

Suite Française

by Irène Némirovsky

About the Book

Beginning in Paris on the eve of the Nazi occupation in 1940, *Suite Française* tells the remarkable story of men and women thrown together in circumstances beyond their control. As Parisians flee the city, human folly surfaces in every imaginable way: a wealthy mother searches for sweets in a town without food; a couple is terrified at the thought of losing their jobs, even as their world begins to fall apart. Moving on to a provincial village now occupied by German soldiers, the locals must learn to coexist with the enemy — in their town, their homes, even in their hearts.

Praise for the Book

“Stunning. . . . A tour de force.”

— *The New York Times Book Review*

“Superb.”

— *The Washington Post Book World*

“Remarkable.”

— *Newsweek*

“Némirovsky sees the fullness of humanity. . . . A masterpiece.”

— *O, The Oprah Magazine*

“Extraordinary. . . . A work of Proustian scope and delicacy, by turns funny and deeply moving.”

— *Time*

“Gripping. . . . Brilliant. . . . Endlessly fascinating.”

— *The Nation*

“Transcendent, astonishing. . . . The last great fiction of the war.”

— *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Courtesy of Vintage International

About the Author

Irène Némirovsky

French Novelist (1903–1942)

Updated: 04/26/2007

Personal Information: Born February 11, 1903 in Kiev, Ukraine; died of typhus, August 17, 1942, at a Nazi death camp in Auschwitz, Poland; daughter of Leon Némirovsky (a banker); married Michel Epstein (a banker), 1926; children: Denise, Elizabeth.

Education: Attended the Sorbonne, University of Paris.

Religion: Catholic.

Career: Writer.

Awards: Prix Renaudot (awarded posthumously).

WRITINGS

NOVELS

- *L'Enfant Genial*, Editions Fayard (Paris, France), 1927, published as *L'enfant prodige*, 1992.
- *David Golder*, Editions Grasset (Paris, France), 1929, H. Liveright (New York, NY), 1930, reprinted, Livre de Poche (Paris, France), 1968.
- *Le Bal*, Editions Grasset (Paris, France) 1930.
- *Le Malentendu*, Editions Fayard (Paris, France), 1930.
- *Les Mouches d'automne*, Editions Grasset (Paris, France), 1931.
- *L'Affaire Courilof*, Editions Grasset (Paris, France), 1933.
- *Le Pion sur l'échiquier*, Editions Albin Michel (Paris, France), 1934.
- *Films parles*, Editions Nouvelle Revue Française, 1934.
- *Jezabel*, Editions Albin Michel, 1936, English translation published as *A Modern Jezebel*, H. Holt (New York, NY), 1937.
- *La Proie*, Editions Albin Michel (Paris, France), 1938.
- *Deux*, Editions Albin Michel (Paris, France), 1939.
- *Les Chiens et les loups*, Editions Albin Michel (Paris, France), 1940.
- *La Vie de Tchekov*, Editions Albert Michel (Paris, France), 1946, translation by Erik de Mauny published as *A Life of Chekov*, Grey Walls Press (London, England), 1950.
- *Les Biens de ce monde*, Editions Albin Michel (Paris, France), 1947.
- *Les Feux de l'automne*, Editions Albin Michel (Paris, France), 1957.
- *Dimanche et autres nouvelles: Nouvelles*, Stock (Paris, France), 2000.
- *Destinées et autres nouvelles*, Editions Sables (Paris, France), 2004.
- *Suite Française* (novel), Denoel (Paris, France), 2004, English translation by Sandra Smith published by Chatto & Windus (London, England), 2004, Knopf (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Le Maître des âmes*, Denoel (Paris, France), 2005.

Media Adaptations: *David Golder* was adapted as a film in 1930; *Le Bal* was adapted as a play and as a film.

Sidelights

Irène Némirovsky was an acclaimed writer in France whose career was cut short when she was detained during World War II and sent to her death at the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp. Her life had always been tumultuous. Born in Kiev, she was the daughter of a wealthy Jewish banker and a mother who cared little for her. She grew up in St. Petersburg, raised by a French governess. The family left Russia after the Revolution of 1918, living in Finland and Sweden for a time, and finally settling in Paris. Némirovsky attended the Sorbonne when she was eighteen years old, and she also began writing at that time. She married Michel Epstein in 1926. Three years later, she had her first child, a daughter named Denise, and also published her first novel, *David Golder*. The book told the story of a Jewish banker and his troubled daughter. More success followed, with Némirovsky being hailed as one of France's most talented young authors.

