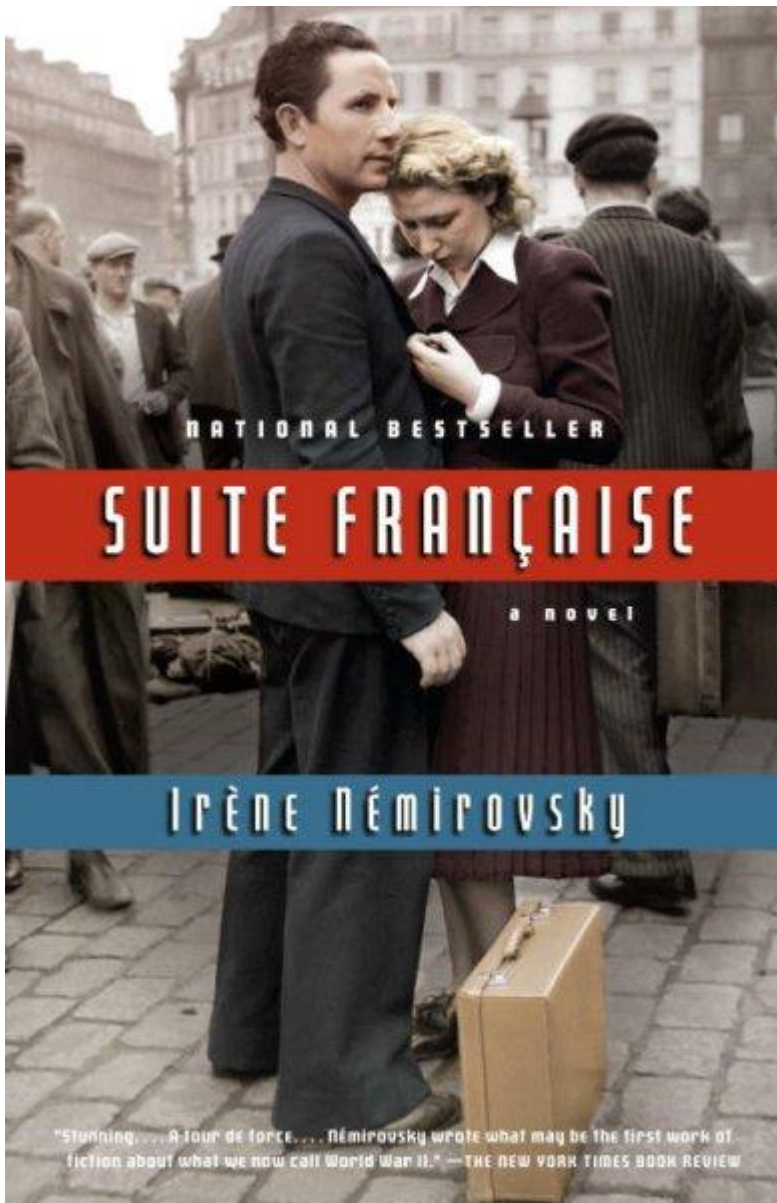


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308868>

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.

About the Author Source: Literature Resource Center

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

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 multi-part 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.

Awards

Suite Française received the Prix Renaudot in 2004 (<http://www.renaudot.com/>).

Reviews

Booklist *Starred Review*

Némirovsky, a young Russian Jewish émigré, became a celebrated novelist in Paris at age 26 in 1929. She wrote eight more novels; then, even though she was certain that she wouldn't survive Germany's occupation of France, she embarked on a grandly symphonic, courageous, and scathing work about France's collaboration with the Nazis. She completed two of five planned movements before she was sent to Auschwitz, a heart-wrenching story meticulously documented in a supplemental section. As for Némirovsky's masterpiece, it begins with the tumultuous Storm in June, in which diverse Parisians frantically evacuate Paris during the June 1940 German invasion. Némirovsky's gift for combining the panoramic with the intimate, high emotion with stinging wit, is reminiscent of Turgenev, Babel, and Berberova. Acutely sensitive to class differences, and

mordantly scornful of hypocrisy, she orchestrates a veritable carnival of cowardice, lies, larceny, and murder as a panicked populace drops all pretense of civilization. The second movement, *Dolce*, evokes the eye of the storm in the village of Bussy, where German officers are billeted in French homes, and life and love resume. *Suite Française* is a magnificent novel of the insidious devastation of occupation, and Nemirovsky is brilliant and heroic, summoning up profound empathy for all, including regretful German soldiers. Everything about this transcendent novel is miraculous.

