



Suite Francaise (Original French edition)

By Irene Nemirovsky

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Celebrated in pre-WWII France for her bestselling fiction, the Jewish Russian-born Némirovsky was shipped to Auschwitz in the summer of 1942, months after this long-lost masterwork was composed. Némirovsky, a convert to Catholicism, began a planned five-novel cycle as Nazi forces overran northern France in 1940. This gripping "suite," collecting the first two unpolished but wondrously literary sections of a work cut short, have surfaced more than six decades after her death. The first, "Storm in June," chronicles the connecting lives of a disparate clutch of Parisians, among them a snobbish author, a venal banker, a noble priest shepherding churlish orphans, a foppish aesthete and a loving lower-class couple, all fleeing city comforts for the chaotic countryside, mere hours ahead of the advancing Germans. The second, "Dolce," set in 1941 in a farming village under German occupation, tells how peasant farmers, their pretty daughters and petit bourgeois collaborationists coexisted with their Nazi rulers. In a workbook entry penned just weeks before her arrest, Némirovsky noted that her goal was to describe "daily life, the emotional life and especially the comedy it provides." This heroic work does just that, by focusing with compassion and clarity on individual human dramas

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Editorial Review

Review

This stunning book contains two narratives, one fictional and the other a fragmentary, factual account of how the fiction came into being. Suite Francaise itself consists of two novellas portraying life in France from June 4, 1940, as German forces prepare to invade Paris, through July 1, 1941, when some of Hitler's occupying troops leave France to join the assault on the Soviet Union. At the end of the volume, a series of appendices and a biographical sketch provide, among other things, information about the author of the novellas. Born in Ukraine, Irene Nemirovsky had lived in France since 1919 and had established herself in her adopted country's literary community, publishing nine novels and a biography of Chekhov. She composed Suite Francaise in the village of Issy-l'Eveque, where she, her husband and two young daughters had settled after fleeing Paris. On July 13, 1942, French policemen, enforcing the German race laws, arrested Nemirovsky as a stateless person of Jewish descent. She was transported to Auschwitz, where she died in the infirmary on Aug. 17.

The date of Nemirovsky's death induces disbelief. It means, it can only mean, that she wrote the exquisitely shaped and balanced fiction of Suite Francaise& almost contemporaneously with the events that inspired them, and everyone knows such a thing cannot be done. In his astute cultural history, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell describes the invariable progression from the hastily reactive to the serenely reflective of writings about catastrophes: The significances belonging to fiction are attainable only as 'diary' or annals move toward the mode of memoir, for it is only the ex post facto view of an action that generates coherence or makes irony possible.

We can now see that Nemirovsky achieved just such coherence and irony with an ex post facto view of, at most, a few months. In his defense, Fussell had not heard of Suite Francaise, and neither had anyone else at the time, including Nemirovsky's elder daughter, Denise, who saved the leatherbound notebook her mother had left behind but refused to read it, fearing it would simply renew old pains. (Her father, Michel Epstein, was sent to Auschwitz several months after her mother and was consigned immediately to the gas chamber.) Not until the late 1990's did Denise examine what her mother had written and discover, instead of a diary or journal, two complete novellas written in a microscopic hand, evidently to save scarce paper. Denise abandoned her plan to give the notebook to a French institute preserving personal documents from the war years and instead sent it to a publisher. Suite Francaise appeared in France in 2004 and became a best seller.

From a purely aesthetic standpoint, the back story of Suite Francaise is irrelevant to the true business of criticism. But most readers don't view books from such Olympian heights, and neither, for that matter, do most critics. If they did, publishers' lists wouldn't be so crowded with literary histories and biographies, those chronicles of messy facts from which enduring art sometimes springs. In truth, Suite Francaise can stand up to the most rigorous and objective analysis, while a knowledge of its history heightens the wonder and awe of reading it. If that's a crime, let's just plead guilty and forge ahead.

Storm in June, the first novella of Suite Francaise, opens as German artillery thunders on the outskirts of Paris and those residents who have trouble sleeping in the unusually warm weather hear the sound of an air-raid siren: To them it began as a long breath, like air being forced into a deep sigh. It wasn't long before its wailing filled the sky. --New York Times

About the Author

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Users Review

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