Némirovsky converted to Catholicism in 1939, but her Jewish ancestry was not ignored by the Vichy government that was working in cooperation with the Nazis. She and her husband were both forced to wear the yellow star that was used to identify Jews. Epstein was not permitted to continue working at his bank, and Némirovsky's work was not able to be published. They fled Paris when the Nazis came to occupy it, taking up residence in a village called Issy-l'Évêque. Némirovsky was shocked at the rapid moral decline she saw in France; put to the test by the advancing Nazis, most people showed their most base, selfish sides. Her view of mankind became very bleak. She began to write stories based on what was going on around her, planning for a multipart work that would be structured like a symphony. Before she could complete it, however, she was detained by the Vichy police and sent away to her death, as was her husband.

Némirovsky's daughters escaped deportation. Before fleeing, her elder daughter, Denise, grabbed a small suitcase that had belonged to her mother, containing photographs and what Denise thought was a diary. Denise took this suitcase with her from one hiding place to another, but even after the war had ended, she avoided reading the "diary," fearing it would bring up painful memories. When she finally did read it, she found, not a diary, but an unfinished novel about the panicked exile from Paris when the Nazis marched in. It describes the rich mingling with the poor, and the rapid collapse of value systems as people grasp at survival. Published as *Suite Française*, the book drew international acclaim, and is considered to be perhaps the finest book ever written about World War II. "Tragicomic, austere and ever conscious of the contrast between brittle human relationships and the enduring beauty of the natural world, Némirovsky captures the pathos and absurdity of sudden social disintegration," wrote Ruth Scurr in the *New Statesman*. While Part One of the book focuses on the flight from Paris, Part Two focuses on one household, where Madame Angellier worries over her son Gaston, a prisoner of war. Her concern is far greater than that felt by her daughter-in-law Lucile, Gaston's wife. When a young German officer is quartered in their home, Lucile finds herself very attracted to him, as he is to her. The situation becomes more complicated when Lucile

gives shelter to a man who has shot a German officer. According to a *Kirkus Reviews* writer, the story is a “nuanced account . . . as much concerned with class divisions among the villagers as the indignities of occupation.” Vince Passaro, writing in *O, the Oprah Magazine*, called it “a lost masterpiece” and concluded: “It is a privilege to read this book.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

- Gille, Elisabeth, *Shadows of a Childhood: A Novel of War and Friendship*, New Press (New York, NY), 1998.
- Weiss, Jonathan, *Irène Némirovsky: Her Life and Works*, Stanford University Press (Palo Alto, CA), 2006.

PERIODICALS

- *America*, June 5, 2006, Peter Heinegg, review of *Suite Française*, p. 22.
- *Booklist*, April 1, 2006, Donna Seaman, review of *Suite Française*, p. 20.
- *Bookseller*, November 11, 2005, Benedicte Page, review of *Suite Française*, p. 32; March 24, 2006, review of *Suite Française*, p. 42; October 22, 2004, “In a ‘Heated’ auction, Rebecca Carter at Chatto has Acquired World English-Language Rights to a ‘Lost Masterpiece,’” p. 26.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 2006, review of *Suite Française*, p. 319.
- *Library Journal*, June 15, 2006, Mark Andre Singer, review of *Suite Française*, p. 58.
- *New Statesman*, March 6, 2006, Ruth Scurr, review of *Suite Française*, p. 57.
- *Newsweek International*, November 29, 2004, review of *Suite Française*, p. 73.
- *Newsweek*, July 3, 2006, Cathleen McGuigan, review of *Suite Française*, p. 91.
- *New York Times Book Review*, April 9, 2006, Paul Gray, review of *Suite Française*.
- *O, the Oprah Magazine*, May, 2006, Vince Passaro, review of *Suite Française*, p. 210.
- *Publishers Weekly*, March 13, 2006, review of *Suite Française*, p. 41.
- *Spectator*, March 11, 2006, Patrick Marnham, review of *Suite Française*, p. 43.
- *Vogue*, April, 2006, Alice Truax, review of *Suite Française*, p. 276.
- *World Literature Today*, September-December, 2005, Adele King, review of *Suite Française*, p. 94.