Publishers Weekly *Starred Review*

Celebrated in pre-WWII France for her bestselling fiction, the Jewish Russian-born Nemirovsky was shipped to Auschwitz in the summer of 1942, months after this long-lost masterwork was composed. Nemirovsky, 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, Nemirovsky 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.

Library Journal *Starred Review*

Nemirovsky (1903-42), a Sorbonne-educated Jewish émigré born into a wealthy Russian family, had planned to write a five-part novel documenting the turmoil of Nazi-occupied France. Instead, she was deported in 1942 and died in Auschwitz. Her daughters hid their mother's notebook in a valise, and it remained unread for over 60 years. This Knopf edition includes the first two books of the projected quintet, as well as appendixes with the author's notes and correspondence, and the preface to the French edition. The latter includes biographical information that tells the remarkable story of the book's provenance. Part 1 (Storm in June) describes the panic and confusion accompanying several Parisian families' exodus to the countryside as the Germans enter Paris. The pettiness of an arriviste banker and his mistress contrasts sharply with his employees' acts of courage, the kind of heroism of ordinary people that history generally does not record. Part 2 (*Dolce*) relates the complicated relationships between the

occupying Wehrmacht army and French peasants, village merchants, and ruling class aristocracy. Some resisted, some cooperated as necessary, while others welcomed the conqueror into their arms. (*Dolce*) illuminates wartime economies of scarcity, the brutality of martial law (anyone caught with a radio risked immediate execution), and cultural hegemony (church bells were reset to German time). Throughout the narrative, the uncertain plight of two million French prisoners of war and painful memories of previous invasions haunt the characters. In a notebook excerpt, Nemirovsky reminds herself to “simplify” the language and the narrative. The result is a world-class “you-are-there” proto-epic that is essential for all fiction and European history collections.

Kirkus *Starred Review*

Acclaimed in France and the U.K., here are two sections of a hugely ambitious novel about World War II France, plus authorial notes and correspondence; the remaining three sections were never written, for the already established Russo-French-Jewish author died at Auschwitz in 1942.

These sections should be seen as movements in the symphony Nemirovsky envisaged. Part one, *Storm in June*, follows various civilians fleeing a panicky Paris and a victorious German army in June 1940. Here are the Pricands, middle-class Catholics, secure in their car; Madame offers charity to refugees on foot, but strictly for show. There is Gabriel Corte, famous writer and “privileged creature” (so he thinks); Charles Langelet, the ice-cold aesthete who steals gasoline from innocents; Corbin, the obnoxious bank director who forces his employees, the Michauds, out of his car. They can handle that; they’re an admirable couple, sustained by their humility and mutual devotion. What interests Nemirovsky is individual behavior in the harsh glare of national crisis; keeping the Germans in the background, she skewers the hypocrisy, pretension and self-involvement of the affluent Parisians. There is no chaos or cross-cutting between multiple characters in part two, *Dolce*. Here the focus is on one middle-class household in a village in the occupied zone in 1941. Madame Angellier agonizes over her son Gaston, a POW; her daughter-in-law Lucile, who never loved him (he kept a mistress), is less concerned; the women co-exist uncomfortably. Tensions rise when a young German lieutenant, Bruno, is billeted with them; he and Lucile are drawn to each other, though they do not become lovers. Then another complication: Lucile agrees to shelter a peasant who has shot a German officer. An honest soul, Lucile is forced into duplicity with Bruno; Nemirovsky relishes these crisis-induced contradictions. Her nuanced account is as much concerned with class divisions among the villagers as the indignities of occupation; when the soldiers leave for the Russian front, the moment is surprisingly tender.

A valuable window into the past, and the human psyche. This is important work.

