



A NOVEL BOOKSTORE by Laurence Cossé

Fed up with a publishing industry dominated by mediocre bestsellers, book lovers Ivan and Francesca take matters into their own hands, conceiving an extraordinary bookstore that will sell only the finest literature. To select the store's inventory they devise a top-secret committee of eight respected novelists, none of whom is told the identities of the other seven members, and before long their dream bookstore, *The Good Novel*, opens in Paris to considerable success. But the story soon takes a darker turn, as anonymous threats and physical violence threaten the store's very existence.

At once a mystery, a critique of the publishing industry and a love letter to novels and fine bookselling, *A Novel Bookstore* entertains while raising an array of important questions about the current state and future of literary tastes and culture.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Despite close ties to the story's main characters, the narrator of *A Novel Bookstore* remains anonymous until the end of the book. Why? How does this affect the reading experience?

2. Van and Francesca's friendship begins with a conversation sparked by books. (Van comments on Francesca's purchase of three Cormac McCarthy novels.) Soon after they begin talking, Van says: "You have just confirmed to me that one of the most fortunate purposes of literature is to bring like-minded people together and get them talking" (pg. 81). Is this statement truer of books than of other art forms? And if so, what is it about books that make them so conducive to conversation? Has a book ever brought you closer to someone?

3. Why is the relationship between Anis and Van initially so unstable?

4. Van and Francesca open the bookstore in response to what they see as major problems in the book world. Great novels, they believe, are drowning in an ocean of mediocrity. And in many ways, *A Novel Bookstore* is itself a sharp criticism of the publishing and bookselling industries. As one of the selection committee members says: "They've made a covered market of literature, where a few best sellers take up all the room. By 'they' I mean the major publishers, the journalists who act like sheep, the wholesale distributors of culture" (144). Is this a valid criticism? And if so, why do great novels not get the attention they deserve? How do you learn about the books you decide to read?

5. The narrator is not the only shadowy character in *A Novel Bookstore*. Anonymity is prevalent throughout. Many of the attacks against *The Good Novel* are made by unknown figures, the selection committee is anonymous and Francesca's involvement in the bookstore remains a secret for as long as possible. How does anonymity affect the course of events? Would things have turned out differently if members of the selection committee had been made public from the start? If so, how?

6. *The Good Novel* is attacked in the media on numerous occasions. In the op-ed pages of *Le Bigaro*, for instance, the Executive Director of a large chain bookstore suggests that *The Good Novel* has "a certain amount of class condescension" in its agenda. By comparison, he writes of his own stores, "Our love of the novel and of the book is so great that we cannot see why, or even how one could exclude, by means of a selection process, ninety-nine percent of the titles available. Our passion, and our cause, is to respect the diversity of cultures and the diversity of individuals" (241). Is there any validity to this argument? Or to any of the criticisms of *The Good Novel*?

7. What is the role of bookstores in the age of the Internet and e-readers?

8. Discuss the tone of the ending. Is it optimistic about the future of *The Good Novel* bookstore?

9. What books have been important to you? Why?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Laurence Cossé is a critic, novelist, playwright and journalist. She has reported for *Radio France* and the newspaper *Le Quotidien de Paris* and interviewed such luminaries as Andrei Tarkovski and Jorge Luis Borges. Cossé is the author of the satirical thriller *The Corner of the Veil* (Scribner), and several historical novels including the bestselling *Prime Minister's Woman*. *A Novel Bookstore* is her ninth novel.

She lives in France.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURENCE COSSÉ

Q: What inspired you to write *A Novel Bookstore*? Is *The Good Novel* based on an actual bookstore?

A: For a long time, I planned to open a bookstore in Paris with the name “Au bon roman” [The Good Novel] that sells novels, nothing but novels, and all of them excellent. But the years passed by and my plan remained only a dream. I told myself that at the very least I could write about it, I could tell the story of *The Good Novel*.

I often ask myself: Where did the idea for such a utopia come from? And my answer is that it is not a utopia. In my mind, it was a plan, a real one, and one that I believed could be fully realized.

Some years ago I encountered an exemplary bookseller in Val d’Isère, a famous ski resort in the French Alps. At the time, he managed a small walk-down treasure trove that was full of novels, all of them remarkable; I was inspired by this man, Jean-Paul Shafran, and based Van’s bookstore, located downstairs from the offices of M. Bono’s small press, on this store. (By the way, Shafran subsequently opened his own bookstore in Val d’Isère.)

Since the publication of *A Novel Bookstore* I have received numerous letters from booksellers in France and all over Europa, all saying, Come to my store (meet our readers), and you'll see: it's The Good Novel.

Q: You have written in a number of different mediums, including novels, plays and newspaper articles. How do you decide which format to use in telling a story? Do your work habits differ depending on what you are writing?

A: This is a core question. Each subject inspires a certain register and a specific form. They are imposed on me, I do not choose them. What's more, I am told that my books are very different from one another. Each has a certain pitch, a certain tone, a specific form and style, and all of these things are imposed by the subject matter and must, therefore, be found. There's a lot of work to do even before the writing proper has actually begun.

My work habits, however, do not change. I need solitude and time enough to write every day, for as long as possible.

Q: The narrator of *A Novel Bookstore* remains anonymous throughout most of the book. Why did you choose to write it this way? And how did you decide that the story would be told by Anis?

A: This is the small game within the big game called "a novel." (I use the word "game" in its fullest sense). I thought that it would be amusing for the reader if very early on he or she were to say, 'Wait a minute, who's talking? Who is telling this story?' And if they were not to get an answer to this question until the very end.

When did this idea come to me and why? I really have no idea. I have forgotten those months in which I reflected on the general economy and the construction of the novel. I no longer even know what I spent my time thinking about. I think of it as pulling the author's scaffolding away from the house.

Q: How closely do identify with the characters in the story? Have you ever thought about opening a bookstore of your own?

A: I don't identify with anyone in particular. And I indentify with everyone. One thing is sure: there is no easy formula. When I write, I am each character, men and women alike, to the extent that I assume their facial expressions and body language while I am describing them. I cannot imagine my way into them without this intimate identification.

I said earlier that I was thinking of really opening The Good Novel bookstore. I would have loved to do so. If it could be done, I think it would be a great success in a city like Paris. I dream of someone trying to pull it off!

Q: What do you think currently poses the greatest threat to literature? Are you optimistic about the future of good novels?

A: Pervasive relativism strikes me as the greatest threat to art today, and to literature especially. This widely diffused idea wants that all things have equal value, that all is worthwhile; in other words, it denies that artistic or literary merit can have any objective foundation at all, and, on the contrary, suggests that everything is just a purely subjective matter of taste. I believe that to be false and it is the very subject at the heart of *A Novel Bookstore*. I'm afraid above all that such ideas will lead to widespread confusion and that great novels will get lost in the great flood of uninteresting novels.

That said, I believe that there will always be great artists, that there will always be great novelists, and that there will always be great books. The problem will be how to find them and how to defend them.