

Palmerino

Melissa Pritchard

Bellevue Literary Press (Jan 1, 2014)

Softcover \$14.95 (192pp)

978-1-934137-69-7

Lush, tactile descriptions and impressionistic scenes bring alive this historical novel about an author of supernatural fiction.

Violet Paget (whose pen name was Vernon Lee), the formidable British Victorian writer of supernatural fiction, serves as inspiration for Melissa Pritchard's new novel, an intriguing experiment in capturing *genius loci*, the spirit of a place. When Sylvia Casey, a writer of historical novels, finds herself adrift after her husband leaves her, she reimagines Paget's love life while staying at Paget's Italian villa, Palmerino. Weaving a loosely biographical tale of female intellectualism, restraint, and erotic awakening in floral prose, Sylvia's journey to change her writing style and her increasing isolation lead to an ambiguous conclusion, all under the watchful eye of Paget's spirit. With a knack for lush, botanical descriptions, Pritchard paints a romanticized version of Florence, Italy. She capably evokes the city's transformative qualities in this fragmented account of beauty, art, the consequences of failing to be honest, and the freedom found in accepting love.

An award-winning novelist and short-story writer whose works include the *New York Times* Notable Book *Spirit Seizures*, Pritchard braids three sometimes uneven strands: that of Sylvia, whose days in Florence pass in quiet absorption, walking and researching the life of Paget; that of Paget herself, a spirit who inhabits Palmerino and whose voice is represented in italicized text; and the story Sylvia is writing, which, through her own admission, omits portions of Paget's life to focus on two women Paget once favored, poet Mary Robinson and Scottish equestrienne Clemantina Anstruther-Thomson.

Each of these alternating sections appears as a moody, impressionistic sketch—in homage to the *genius loci* the real Paget, who was also an essayist and writer on travel, espoused—yet as a novel, the approach seldom leaves room for profound character insights. Sylvia as a writer in search of an obsession to distract herself remains at a remove. The spirit of Paget emerges as a driving force with questionable motives; the desire to ensure a version of her story that is to her own liking, and to direct “Sylvia's pen,” at times seems too deliberate. The story Sylvia writes, however, casts Paget and her late nineteenth-century lifestyle in a captivating light.

Marked as it was with epistolary fervor and the passage of numerous expatriate and prominent cultural figures, *Palmerino* becomes a proving ground for Paget's capacious power to enthrall. Recommended for the tactile setting and as an introduction to an original, lesser-known historical personage.

KAREN RIGBY (Winter 2014)

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