Literary Criticism

The grim face of defeat

When *Suite Française* was first published in France 18 months ago it caused a stir. The book had an impossibly dramatic publishing history: its author had been deported from France in 1942 and had died in Auschwitz and the manuscript had been saved by a little girl who was running for her life. Then it was lost for 60 years. Irene Nemirovsky did not live to complete or correct the work, but the fragment that has survived is a great novel that can be read on several levels, the most immediate being a vivid account of recently lived experience. It is in two sections, 'Storm in June' and 'Dolce', that stand separately but were intended to be the first parts of a five-volume sequence.

'Storm in June' describes the last few days in June, 1940, before the occupation of Paris, when the French army had been routed, the French government was in retreat towards the Spanish border and the last Parisians were preparing to flee. The story opens with the silent city, at night, awaiting bombardment, blacked out, but to no purpose because in the moonlight the Seine 'could be seen flowing along, as white as a river of milk', guiding the enemy planes. The atmosphere changes from bravado to apprehension, fear and then growing panic. The narrative of l'exode proceeds at a gallop as we follow groups of characters, a banker and his mistress, the humble clerks he abandons, a wealthy aesthete, a wealthy Catholic family, a celebrated writer, a priest and a party of orphans, as they prepare for their separate journeys. What lies ahead is total horror, described in crisp snapshots, the roads choked with people pushing prams or handcarts, vehicles both military and civilian unable to get through. The railway stations are bombed, the refugees are machine-gunned. Young and old are given a detailed and bloody anatomy lesson by the roadside, beneath the fruit trees of the orchards where they had hoped to find safety. The wealthy abandon their cars, and are forced to mingle with the poor, and sometimes even to touch their dirty children. The country people offer this desperate mob shelter, feed them, let them wash and sleep under cover. The soldiers abandon their weapons and join the refugees, exhausted and ashamed. 'The refugees were walking in small groups ... Chance had thrown them together at the edge of Paris and now they stayed together though they didn't even know each other's names.' Later they start to rob one another of jewels, petrol or food.

'Storm in June' makes the point that in desperate circumstances the most unpleasant people are best equipped to survive, but the author then treats this national tragedy in an original way as black social comedy, an original note that is skilfully emphasised in Sandra Smith's brisk translation. 'Monsieur Pdricand [the

influential Catholic] was thinking about the last war, the one that had taken two sons from him and tripled his fortune ...' Madame Corbin, the banker's wife, unpacking in the safety of the Free Zone, finds that her maid has slipped a framed photograph of her husband's mistress into her suitcase. The fact that the lady is naked does not upset her. Madame Corbin 'was a person of a great deal of common sense--but the dancer was wearing a magnificent necklace.' A terrible row breaks out; useless for Monsieur Corbin to claim that the necklace is a fake. The Vichy government established in the Grand Hotel is relieved to hear that appalling relations with Britain have not led to an embargo on Scotch. Gabriel Corte, the fashionable novelist, reduced to the level of a nondescript coward by the loss of his work in progress, recovers his manuscripts, looks around the luxurious bar and forgets his panic. 'It was an inexpressible relief to see once again all his famous friends, even his enemies...' Then, in a scene that prefigures *Lord of the Flies*, the obtuse, sanctimonious young priest is beaten to death by the feral orphans in his care.

In 'Dolce' the time has moved on one year to a village in the Occupied Zone where a German garrison is installed. Although this is a village through which some of the refugees had passed, and the stories are interconnected, the main characters now are Lucile, the wife of a wealthy landowner who is a prisoner-of-war, and von Falk, a German officer quartered in her mother-in-law's house. The village lives in two time zones, German and French, the official clock on the town hall being one hour ahead of the villagers' watches; and the inhabitants of the village, Germans and French, also have two faces, one correct and accommodating, the other frightened and cruel. The definition of resistance is to be found on the posters put up by the German commandant as 'Verboten ... on pain of death--Forbidden to listen to the BBC, to harbour fugitives, to keep hunting guns.' But there is no resistance; there is just the struggle to survive. Patriotism consists of knitting socks for PoWs and cheating the Germans when they shop for fruit or baby clothes. The real struggle beneath the iron framework of occupation is once again between the French; there are layers of mutual hatred, the poor for the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie for the aristocrats, a mother-in-law for her daughter-in-law who is too polite to a German officer.

