



# FRESH WATER FOR FLOWERS

by Valerie Perrin

*Translated from the French  
by Hildegard Serle*

**“Melancholic and yet ebullient...  
An appealing indulgence in nature,  
food and drink, and, above all, friendships.”**  
*The Guardian*

**A WALL STREET JOURNAL BEST BOOK OF SUMMER 2021**

**A 2020 INDIES INTRODUCE & INDIE NEXT LIST PICK**

**A #1 international best-seller, *Fresh Water for Flowers* is an intimately told story about a woman who defiantly believes in happiness, despite it all.**

Violette Toussaint is the caretaker at a cemetery in a small town in Bourgogne. Her life is lived to the predictable rhythms of the often funny, always moving confidences that casual mourners, regular visitors, and sundry colleagues share with her. Violette's routine is disrupted one day by the arrival of Julien Sole—local police chief—who has come to scatter the ashes of his recently deceased mother on the gravesite of a complete stranger. It soon becomes clear that Julien's inexplicable gesture is intertwined with Violette's own complicated past.

“Full of contentment and hope... Fans of Elizabeth Berg will enjoy this thoughtful take on the inner life of an unforgettable woman.”—*Booklist*

---

## Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. One critic called *Fresh Water for Flowers* “A tender and poignant exploration of love, loss, and redemption.” *How do these themes weave together in the narrative? Given the multiple characters and storylines, how do such feelings transcend the characters' stories in the novel and reflect back on to the readers?*

2. The novel recounts Violette's life over the course of many years, but not always in order. *How does this inter-changing chronological structure add to the narrative? Does it take away from it? How does it further underscore the novel's theme of life's unpredictability and Violette's (and, ultimately, ours) resilience?*
3. Violette spends most of the novel telling her story as the cemetery keeper in Brancion-en-Chalet, but the novel also recounts her life as a level crossing keeper. *Discuss the differences in Violette's life in these two places. How do both locations subvert readers' expectations and how do they imprint themselves on Violette's life?*
4. Each chapter begins with an epitaph as a preamble for what's to come. *Do you find these epitaphs informed the contents of each chapter? What role do the epitaph's play in the story?*
5. By following the lives of multiple characters other than Violette (Philippe, Gabriel, Irene, Julien, etc.), the novel opens onto the impossibilities and contradictions that make up a person. To wholly care for someone, but to be distant. To be in love, but still unfaithful. *In doing so, what commentary does the novel make on how a single life can hold a multitude of lives within it? Do you feel as though each character has redeemed themselves by the end of the novel? Is Violette's capacity for forgiveness, then, ultimately, a weakness or a strength? Is there anyone who did not fully redeem themselves by the end and, if so, do you at least understand them better?*
6. Chapter 75 ends with Violette wondering of Julien, "How will our encounters end?" (346). Meanwhile, Chapter 76 begins with the epitaph "The family isn't destroyed, it changes. A part of it merely becomes invisible" (347). *How do Violette's encounters with the prominent people in her life—Phillippe, Leonine, Sasha, Celia, Julien, Irene, etc.—guide her to the end of the novel? How does her family change over the course of the novel? Is a family merely one made up of a bloodline?*
7. After Leonine's death, both Philippe and Violette grieve in their own ways, all the way having to deal with the scrutiny from friends and family around them. *Discuss how this novel the different ways this novel portrays grief and the avenues with which each character takes to heal. Does any character grieve in a similar way as you? If so, what did you learn from it?*

8. This novel portrays different kinds of love: the love friends share; your first love; the love between a mother and a daughter, and between a father and a son; the complicated loves; the loves lost; the misunderstood loves, and more. *Do you find love to be enough of a driving force for redemption with some of these characters? Do you believe Violette to be incapable or unworthy of love, as she continuously claims?*
  9. One critic calls *Fresh Water for Flowers* “a triumphant celebration of life and love.” *Discuss the ways in which this novel reproduces the cycle of life and the ways in which it celebrates it, with all the good and the bad that come along with living? Did you learn anything along the way?*
- 

## About the Author

**Valérie Perrin** was born in 1967 in Remiremont, in the Vosges Mountains. She grew up in Burgundy and settled in Paris in 1986. Her English-language debut, *Fresh Water for Flowers* (Europa, 2020) won the Maison de la Presse Prize, the Paperback Readers Prize, and was named a 2020 ABA Indies Introduce and Indie Next List title. It has been translated into over thirty languages. *Figaro Littéraire* named Perrin one of the ten best-selling authors in France in 2019, and in Italy, *Fresh Water for Flowers* was the best selling book of 2020. Perrin now lives in Normandy.