in their rent-controlled apartments. She hears rumors about Darby, a maid named Esme, and an incident from 1952 when Esme fell to her death from the roof of the hotel, and Rose's curiosity becomes an obsession.

The two stories unfold in alternating chapters, and "the story becomes increasingly complex," according to a review by Carla Jean Whitley in *BookPage*. Rose begins to develop an article about the Barbizon and its elderly holdovers, but her boss wants lurid details. She is drawn to the spinster ladies of the fourth floor, who have nothing left but their memories. Rose interviews them to learn about what happened to Darby in 1952.

Darby comes to the Barbizon at age nineteen, a plain, unpretentious girl from the Midwest with little hope for marriage and family, who plans to pursue a secretarial career. By chance the secretarial floor is full, so she is assigned a room higher in the social hierarchy, on the floor for aspiring models. Darby feels out of place there; instead, she strikes up a friendship with Esme, an aspiring performer of Puerto Rican heritage who qualifies for the Barbizon only as a member of the housekeeping staff. Esme sneaks Darby out of the hotel at night and introduces her to an

exciting world she had never imagined: the jazz scene, the after-hours clubs, the alcohol and drugs and sex, and a man named Sam. Darby's life is beginning to spin out of control.

Rose's life is also at a crossroads. Her interviews have left her at a roadblock, and her boss wants more. Her boyfriend has evicted her and left her without a home. She must find out what drove Darby and Esme to the roof of the Barbizon on that fateful night in 1952. Only Darby can tell her what she needs to know, and Darby does not want to talk. Rose's desperation for both a story and a roof over her head prompts her to take refuge in the missing woman's apartment.

*The Dollhouse* generated mixed reviews. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor found "good, old-fashioned suspense" as the author "juxtaposes the elegance and dark side of a bygone era ... with the crass, digitally obsessed, and cutthroat media world of today." In the *New York Daily News*, Ariel Scotti called attention to various flaws but also described the novel as "a fast, easy read with an interesting enough mystery and a smooth enough pace to both catch and hold a reader's attention." Jenny Shank told readers of the *Dallas News* that the narrative "is thick with clichés," especially in the early chapters, but she also mentioned that "there are some real strengths and moments of heart" as Rose is increasingly drawn to her solitary octogenarian neighbors. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor cited *The Dollhouse* for "a conspiracy of hidden identity, drug trafficking, and undercover police" that, while "lively," "fails to ignite much warmth." On the other hand, Terry Lucas reported in *Xpress Reviews* that Davis's debut adds life to a historic urban site "and populates it with realistic characters," evoking a "strong sense of time and place."

*The Address*, Davis's 2017 novel, centers on the Dakota Hotel and a storyline that involves two women whose lives become intertwined over one hundred years of history.

The Dakota, a famous hotel near Central Park in New York, has a storied history connected with the city's rich and famous. The hotel was originally built in an unattractive neighborhood, in an era when the wealthy residents of the city thought that living in close proximity to each other in a single building was socially unacceptable or worse. Over the years, however, the Dakota gained enormous popularity, with the area nearby becoming extremely valuable. The Dakota has served as the home of notables such as John Lennon, Gilda Radner, Harlen Coben, Leonard Bernstein, Rudolf Nureyev, and Lauren Bacall.

At the beginning of *The Address*, set in 1884 shortly after the hotel was built, Sara Smythe comes from London to serve as the Dakota's manager, operating in an authority role as much as women of the time were allowed. She has accepted the job at the invitation of Theo Camden, the architect who designed the Dakota. At the other end of the historical span covered in the novel, Bailey Camden has just completed a stay in rehab and is in need of a job. She accepts an assignment from her cousin, Melissa Camden, to renovate Melissa's apartment in the Dakota. Though Bailey has the same name as the hotel's owners, she is not a direct descendent of Theo Camden; she is the descendent of his ward. Melissa, on the other hand, is truly a Camden, and though she is wealthy, she is spoiled, a party girl, and generally a vile person.

As Bailey works on Melissa's home, she explores the Dakota and makes intriguing discoveries about the history of the structure and those who were involved with it at the beginning. Sara became romantically involved with Theo Camden, and after becoming pregnant, was interned in

Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum. Eventually, she was accused of Theo's murder. What Bailey finds in the hotel's dark, dusty corners sheds a new light on Sara's life and troubles, suggesting that what has been accepted about her over the years may not be correct.

"With her nimble writing style, Davis makes pithy commentary on gender, social and economic inequality in both eras," commented Arlene M. Ckanic in a *BookPage* review. Kathy Piehl, writing in *Xpress Reviews*, remarked that the "Sara-Theo and Bailey-Melissa relationships are well developed in these parallel stories." A *Publishers Weekly* writer concluded that *The Address*, "rife with historical description and architectural detail, will appeal to design and history buffs alike."

## FURTHER READINGS

### FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

#### PERIODICALS

*Booklist*, August 1, 2017, Mary Ellen Quinn, review of *The Address*, p. 34.

*BookPage*, September 2016, Fiona Davis, "Storied NYC Building Inspires a Thoughtful Debut;" August 1, 2017, Arlene M. Ckanic, review of *The Address*, p. 23.

*Chicago Review of Books*, August 24, 2016, Hilary Rice, review of *The Dollhouse*.

*Dallas News*, August 26, 2016, Jenny Shank, review of *The Dollhouse*.

*Kirkus Reviews*, June 15, 2016, review of *The Dollhouse*; June 1, 2017, review of *The Address*.

*New York Daily News*, August 31, 2016, Ariel Scotti, review of *The Dollhouse*.

*New York Journal of Books*, August 23, 2016, Paul La Rosa, review of *The Dollhouse*.

*Publishers Weekly*, May 9, 2016, review of *The Dollhouse*, p. 45; June 12, 2017, review of *The Address*, p. 39.

*Xpress Reviews*, July 8, 2016, Terry Lucas, review of *The Dollhouse*, p. 3; July 7, 2017, Kathy Piehl, review of *The Address*.

#### ONLINE

*Book Club Babble*, <http://bookclubbabble.com/> (January 21, 2017), Kelly Sarabyn, author interview.

*BookPage Online*, <https://bookpage.com/> (August 23, 2016), Carla Jean Whitley, review of *The Dollhouse*.

*Fiona Davis Website*, <http://www.fionadavis.net> (October 20, 2017).\*

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