Nemirovsky's account has the ring of a truth acquired through close observation. In a village full of women whose men have been taken prisoner there is a slow thawing of relations. The German soldiers emerge from behind the grey uniforms and green capes and become individuals with their own attractive characteristics. They acquire names and flirtations begin. Though the social comedy is as well observed in the second part as in the first, the book has by now taken on a new complexity. The author's judgments are even more detached and less sentimental.

Patriotism, as an adequate response to the situation, is lampooned on several levels. There is the empty patriotism of the village crones, busy spying on their neighbours in order either to denounce them to the Germans for breaking the regulations, or to the village for talking to the Germans. A charitable meeting called to send comforts to the PoWs breaks up in disorder as mutual dislike and jealousy take over. The most patriotic character, the embittered mother-in-law, is a portrait of sterile chauvinism. The only resister in the village, a Communist, is driven to shoot a German officer, not because he wants to continue the war but because he is enraged by sexual jealousy: the German is after his wife. The true resister is the bourgeois housewife, Lucile, who has fallen in love with Lieutenant von Falk and who risks her life to help a Frenchman who despises her. She hates nobody, refuses to think in slogans and categories and just yearns for the freedom to be herself and not to have to 'follow the swarm'.

Part of Nemirovsky's achievement is that 'Dolce' is a valuable fragment of social history as well as living fiction. In one scene Lucile listens to her mother-in-law condemning the village girls who are sitting in the dusk with the German soldiers, singing with them, and thinks that this is not scandalous but sad.

Their youth was passing them by in vain: the men were gone, prisoners or dead. The enemy took their place. It was deplorable, but no one would even know in the future. It would be one of those things posterity would never find out, or would refuse to see out of a sense of shame.

In that sentence, with prophetic lucidity, Nemirovsky foresees the murderous purge that followed the liberation, the long legend of Gaullism and the political distortions inflicted on French history for the following 30 years.

Suite Francaise has been hailed as an example of 'Holocaust literature', which is to impose a new form of political distortion on what is simply a very fine novel. Although the author was arrested, deported and sent to Auschwitz on racial grounds, the Jews of France are entirely absent from her book. (They appear only once, in a humorous context, when the banker's mistress makes a bitter little crack about her successful and now 'quite useless' pre-war seduction of an influential Jewish banker.) This is the more extraordinary when one remembers that the author was herself a fugitive in hiding throughout the events she describes. But it is a sign of her greatness as a novelist that she should have left such an unforgettable portrait not of the persecution of the French Jews but of the way in which some of her fellow countrymen by their conduct made the deportations and consequent genocide a possibility.

The exceptional biographical context of *Suite Francaise* is thoroughly explained in the appendix. 'My God!', Nemirovsky wrote in her diary, as the net closed on her

and her husband, '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 that, my God, is exactly what she did.

Source: Marnham, Patrick. "The grim face of defeat." *Spectator* 11 Mar. 2006: 43+. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions Source:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400044733&view=rg>

1. The novelist, who herself fled Paris on the eve of the Nazi invasion, wrote the book virtually while the occupation was happening, most likely making *Suite Française* the first work of fiction about World War II. How do you think she managed to write while she herself was in jeopardy? Do you think it was easier for her to capture the day-to-day realities of life under occupation? In what ways might the book have been different if she had survived and been able to write *Suite Française* years after the war?
2. *Suite Française* is a unique pair of novels. Which of the two parts of *Suite Française* do you prefer? Which structural organization did you find more effective: the short chapters and multiple focus of *Storm in June*, or the more restricted approach of *Dolce*?
3. What is the significance of the title *Dolce*?
4. How does *Suite Française* undermine the long-held view of French resistance to the German occupation?
5. Discuss Irène Némirovsky's approach to class in *Suite Française*. How do the rich, poor, and the middle classes view one another? How do they help or hinder one another? Do the characters identify themselves by class or nationality? (You might consider the aristocratic Mme de Montmort's thought in *Dolce*: "What separates or unites people is not their language, their laws, their customs, but the way they hold their knife and fork.")
6. In *Dolce*, we enter the increasingly complex life of a German-occupied provincial village. Coexisting uneasily with the soldiers billeted among them, the villagers—from aristocrats to shopkeepers to peasants—cope as best they can. Some choose resistance, others collaboration. Each relationship is distorted by the allegiances of war. What happens when someone—who might have been your friend—is now declared your enemy during a war? The lovers in the second novel question whether the needs of the individual

