



Civilisation Française

Mary Fleming

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In Mary Fleming's evocative novel *Civilisation Française*, three women's lives intersect in 1980s Paris.

Lily moves to Paris in 1982 to study at the Sorbonne. American-born, Lily was raised in London and speaks French quite well; she finds a live-in job helping elderly Amenia, who owns a mansion in Paris's Marais quarter. Though Lily worries about working for an irritable "old lady," she's thrilled to leave her present lodging arrangement—a room in a doctor's office, amid tongue depressors and antiseptic.

The perspective alternates between Lily and Amenia. While twenty-one-year-old Lily is troubled by a dysfunctional family past, she is determined to enjoy her Paris life. Amenia is often overwhelmed by memories: her upbringing in Wyoming and work as a French literary translator, the Nazi occupation of Paris, and the deaths of her husband and son. Amenia is further anguished by how her increasing blindness forces her to be dependent on others.

Amenia's kindly Jewish housekeeper, Germaine, is a concentration camp survivor who tries to cover the dehumanizing numbers tattooed on her forearm and walks with a limp from a resultant leg injury. Though Lily is sympathetic, she cannot fully comprehend her elders' wartime experiences; she views Paris as an enduring yet exciting city, with a promise as "shiny" as her new electric kettle.

The novel is taut and subtle as Lily ventures from the "daunting, domed" Sorbonne to Amenia's "airy and orderly" home. Lily and Amenia become better acquainted and even work together to manage an unnerving invasion of squatters, but their relationship maintains a sense of mutual reserve and politesse. Amenia is also secretly determined to reclaim some vestiges of autonomy and die on her own terms.

Within its intricate and nuanced portrait of Paris, the novel *Civilisation Française* explores compelling alliances and experiences.

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