

Suite Française, Irène Némirovsky
Vintage 2006, 367 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

Suite Française is a highly readable, personal novel that follows a handful of characters in France at the time of the Nazi invasion and occupation, beginning in the summer of 1940. The story is all the more poignant because the author herself died at the Auschwitz concentration camp as a result of the horrors she writes about here. Originally conceived as five distinct parts, modeling a Beethoven symphony, the manuscript from which the book emerges is only two parts due to the author's premature death.

I read the book while on a recent trip to France, saving it to read "on location." Being present in the Paris and Loire Valley regions featured in the book provided meaningful context that brought vivid descriptions even more alive for me. For others who have been to Europe in general and France in particular, the book will awaken images from your own travel experiences.

Némirovsky introduces us to a rich array of characters, who in number and scope rival a Russian historical novel. They carry us long on the journeys and hardships of their lives during foreign occupation. Through their eyes we see the wreckage caused by bombs and bullets. Sons dying. Families torn apart by the void of missing loved ones and the mistrust fostered by fear and despair. We see how the ravages of war tears through the fabric of people's lives to reveal remarkable courage on one side of the coin, and pettiness, greed and selfishness on the other. Each of these stories plays itself out in a way we get to know and often empathize with the characters, no matter which face they show. The character-centered story telling is reminiscent of the colorful stained glass windows of France's churches, graphically portraying the stories of Biblical lives and times.

Part one, *Storm in June*, goes back and forth between several groups of people fleeing Paris. They largely leave their belongings behind, though in the case of Charles Langelet, a consummate snob, he chooses to pack his collection of porcelain. Among our most admirable characters, Maurice and Jeanne Michaud, are precariously left at the station in the midst of Paris' great exodus when their employer abandons them in favor of his mistress and her dog. Throughout their story we feel how overwhelmed they are about the fate of their soldier son who is missing in action. So too is the situation for the family of Phillip Pericand, who is a soldier of God, doing good deeds for young men orphaned by the tragedy of the war. We witness this well-intentioned man being cruelly beaten to death by his murderous wards, one of the low points of the book.

The story settles down in a rural French village and its surrounding farms in part two, *Dolce*, which means sweet in Italian. Here German soldiers are billeted in homes throughout the area, where we watch the uneasy truce between occupier and occupied. Trust and goodwill are as scarce as food and petrol. The tension mounts as the women of two featured households walk the line between the anxiety of their confinement and the opportunity for greater liberties under the judgmental watch of their mothers-in-law, and in one case her anger-ridden husband.

The situation boils to a conclusion in 1942 when Germany opens a second front against Russia. It's a time for reassessment for all these families who are so fractured by war. We leave the story at the advent of a reunion, as Madeline, one of the courageous, passionate woman from the country, embarks for Paris to connect with a family sympathetic to the resistance, who we met in part one. Unfortunately you will want to read

more, but alas the book ends here, as Madame Némirovsky's life did in August 1942, after living precisely what she wrote about in *Suite Française*. (Note: this novel has been a favorite of book clubs and is available at the library.)