

★ Coming Up for Air

Sarah Leipziger

House of Anansi Press (Mar 3, 2020)

Softcover \$18.95 (320pp)

978-1-4870-0650-1

From the turn of the twentieth century into the present, the defiant and vivacious characters of Sarah Leipziger's *Coming Up for Air* refuse to be suffocated by others' expectations.

In Paris, the haunting death mask of an unknown girl, dubbed L'Inconnue de la Seine, became a source of inspiration for poets and artists, her story lost but her last peace preserved. The novel begins by resuscitating the drowned girl, placing her at her moment of decision, before the river handed her "the universe in a glass jar." It skips backward to cover her motherless childhood, her first days in Paris, her affair with a beautiful model, and the future that she could not accept.

In between these vibrant episodes of L'Inconnue's story, the novel also involves Pieter, a toymaker shot through with the salt of Norway's seas, who as a child stared upon a cast of L'Inconnue with wonder. And it reaches across the seas to encompass Anouk and her mother Nina, the rhythm of whose lives is determined as much by Canada's rivers as it is by Anouk's struggles with cystic fibrosis.

These connected stories trouble the releases and rearrangements that are forced upon people by parenthood, the most thorough submersion of all. Though loving and loved, Pieter, L'Inconnue, Nina, and Anouk all have air-bubble moments in which they scramble for their footing, their uncertainties of self a swirl.

Tactile phrases capture poignant details: a brown mole nestled between breasts, pink froth, and clogged cilia, but also the warmth of Toronto mornings, the safety of a grandparent's cottage, and the colors, smells, and affectations of a busy Paris market. Though its turns involve deaths, disappointments, and loss, *Coming Up for Air* is effervescent and audacious—a novel in which kicking for the surface, no matter how desperate the odds, is always worthwhile.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2020)

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