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Suite Française



Synopsis

Suite française is the title of a planned sequence of five novels by Irène Némirovsky, a French writer of Ukrainian-Jewish origin. In July 1942, having just completed the first two of the series, Némirovsky was arrested as a Jew and detained at Pithiviers and then Auschwitz, where she died. The notebook containing the two novels was preserved by her daughters but not examined until 1998. They were published in a single volume entitled Suite française in 2004.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Having read much history about the 1940 fall of France, including such indispensable first person accounts as Bloch's "Strange Defeat," I have read nothing that captures the human experience of that debacle (arguably any debacle) as immediate and gripping as Irène Némirovsky's two novellas, all that was completed of what would have been the five part "Suite Française" (her title).

Characters are as real as people we know well. They are vividly and deeply etched, with a focus and an economy of utterance that belie how engrained they become in the reader's mind. Without a central narrator, through the depiction of lives that in some cases are interlocking, in others tangential, indeed in most merely coeval, the feel of a world in dissolution has never been so

effectively conveyed, both the general maelstrom and the personal experience. Transcending its time and place, it reminds us today how transitory everything is, how off-kilter, unbalanced, insecure life can suddenly become, indeed of the fragility of our existence, of how supporting structures such as class, belief, position, employ, wealth, can be swept away by happenstance or a tide of events we do not fully understand or foresee. When all material support is gone, all the characters (we) have left is what they (we) find within. For some, it's emptiness and pretension which always engender brutishness. Others are surprised by habits and qualities they took for granted or were not even aware they had: integrity, empathy, resourcefulness, even the grace and generosity inherent in good manners. Riches indeed. Ironically, the novelist as well as we, have always known that brutishness is not always punished nor does virtue always heal. This novel speaks to the heart directly and, through the heart, to the intellect.

This novel bridges the divide between fact and fiction and as such is just my cup of tea. Irène Némirovsky, a successful Russian born novelist, was living in Paris at the start of the second world war - 1939. Although of Jewish parentage, she was in fact a Catholic, married and with two small children. By 1940 it was clear that France would be overthrown and Paris would be occupied by the Nazis. The Parisienne, and particularly the Jewish citizens of Paris, on hearing the guns of war outside their city, then proceeded by the thousands, to flee, and make for the rural communities of France hoping to avoid the wrath of the Nazis. In the case of the Jews, it was in order to save their lives. Némirovsky and her family fled to a small town in central France and she began to write the first of what she planned to be a series of four or five stories about the French experience during the war. She had completed her drafts of the first two of these, when she was discovered by the German SS and sent immediately to a concentration camp. Within a month, at the age of 39, she was executed. After a relatively short time her husband suffered the same fate. The children were taken by a friend and hidden from the Nazis for the duration of the war, and survived. They took their Mother's manuscript into hiding with them and some 60 years later, it was taken by Némirovsky's daughter, Denise Epstein to a publisher. It was published first in France, where it has already been very successful, and with a fine translation by Sandra Smith, now in English.

I think this is a wonderful book, so moving and beautifully written that you realize after only a few pages, that you are reading a timeless classic, something that will endure for ever in the same way as the great works of Tolstoy or Flaubert. Actually the author has all the lyricism of Tolstoy - and the breadth of vision - but doesn't hammer on about her 'message' as he can do. Think of those

passages in Anna Karenina where the great man begins to describe Levin and the ideal life in the country. There is none of this in Suite Française. And the wonder of it is that you don't realize the author was a Jew living life on borrowed time, exiled to the French countryside and with the full knowledge of what this invasion meant for her personally and her family. There is no fear in the book. It is essentially and creatively feminine. That Irene Nemirovsky was about to be taken and killed, that she was a Jew in the middle of a European abomination, this never intrudes. You don't read the book for what the author suffered, despite her knowledge of her own personal perilous position, she just lets her art take over so what we get is a timeless brilliant classic which is so much more of an amazing legacy to her and those who died than any personalized or angled account could ever have been. What real heroism to do this, what an achievement, to rise about the fear and humiliation and write this wonderful work. And the translation is fantastic just because we don't notice it specially.

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