ONLINE

- *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> (December 4, 2006), Caroline Wyatt, transcript of broadcast about Irène Némirovsky.
- *BookBrowse*, <http://www.bookbrowse.com/> (April 19, 2006), biographical information on Irène Némirovsky.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2007

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Behind the Book

From the Preface to the French Edition:

That the manuscript of *Suite Française* should have survived in such circumstances is extraordinary. It was Denise who put it into a suitcase as she and her sister fled Issy l'Évêque. She had often watched her mother writing — in tiny handwriting to save ink and paper — in the large leatherbound notebook. She took it as a memento of her mother. The suitcase accompanied Denise and Elisabeth from one precarious hiding place to another. After the war, they couldn't bring themselves to read the notebook — having it was enough. Once, Denise tried to look inside to see what was there, but it was too painful. Many years passed, and she and her sister . . . agreed they should entrust their mother's notebook to the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine, an organisation dedicated to documenting memories of the war, in order to preserve it. Before giving it up, Denise decided to type it out. With the help of a large magnifying glass, she began the long, difficult task of deciphering the minuscule handwriting. Soon she discovered that these were not simply notes or a private diary, as she had thought, but a violent masterpiece, a fresco of extraordinary lucidity, a vivid snapshot of France and the French. . . .

Denise Epstein sent the manuscript to the publisher Denoël. Sixty-four years after Nemirovsky's death, we are finally able to read the last work of a writer who had held a mirror up to France at its darkest hour.

— Myriam Anissimov

The entire preface is included in the Vintage edition of *Suite Française*.

Courtesy of Vintage International

Discussion Questions

1. The Péricands were mistrustful of the government, yet “Monsieur Péricand’s position as curator of the country’s national museums bound them to an administration that showered its faithful with honours and financial rewards” [p. 6]. Given their wealth and social position, is it unsurprising that people like the Péricands would collaborate with the Vichy government? Does the novel present moral failure as understandable or repellent?
2. In the exodus from Paris, Gabriel Corte is looking at the people around him: “Such ugliness . . . such hideous faces!’ Overcome, he turned round to face inside the car and closed his eyes. . . . ‘Did you see that horrible old woman beside us with her birdcage and bloodstained bandages?’” [pp. 47–48]. Corte is a successful novelist. What kind of sensibility does he have? How does he differ, as an observer of life, from Némirovsky?
3. Madame Michaud longs for news of her son Jean-Marie, who is a soldier. In chapter 12, she and Maurice are present when German bombs strike a train carrying wounded French soldiers. Jean-Marie is on this train, though his parents don’t know it, and they eventually return home still longing for news of him. Later, having stolen gasoline from a young couple on the road and finally arrived at home, the aesthete Charles Langelet is killed by a car driven by Arlette, Corbin’s ex-mistress. Discuss the effects of this approach to plot construction, in which Némirovsky directs the movements of characters whose paths converge and diverge in unexpected ways.
4. “In spite of the exhaustion, the hunger, the fear, Maurice Michaud was not really unhappy. He had a unique way of thinking: he didn’t consider himself that important; in his own eyes he was not that rare and irreplaceable creature most people imagine when they think about themselves” [pp. 54–55]. Why is Maurice “unique” in this? Given the novel’s broad array of selfish and narcissistic characters, do the Michauds seem to stand as models of moral decency?

5. Consider the following two passages:

“The glass roof shattered and exploded outwards, wounding and killing the people in the square. Panic-stricken, some of the women threw down their babies as if they were cumbersome packages and ran. Others grabbed their children and held them so tightly they seemed to want to force them back into the womb, as if that were the only truly safe place” [p. 60].

“Machine-guns fired on the convoy. Death was gliding across the sky and suddenly plunged down from the heavens, wings outstretched, steel beak firing on this long line of trembling black insects crawling along the road. Everyone threw themselves to the ground; women lay on top of their children to protect them. When the firing stopped, deep furrows were left in the crowd, like wheat after a storm when the fallen stems form close, deep trenches” [p. 82].

What characteristics of style, vision, or sensibility make Némirovsky’s descriptive writing so powerful?

