

The Dream Collector – Book Two Review The Historical Fiction Company

Volume Two of R.w. Meek's books on the Paris of 'La Belle Epoch' continues the biographical life and times of the remarkable Julie Forette -Weiss and her equally remarkable sister, Sabine - the 'cause celebre' and prize exhibit of the Salpêtrière Hospital. As with the previous book, this second volume is a striking work, noteworthy in its' approach to and treatment of some of the greatest names in all of French art. It would be best if at this point a note of caution is sounded. As with its predecessor, "*Book II: Sabine and Vincent*" is prodigiously long! This is not a book intended for any slight skimming in an idle moment. It requires of the reader a degree of attention in order to extract the finer details and insights that illuminate most pages. The finely drawn observations of the great and the famous will be a delight to the reader and the occasional pause to re-read a sentence or paragraph will reap its own reward.

Julie has freed her beloved sister Sabine from the all-encompassing control of Dr Charcot, doyen of the prestigious Salpêtrière Hospital; a man to whom all ailments of the mind and spirit seem to be capable of being cured by surgical means. Charcot is a great believer in close observation and clinical intervention, rather than any of Freud's much derided 'chimney sweeping' and of which Charcot is so sneering and dismissive! Julie's friend and partner in cocaine experimentation, Sigmund Freud, has returned to his native Vienna and where he is hard at work with his practice and carrying out his groundbreaking research. Freud, a frequent correspondent, remains fascinated, not to say entranced, by Sabine. He and Julie believe that the explanation and the cure for all of Sabine's great problems and difficulties lie rather in the unlocking of her trauma and her repressed childhood memories through therapy based on an analysis of her dreams. Deep within Sabine, Freud warns, there lies a deep and destructive trauma waiting to be discovered. In his study of Sabine there lies the very germ, the genesis of what, ultimately, is to be his contribution to world knowledge!

Sabine has suffered much in her five-year confinement in Salpêtrière Hospital to whence she had been taken from her childhood home in Marseilles when her condition had been deemed impossible. Her suffering extended from a regular schedule of humiliating exhibitions as 'the Queen of Hysteria' to packed and appreciative audiences to the very real danger of the surgical removal of her ovaries! As, in Julie's care, she takes her leave of Charcot, a series of chants arise from her fellow inmates. They plead for her to take them with her. She raises her arms to the hidden and unknown voices and the clamor ceases. Julie reflects upon this: "***I will swear, to this day, my sister embraced in that moment every broken heart.***"

As Sabine makes her dramatic exit from the Library and the domain of the Doctor she proclaims dramatically 'Paris awaits'. She is joyfully excited at the prospect of being introduced to the world which Julie inhabits; the Paris of the Third Republic, the febrile and brittle world of 'La Belle Epoch' populated by an extraordinary cast of the greatest painters and thinkers of the time. Julie knows most if not all of them and this knowledge proves to be a double-edged sword indeed. Julie hopes to offer her sister the much needed peace and security and a coaxing to health that Sabine needs. Instead, the former inmate and prized exhibit very soon becomes a celebrity amongst the salons and cafes, much sought after as an artist's model for her flame hair and bewitching beauty, which Julie the former model to both Cezanne and Gauguin, is very much against! Sabine is also celebrated for her eerie and cryptic 'symbolic' poetry that earns her the title of 'the Haiku Princess' thus shedding her former Salpêtrière title of 'Princess of the hysterics' that Freud had awarded her and in line with the current obsession of the time for all things Japanese. The former poet and literary giant Paul Verlaine, now a shambling alcoholic wreck, begs an audience with her and hands over a tattered collection of poems by Arthur Rimbaud as payment. The world is seemingly beating a path to her door. This obsession with Japanese 'objets d'art' is particularly felt by the one man whom Julie is determined in particular to keep her sister well clear of; along with the sensuous and dangerously erotic figure of Paul Gauguin, that is. This is the deeply disturbed person of the emerging artist Vincent van Gogh. Julie Forette fears deeply that any association of the two can only end

in tragedy. It is the central theme of this very long book, the relationship of Sabine and Vincent and the consequences that follow.