or the community should take priority. Lucille imagines that “in five, or ten, or twenty years” this problem will have been replaced by others. To what extent, if at all, has this proved the case? Has Western society conclusively decided to privilege the individual over the group?

7. How does *Suite Française* compare to other World War Two novels you have read? How would you compare it to the great personal documents of the war (for example, those written by Anne Frank and Victor Klemperer), or to fiction?
8. “Important events—whether serious, happy or unfortunate—do not change a man’s soul, they merely bring it into relief, just as a strong gust of wind reveals the true shape of a tree when it blows off all its leaves.” —Storm in June, p.203. Do you agree?
9. Consider Irène Némirovsky’s plan for the next part of *Suite Française* (in the appendix). What else do you think could happen to the characters?

Multimedia

Terror and Tenderness in ‘Suite Française’ (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5542557>

A review of the book from NPR.

Further Reading

David Golder, the Ball, Snow in Autumn, the Courilof Affair by Irène Némirovsky

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1298505>

(Call number: Fiction Némirovsky)

Readers everywhere were introduced to the work of Irène Némirovsky through the publication of her long-lost masterpiece, *Suite Française*. But *Suite Française* was only the coda to the brief yet remarkably prolific career of this nearly forgotten, magnificent novelist. Here in one volume are four of Némirovsky's other novels—all of them newly translated by the award-winning Sandra Smith, and all, except *DAVID GOLDER*, available in English for the first time. *DAVID GOLDER* is the novel that established Némirovsky's reputation in France in 1929 when she was twenty-six. It is a novel about greed and loneliness, the story of a self-made business man, once wealthy, now suffering a breakdown as he nears the lonely end of his life. *THE COURILOF AFFAIR* tells the story of a Russian revolutionary living out his last days—and his recollections of his first infamous assassination. Also included are two short, gemlike novels: *THE BALL*, a pointed exploration of

adolescence and the obsession with status among the bourgeoisie; and *SNOW IN AUTUMN*, an evocative tale of White Russian émigrés in Paris after the Russian Revolution. Introduced by celebrated novelist Claire Messud, this collection of four spellbinding novels offers the same storytelling mastery, powerful clarity of language, and empathic grasp of human behavior that would give shape to *Suite Française*.

Dimanche and Other Stories by Irène Némirovsky

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1356441>

(Call number: Fiction Némirovsky)

A never-before-translated collection by the bestselling author of *Suite Française*. Written between 1934 and 1942, these ten gem-like stories mine the same terrain of Némirovsky's bestselling novel *Suite Française*: a keen eye for the details of social class; the tensions between mothers and daughters, husbands and wives; the manners and mannerisms of the French bourgeoisie; questions of religion and personal identity. Moving from the drawing rooms of pre-war Paris to the lives of men and women in wartime France, here we find the beautiful work of a writer at the height of her tragically short career.

Verdict on Vichy: Power and Prejudice in the Vichy France Regime by Michael Curtis

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1208075>

(Call number: 944.081 Cu)

