

The Art of Traveling Strangers

Zoe Disigny

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The Art of Traveling Strangers is a warm, empowering novel in which a woman recovers her sense of worth.

Heartbreaks prompt an art history professor to work as a guide in Zoe Disigny's quirky novel *The Art of Traveling Strangers*, about self-discovery, friendship, and a European adventure in the 1980s.

In her mid thirties, Claire's disappointments make her vulnerable to an affair. When impending divorce, repressed grief about her mother's death, and financial constraints she hasn't anticipated culminate in uncertainty, she agrees to escort Viv—a wealthy student who's close to her own age—as a paid art guide in Europe.

The chapters alternate between the women's trip and Claire's memories about the affair and her marriage. The latter reveal her "doormat" tendencies, alongside her willingness to overlook warning signs in the lives of her lovers. Her sensitive hindsight, when it's juxtaposed with Viv's spontaneous nature, results in charm. Further, forthright Viv is unafraid to tell Claire when she thinks that Claire is wrong or being uptight.

Indeed, Claire's growth begins when she lets go of her need to control itineraries. She explores high fashion in Milan, accepts Viv's lighthearted responses to art, lets her guard down in Venice, and shops for shoes in Florence; in the process, she gains confidence about facing the future. Italy's locations are described with sumptuous appreciation.

Insightful parallels are drawn between Claire's comments about paintings and her own life and Viv's family problems. But the women's tour moves with such speed that there's seldom time for such deep reflections. Further, while learning about Viv allows Claire to focus on others and helps her to become more open and assertive, her ongoing concern about Viv's anxiety disorder stems from vague information and feels misplaced.

Viv's language is punctuated by vernacular flourishes; while these suit her brashness, the tendency is over pronounced and wears thin. Her gum-chewing exchanges with Claire also render her an uncomplicated foil for Claire's extemporizing. Secrets from Viv's life are only peripherally suggested, and recurrent references to her thoughts on the LGBTQ+ community are distracting and underdeveloped. Still, the book works toward a promising ending in Paris that suggests new beginnings.

Americans seek enlightenment abroad in *The Art of Traveling Strangers*, a warm, empowering novel in which a woman recovers her sense of worth.

KAREN RIGBY (December 15, 2021)

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