Theo, Vincent's much put upon and long-suffering younger brother and who had always supported Vincent through thick and thin, is much disturbed when he discovers that a relationship between the two has been formed. Sabine sweetly explains to him: "*We merged purely, like all colours must do, into light.*" This is no consolation to Theo, or to Julie, for that matter. In her view "*Two quicksilver psyches were foolishly forming a liaison.*" She has adequate grounds for fearing this - and the possibly fatal association of two such similar people - from her own deep knowledge of her sister and from the occasion that she had hypnotized the tramp like figure of Vincent on a night train to Paris and learned something of the dark thoughts that haunted him. Julie counsels caution and discreet observation. Opposites seem to attract:

"Vincent and Sabine, fire and air, ignited each other, becoming an inseparable couple. Theo and I, of less combustible natures, kept our distance. Of course, we were sometimes all together, an awkward affair in the beginning, where I said little and Vincent even less. Was I recognized as the woman on the train? He gave no hint. I just wasn't sure."

The strange and obsessive character of Vincent and his subsequent association with Sabine becomes the central theme of this very long but always absorbing book. What, primarily, concerns the minds of Julie and Theo is a mutual anxiety that the obsessive nature of their respective siblings is leading them ever onwards into a subconscious pact of mutual self-destruction. All four, brothers and sisters, are irretrievably linked and Julie and Freud scribble worried letters to each other as Sabine seemingly careens back into what is considered madness and on a path to self-destruction in much the same way as Vincent. Julie is naturally horrified when she reads one of Sabine's poems to her lover, Vincent Van Gogh, currently making his first revolutionary steps as a true pioneer in the new artistic movement of 'Post Impressionism':

"All of me condensed into a lacy snowflake / Melt I must / are you the Sun?"

A series of events occur that, in the end, result in both Vincent and Sabine continuing their difficult lives apart from each other. After a succession of incidents and behavioral meltdowns, Julie is obliged to once more consign Sabine back to the dubious care and attention of Doctor Charcot and the Salpêtrière. Here, under the watchful eye of the Doctor and his daughter Jeanne, once a good friend and ally of Julie [now both are irrevocably estranged] Sabine is largely given the run of the premises, indulging in her collecting of birds' nests that are redolent with significance and symbolic meaning and develops a passion for working in the Hospital's Photographic Department that will stand her in such good stead in the future. She continues with her obsession with light and the 'white ray' she basks in and worships and delights in the company of the Hospital's 'isolated ones'. There is a dramatic incident in which Julie encounters her with her patients, transformed into worshippers.

Vincent, for his part, seeks to form an artists' colony in the south of France with his new friend Gauguin as Head. He is truly devoted to the man and finally entices him to come and share his beloved yellow house in Arles with him, the scene, of course, of some of his finest work! He writes frequently, to his brother Theo and to the sisters. An extract from a letter to Julie and Sabine notes just a hint of some of his passion and his longing, and his hopes for the future:

"What I definitely wish to paint soon is a starry sky. It often seems to me that the night is even more richly coloured than the day, coloured in the most intense violets, blues and greens. It does not suffice for an artist to merely put white spots on blue-black; if you look up carefully at the night, you will see that some stars are lemony, others have a pinkish green, forget-me-not blue glow."

The liaison between van Gogh and Gauguin, unfortunately, proves to be an unmitigated disaster. All know, for example, of Van Gogh's desperate act of self-mutilation and his subsequent confinement in a local lunatic asylum [his choice and his devoted and his caring brother Theo's money] where he continues to paint under strict supervision. This period of Vincent's short life and his subsequent period of self-exile in Auvers and subsequent death near to Paris was to result in some of his finest work, though he only ever sold one painting in his entire life! In all this time Julie is unceasing and unflagging in her attempts to unravel the mysteries of the traumas that beset both individuals, convinced that in the location and understanding of the Dutch artist's trauma she might all the better bring cure and relief to her benighted and beloved sister. In the course of one such journey and an encounter with a 'madame' of an Arles brothel she discovers memories and truths of her own childhood which she has herself repressed.

