

★ **The Parasol Flower**

Karen Quevillon

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In Karen Quevillon's novel *The Parasol Flower*, a doctoral candidate, Nancy, becomes so entranced by an illustration of a painting that she stumbles upon during her research that it changes the course of her life.

The painting is the work of Hannah Inglis, and Nancy sets off to discover what happened to the nineteenth-century artist. What emerges is an opulent portrait of an artist trying to survive within the limits of society and colonialism, and the woman who searches for traces of her.

Living an impoverished student life in Paris, Nancy is an American writing a dissertation on the construction of gender. She has limited contact with the outside world and hopes that she will soon be over her failed relationship with her dissertation adviser, Kenneth, who is back in the US. Over Christmas, her mother suggests that Nancy visit Bob and Daphne, an older couple in England. There, Nancy focuses on Hannah's life in British Malaya, her marriage to an older colonel who forbade her to paint, and the expat crowd that rejected her.

Much narrative attention is devoted to Hannah's story. Her young, resilient, and genuine personality brings humor and passion to the world around her, even as her drive for artistic expression is threatened by the forces of misogyny, xenophobia, and elitism. The book's language is as verdant as the flora and fauna that surrounds Hannah. The less frequent chapters that focus on Nancy's point-of-view highlight the loneliness of both women and their parallel desires for intellectual and artistic kinship, but also the alienation and isolation of expat living.

The Parasol Flower is a visceral, captivating novel about charisma, commitment, and the need for connection—an elegant and wistful portrayal of two women from different eras searching for each other.

MONICA CARTER (July / August 2020)

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