On May 10, 1940, Hitler's Panzer divisions launched an all-out offensive, sweeping through the Low Countries and the Ardennes. Despite France's impressive army and equality in weaponry, by mid-June the Germans had occupied Paris. Days later, a new French government under Marshal Philippe Pétain was formed, with its capital in Vichy. For the next four years France was occupied by the Nazis. What actually happened during that fateful period has been hard to assess, for many who collaborated later surfaced as prominent post-war figures in politics, business, and finance. Now finally, after almost six decades, the complex truth is emerging, as long-suppressed files are made public. Using the latest research, Michael Curtis examines the degree to which ministers and officials of the Vichy regime, the legal and administrative system, the Church, the French police, and people in all walks of life, collaborated with the Nazis, especially regarding the fate of France's 330,000 Jews, one-third of whom perished in the Nazi death camps. Despite all we have learned about World War II atrocities, this is a book that will shock and anger. World War II still fascinates readers: this is an important, still relatively little-known aspect of that tumultuous period. Supplements and complements Robert Paxton's book on the subject, published 30 years ago. Analyzes postwar trials, including the recent, highly-publicized trials of Klaus Barbie and Maurice Papon. Reveals that Hitler's ally

Mussolini was far more solicitous about and protective of Italian Jews than were the French. Prewar chapters demonstrate how the strength of anti-Semitism in France in the 1930s made Hitler's "final solution" much easier to implement. Answers the question: Why were the French, as opposed to many occupied countries in World War II, such zealous collaborators?

Read-Alikes Source:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400044733&view=rq>

Anne Frank: the diary of a young girl by Anne Frank

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1025498>

(Call number: 921 Frank)

A young girl's journal records her family's struggles during two years of hiding from the Nazis in war-torn Holland.

Charlotte Gray by Sebastian Faulks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146288>

(Call number: Fiction Faulks)

From the bestselling author of *Birdsong* comes *Charlotte Gray*, the remarkable story of a young Scottish woman who becomes caught up in the effort to liberate Occupied France from the Nazis while pursuing a perilous mission of her own. In blacked-out, wartime London, Charlotte Gray develops a dangerous passion for a battle-weary RAF pilot, and when he fails to return from a daring flight into France she is determined to find him. In the service of the Resistance, she travels to the village of Lavaurette, dyeing her hair and changing her name to conceal her identity. Here she will come face-to-face with the harrowing truth of what took place during Europe's darkest years, and will confront a terrifying secret that threatens to cast its shadow over the remainder of her days. Vividly rendered, tremendously moving, and with a narrative sweep and power reminiscent of his novel *Birdsong*, *Charlotte Gray* confirms Sebastian Faulks as one of the finest novelists working today.

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1105647>

(Call number: Fiction Faulks)

Published to international critical and popular acclaim, this intensely romantic yet stunningly realistic novel spans three generations and the unimaginable gulf between the First World War and the present. As the young Englishman Stephen Wraysford passes through a tempestuous love affair with Isabelle Azaire in France and enters the dark, surreal world beneath the trenches of No Man's Land, Sebastian Faulks creates a world of fiction that is as tragic as *A Farewell to Arms*

and as sensuous as *The English Patient*. Crafted from the ruins of war and the indestructibility of love, *Birdsong* is a novel that will be read and marveled at for years to come.

The Regeneration by Pat Barker

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1008638>

(Call number: Fiction Barker)

Set in a British military hospital during WWI, this novel blends fact and fiction, drawing its two protagonists from the pages of history. The author of *Union Street* (made into the film *Stanley and Iris*) portrays over whelmed men who try to come to terms with their outrage of a futile war.

Night by Eli Wiesel

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1264071>

(Call number: 940.548 Wi)

Night is Elie Wiesel's masterpiece, a candid, horrific, and deeply poignant autobiographical account of his survival as a teenager in the Nazi death camps. This new translation by Marion Wiesel, Elie's wife and frequent translator, presents this seminal memoir in the language and spirit truest to the author's original intent. And in a substantive new preface, Elie reflects on the enduring importance of *Night* and his lifelong, passionate dedication to ensuring that the world never forgets man's capacity for inhumanity to man. Offers much more than a litany of the daily terrors, everyday perversions, and rampant sadism at Auschwitz and Buchenwald; it also eloquently addresses many of the philosophical as well as personal questions implicit in any serious consideration of what the Holocaust was, what it meant, and what its legacy is and will be.

Extras!

Set the scene for your discussion with popular Parisian music of the era, lsuch as *Café de Paris: 1930-41* <http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1140706> (Call number: CD World Europe France Café).

