



The Readers' Room

Antoine Laurain

Polly Mackintosh, Translator

Emily Boyce, Translator

Jane Aitken, Translator

Gallic Books (Sep 22, 2020)

Softcover \$15.95 (224pp)

978-1-910477-97-7

In Antoine Laurain's acerbic cozy mystery *The Readers' Room*, a debut novel makes waves among the Paris literati—and with two homicide detectives.

Publishing darling Violaine Lepage is much admired for her impeccable taste and alluring green eyes. But just twenty years ago, she was a literature-loving college dropout who caught a lucky break. Mentored by a publishing scion, Charles, she helped to direct the tastes of a respected publishing house from within its readers' room, where most unsolicited manuscripts go to die.

When the successive generation of readers' room tastemakers recommends *Sugar Flowers*, by an elusive first-time author who avoids face-to-faces, Violaine thinks she's found a bestseller. She publishes the book to much acclaim, but then finds herself hosting detectives who are concerned that the book is a manifesto. Most troubling of all: real-life victims one and two are villains from Violaine's own past.

Mixed in with these gripping circumstances are a plane crash that Violaine survives, biting commentary on the ubiquity of boastful unpublished novelists, and loving nods to Stephen King and Marcel Proust. The irresistible cast, as they select tales worthy of public consumption, holds its own salacious stories close. Violaine contends with post-traumatic amnesia regarding her demonstrable vices: she steals, she cheats, and she obfuscates. And as she wrangles the fictions she tells others against the facts she'd prefer to avoid, she begins to wonder if *Sugar Flowers* wasn't penned by someone very near to home.

Trade secrets are nestled throughout the novel, including a solemn warning that, from "initial idea to finished book, novels have lives of their own which elude even their authors." Replete with treats for bibliophiles and armchair vigilantes alike, *The Readers' Room* is an engrossing mystery novel that plumbs the writing process for its most dangerous potential.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2020)

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