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General

The Feasting Season
Nancy Coons
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Travel writer Meg Parker appears to have a dream job living and working in the French countryside, but the reality of having to deal with an inattentive husband, two young children, and incompetent home remodelers is forcing a rude awakening. When she receives an assignment to write a book about French history, Meg accepts with excitement and is paired with photographer Jean-Jacques Chabrol. A passionate love affair ensues, and Meg must, in the end, decide what kind of life is most valuable to her.

Like Meg, Coons lives in an old farmhouse in the Lorraine region of France with her husband and two children. She has authored books such as *Escape to Provence*, *Escape to the Riviera*, and *Fodor's Provence and the Cote d'Azur*, and she has contributed to guides on France, Italy, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Further, she has been featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*, and her writing has appeared in *Saveur*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and the *New York Times*.

Coons' travel writing experience is apparent in her detailed descriptions of regional food in France, and the reader is seduced right along with Meg by visions of bulging white stalks of asparagus in salt-cured ham, briny-sweet oysters, and luscious wild strawberries. Thanks to Jean-Jacques' family connections, the pair travels to places like Arles, Cluny, and Versailles, sampling great wines and delicacies including anchoiade.

They also visit regions during festival times. In a gypsy gathering in Stes-Maries during Pentecost, for example, Meg and Jean-Jacques join thousands of people carrying to the sea a statue of a girl who legendarily traveled with Mary Magdalene and others as Christian castaways. In the Camargue, dramatic bullfights overshadow what little remains of the funeral stones and Hotel-Dieu gardens that served as subjects in Van Gogh's paintings.

Ongoing tension between Meg and Jean-Jacques about the role and relevance of history causes Meg to question the original plans for her book. As her focus evolves to depict France's

history through its food, so too does Meg grow to wonder whether she should risk losing her family for the adventuresome life that Jean-Jacques offers. Even toward the book's end it is unclear which path this fictional travel writer will choose.

The author's first venture into fiction is exciting, and one looks forward to her exploring other destinations similarly. Next time around she could further develop her characters' personalities; here they are sometimes limited and predictable. Throughout the book, for example, Meg's husband typically quotes Shakespeare, her daughter regularly invents a "sore sroat" under stress, and Jean-Jacques consistently swears and smokes. Nonetheless, readers who delight in stories revolving around food will find pleasure in being transported to the sights and tastes of the French countryside.

Beth Hemke Shapiro