

L'Anglaise by Helen E. Mundler

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Grief's Sudden Grip

The language of families is often confusing. Ella is a successful British academic based in Strasbourg who, following her father's death, takes a sabbatical to finally start writing her first book. Attempting to tell her mother's story based on remembered snippets, she chips away at the polished version of events to uncover the harrowing reality. Her distant parents happened to reside under the same roof but rarely communicated, living separate lives within their outwardly prim London townhouse. Life stories intertwine as Ella attempts to make sense of the present by translating the past and exploring what home really means to her.

'It's not easy being difficult.'



Intimacy is elusive to Ella. Her late father, Hugo, conversed like an automaton leading to constant misunderstandings. Close in blood ties but little else, she was never introduced to his parents and when she went to boarding school, his young boyfriend quietly moved in to the family home. Her mother, Margaret, is impervious to sarcasm or argument and renders Ella an intruder at the funeral by inviting her along only if she wants to come.

Ella's alienation is further emphasized by her struggles with language. She speaks French but at emotional moments loses her fluency, revealing a vulnerable disconnect. As she begins a halting relationship with Max, the owner of a cat she is looking after, words - or the lack of them - threaten to create a gulf between them.

'She felt again bizarrely self-conscious about speaking French, groping for words, seeing herself uncomfortably like a parody Englishwoman in a French film.'

The novel's backdrop is both unique and relatable and the story will particularly resonate with people who, like me, moved to another country or dream of doing so. Having lived in Rome, I found Mundler's vivid imagery illustrative of the light and shade of European life. The sunlight that comes through Ella's bedroom window is 'thrown over her bed like a perfectly unruffled quilt.' As her perceptions of both France and England become less set, so does her sense of affiliation to either place. Unsure where she belongs, she feels like a foreigner in the country of her birth. Nationality, sexuality, and identity all seem fluid and old labels are called into question in what is a richly complex and thought-provoking read.

Ella's feeling of transience as an expat is subtly drawn out. While she has a much-coveted permanent university job, she is still perceived as somehow 'other' despite speaking the language and setting up home. She battles everyday misogyny and her attempts to object achieve mixed results. She is inevitably defensive during these encounters but at times is herself harshly critical of the more traditional choices made by other women. Her personal brand of feminism seems to allow for routinely dismissing women who disagree with her. Despite her frustration at being judged for choosing not to have children, for instance, she seems to look down on other women regarding everything from their lifestyle choices to their appearance.

Narrative voice changes frequently as Ella attempts to see things from the point of view of her and Max's mothers. Margaret spent time in a psychiatric ward before being married off, engagement viewed as her only possible route to social acceptance. She therefore views Ella as incomplete without a husband, rather than as the successful woman she actually is. There are parallels, too, with Max's artist mother who committed suicide, providing a compassionate insight into the impact of post-natal depression on the mother-child relationship.

There are frequent references to suicide as a sort of security blanket that has become a regular part of life. Bereavement sometimes catches Ella unawares, leaving her 'howling on the kitchen floor,' and she keeps enough medication in the house so that she could take an overdose at any time.

'At bottom, however, it was herself she doubted most, the depth of the black holes of her own soul.'

Ella's introspections reveal her isolation as she searches for a sense of belonging. At times there are multiple inner voices who Ella addresses directly in her head.

"Well?" she enquired, sharply, within. But at this the bluestocking and the soul-keeper exchanged a glance and then only lowered their separate eyes, each with the merest and most lady-like of shrugs.'

These slightly cringe-worthy inner monologues jar with the overall tone of the novel. Fifty Shades of Grey did unexpectedly spring to mind! Ella's character is brought to the surface better through her interactions with other people, subtly revealing her thoughts through her reactions. Her character is eloquently drawn and her voice is clearest when unimpeded by clumsy narrative tricks. There are laugh-out-loud funny moments, too, like when she imagines reducing her patronising manager to six inches high and 'banging him into the ground like a tent peg.'

L'Anglaise is a profound exploration of the damage caused by parental neglect and the ensuing struggle to rebuild self-esteem. Painful snapshots capture this perfectly, like when a very young Ella is told to kiss her Daddy and 'paralysed and powerless to perform as required' she holds her arms up to the wrong man. But it is ultimately a hopeful story as time and experience allow the main characters to comprehend a little more about each other's experiences and find forgiveness. As this intensely personal story unfolds, the rich prose and beautiful details ensure that the reader will be captivated from beginning to end.

About the publisher

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About the reviewer

Becky Danks is an avid reader, creative writer, book reviewer, and dog lover. She recently won the City Writes competition for her short story, The Anniversary. She is currently organising a UK and Ireland-wide poetry and short story competition which will launch very soon. Follow her on Twitter: @BeckyD123 or visit her website: www.beckydanks.com