

★ **Fresh Water for Flowers****Valérie Perrin****Hildegard Serle, Translator**

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Though much of it is set among the dead, Valérie Perrin's *Fresh Water for Flowers* is an exuberant novel whose thoughtful treatments of family tragedies are alchemistic.

Abandoned at birth, Violette was shunted between disinterested foster placements. While still a teenager, she married Philippe—gorgeous, mercurial, older, and skilled at manipulation. But it would be a mistake to presume that those stations defined Violette. Doubters, see her now: tearing through the cemetery she oversees, luminescent on a unicycle; nurturing her vegetable and flower gardens toward brilliance; healing the wounded and helping the lonely.

When it comes to bundling and embracing her outward contradictions, Violette is zestful. Impervious to people's low expectations, she teaches herself to read, shoulders the work of two adults, forges lifelong friendships with passersby, becomes a caretaker's unwitting acolyte, and cultivates her daughter's sense of wonder.

When Philippe's last days-long disappearance stretches to years, Violette shrugs it off and makes their home her own. Though she is regarded as a misfit in town—because “all jobs connected with death seem suspect”—her compassion is a revitalizing force for the bereaved. When a stranger, Julien, starts lingering among Violette's tombs, carrying with him an unexpected story, he prompts hard examinations and life-giving revelations.

The story undulates between seeming extremes with elegance. It is mournful and vivacious, full of laughter and despair; its vibrant potentialities spring up among eccentrics and the dead. Perfumed air and calming teas blunt the impact of tragedies and disappointments, while Violette's penchant for collecting eulogies like confessions keeps long-past moments fresh. Every moment becomes an impossible gift, and even calamities produce opportunities.

Savor every page of Valérie Perrin's irresistible novel, which, despite its deaths, betrayals, and affairs, is a triumphant celebration of life and love.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2020)

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