

HELEN DUNMORE " A SPELL OF WINTER " 1995

1996 winner of women's prize for fiction

Unsettling love and stifled horror

create and then destroy the claustrophobic world of this lush, literary gothic set in turn-of-the-century England.

Catherine and Rob Allen, siblings two years apart, grow up in a world of shameful secrets. Their mother creates a public outcry, abandoning her family for a bohemian life on the Continent. Their father, whose mental state has always been slightly precarious, is committed to an asylum in the country. The children are sealed off with their grandfather in a crumbling country estate accompanied by their sturdy and well-loved servant, Kate, and the predatory tutor, Miss Gallagher.

In true gothic fashion, terror, violence and eroticism collect beneath every dark surface.

Against this strange and secretive backdrop, Cathy and Rob develop a closeness so fierce that it eventually threatens to smother them both

Kate makes the first crack in their hermetically sealed world, which World War I eventually bursts wide open.

With Kate's departure for Canada and Rob's for the front, destitute times at home force Cathy into self-reliance. It's only after she's redeemed by hardship that she's given a second chance to be redeemed by love.

Though the setting is classic Gothic, the novel is peculiarly modern

with its precise, unforgiving depictions of childhood and madness,

dark sensuality and

artful use of metaphor.

The intensity and darkness of the world Dunmore creates teeters between gripping and overwrought.

In the years before World War I, Cathy, the narrator, and her brother grow up on their grandfather's impoverished English estate. Their mother abandoned them when they were small, and their father died after being institutionalized. Except for the ministrations of the maid, Kate, and the interference of the repulsive governess, they are left on their own.

It seems inevitable when their closeness takes an unnatural and destructive turn.

A wealthy neighbor is refurbishing a nearby estate and offers Cathy glimpses of a larger world, but she cannot bring herself to respond

In the meantime, there are threats to her hermetic existence--the governess' intrusions become intolerable; first Kate and her brother, Rob, decide to leave. And finally the war comes, taking most of the neighboring men with it, so that Cathy is left with her ailing grandfather to scratch out an existence on the farm.

It's only when the war ends and she is alone that she is ready to break away. Dunmore creates a compelling tale of obsession.