"Sabrine and Vincent" is a vast and sprawling epic of a novel that is teeming with 'vignettes' that stand alone in their quality [the chapter relating to the meeting of the sisters and Paul Verlaine is only one such fine example] and packed with personalities forever making their memorable entrances and exits. R. w. Meek has provided the reader with a stunningly large canvas and has painted upon it a kaleidoscope that is packed with truly remarkable characters, all of them egocentric in their own ways. At one of many impromptu parties, one of Gauguin's eccentric ceramic pieces is accidentally broken, at which Sabrine remarks: ***"We are all broken vases trying to keep flowers alive"***.

It is through such remarks that she ensures her growing reputation as a poet! We meet many of these people for the first time at the ultimately unsuccessful 8th impressionist show of May 1886. The writer is unstintingly warm in his praise of and affection for old 'Father' Pissarro [with whom this epic tale movingly ends] and of his two young proteges Seurat and Signac. Seurat's massive canvas, the masterpiece of pointillism, *"Sunday afternoon on the island of les Grande Jatte"* causes a minor sensation. Upon viewing it, Sabrine describes it in her customarily cryptic fashion, whilst also invoking her mystical fascination with Egyptology: ***"We are Egyptians who have come down from the walls of the God King's tomb to spend an afternoon in Paris."*** Cezanne, Renoir and Monet are absent on this occasion [but we have met these personalities in depth in the earlier book] The gentle and retiring Edgar Degas and his friend and lover, the American Mary Cassatt, are also present and Paul Gauguin broods and sulks and nurses his heart pains and poor physical condition amongst his collection of largely ignored exhibits before being bundled off in a cab to hospital. Last and by no means least, the reader meets for the first time the bizarre and extraordinary figure of the utterly morally debased, stunted and strangely heroic Henri-Marie Reynard de Toulouse-Lautrec. Julie is to unearth some of his tragedy when she is persuaded to reluctantly and publicly display her gifts of hypnosis upon him.

These personalities [and many others besides] continue to pop up in Julie Farrant's crowded and busy life. Towards the end of the narrative she pays a tribute of sorts to the now dead Doctor Charcot and, as a laconic side note, mentions the death through carbon monoxide poisoning of Emile Zola - a man she had always despised for his betrayal of his childhood friend Paul Cezanne and other failings. She takes farewell of a frail and elderly Degas as he fumbles to adjust his clothing upon exiting a 'pissioire' and Paul Gauguin, 'the 'Peruvian Savage' and former sailor, makes his final exit in search of his paradise beyond Paris and beyond France, noting that: ***"I think I shall go to an island, in the South seas somewhere, to live like a savage. I will take my colours and my brushes and I will rebaptise myself."*** and the eminently likeable Claude Monet [who Julie once cured of blindness through hypnosis in a violent rain storm] continues to feed Julie's nicotine habit with regular supplies of her favorite 'Black Cat' cigarettes and leaves a moving note for her in one of the packs that mourns the passing of Vincent van Gogh: ***"How could this artist, who loved flowers and light, and rendered them with a lover's intimacy, how could such a person have managed to be so unhappy?"***

Sabrine is finally removed once more from the Salpêtrière and Julie takes her to Innsbruck where she unwittingly interrupts Freud's walking holiday with his wife, a planned tryst with his lover and a robust bout of homo-erotic wrestling with his colleague. In a wholly unexpected incident in the local church whilst waiting for the train to carry them back to Paris they experience a disturbing experience, a Crucifixion, Penance and Resurrection combined and an equally unexpected cure - a catharsis - with the help of a drunken expatriate Irish priest. There is no such redemption or salvation for poor doomed Vincent Van Gogh! the final section of Meek's book devotes itself to a truly moving account of his final days and their aftermath, not least for his poor devoted brother Theo. As with all of this long book, this is movingly written and evoked, and the final Epilogue tells of a highly affectionate homecoming to what remains of his family of Camille Pissarro, with whom this whole long and glorious epic first began.

As a final note, tribute needs to be paid to the obvious and clear literary skills of the author and to his ability to invoke the people and the age he so evidently adores in these two ambitious books!

"The Dream Collector – Book Two: Sabrine and Vincent" by R. w. Meek receives five stars and the 'Highly Recommended' award of excellence from The Historical Fiction Company