6. Arlette, the dancer who is one of the banker Corbin’s mistresses, has ensconced herself in Tours where she provides Hubert Péricand with his first sexual experience. What motivates Arlette, and how does she manage to survive so well in the world [pp. 94–103]?
7. Chapter 20 of “Storm in June” is told from the perspective of the Péricands’ cat Albert [pp. 104–107]. What details does the cat perceive? What does Némirovsky’s desire to include this playful chapter in the story tell us about her vision as a novelist?
8. Carmen Callil, author of *Bad Faith*, a widely hailed biography of a Vichy collaborator, observes, “Némirovsky has a particular talent, a nearness to her readers, so that you almost feel the flesh of the characters she creates, however vile, rapacious and idiotic they may be. This is where she is irresistible — addictive — so that once you pick up one of her novels, you cannot put it down” [*The Guardian*, February 3, 2007]. Which characters, either good or bad, come most powerfully to life, and what particular details about them are most striking?
9. Is it surprising that Father Philippe’s instincts about the nature of the orphan boys was correct [p. 24]? What do the scenes in chapter 25 suggest about Némirovsky’s perspective on human evil? What is the effect of reading the scenes that describe his fate [pp. 135–144]?

10. Némirovsky brilliantly delineates class tensions and resentments throughout *Suite Française*. The man in the battered Citroën, first commented upon with disgust by Gabriel Corte [p. 48], has stolen Corte's picnic basket and his family enjoys a bottle of champagne and an elegant lunch. The woman with the bandaged head, wounded and possibly widowed, thinks, "Privileges, exemptions, connections, all that was for the middle classes. Deep in her heart were layer upon layer of hatred, overlapping yet distinct: the countrywoman's hatred, who instinctively detests city people, the servant's hatred, weary and bitter at having lived in other people's houses, the worker's hatred" [pp. 71–72]. Does Némirovsky suggest that these hatreds among the French are partially to blame for their defeat by the Germans? Or do you see them simply as indicating Némirovsky's gifts as a social realist?
11. In the village of Bussy, the women think of the occupying Germans as "our masters," and look at them "with a mixture of desire and hatred. (The enemy? Of course. But they were also men, and young . . .)" [p. 213]. How is this ambivalent mix of desire and hatred expressed in relations between the French women and the Germans in "Dolce"?
12. In sentences like the following, Némirovsky demonstrates how attached the French are to their material possessions: "Life in the provinces of central France is affluent and primitive; everyone keeps to himself, rules over his own domain, reaps his own wheat and counts his own money" [p. 217]. Which scenes and characters demonstrate this material attachment most clearly? Does Némirovsky seem to be critical of this aspect of bourgeois life? What are its implications for the ways people behave toward each other?
13. Thinking of her arranged marriage to Gaston Angellier, Lucile "realised how very empty was her heart; it had always been empty — empty of love, empty of jealous hatred" [p. 218]. But in her attraction to Bruno, "she was almost afraid of the feelings growing within her. It was like stroking a wild animal — an exquisitely intense sensation, a mixture of tenderness and terror" [p. 295]. Bruno later says, "Waiting is erotic" [p. 324]. How effectively does the tension generated by this attraction between Lucile and Bruno drive the narrative in "Dolce"?
14. How is Lucile changed by her decision to help Benoît Sabarie? What does she mean when she says to herself, "I've already chosen . . . in spite of myself. And I thought I was free" [p. 338]. Why does she reject Bruno, and is it admirable of her to do so?
15. At the beginning of her personal notebook Némirovsky wrote, "My God! what is this country doing to me? Since it is rejecting me, let us consider it coldly, let us watch as it loses its honour and its life. And the other countries? What are they to me? Empires are dying. Nothing matters. . . . Let us keep a cool head. Let us harden our heart. Let us wait" [p. 373]. In what ways do you see this cool, observant perspective realized in the novel?

16. Némirovsky wrote in her notebook, “Never forget that the war will be over and that the entire historical side will fade away. Try to create as much as possible: things, debates . . . that will interest people in 1952 or 2052. Reread Tolstoy. Inimitable descriptions but not historical” [p. 383]. What does this entry emphasize about Némirovsky’s interest in observation and description? What do the notebook entries convey about her writing process, the overall arc of the intended work, and her frame of mind as she wrote?

17. Much has been made in the literary press of the fact that Némirovsky did not include any Jewish characters in the novel. Why might she have made such a choice?

Courtesy of Vintage International