

READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

This is the story of two flawed eccentrics. Everything they do subverts their firm intention of keeping up appearances. They meet just after the war in liberated Paris but they cannot quite free themselves from the many strings attached to them – the old aunts, the sisters, the cousins, the nuns and the ominous concierges who dog their footsteps.

Alexandre is a banker and a Resistant and lives in a world of numbers and Roman emperors. Poum resides in the Odyssey and in her bed, hiding from the mysterious disapproval of their relatives, for they both seem to persist in some irreparable faux pas which has them wading through a lifetime pickle. Their daughter, Catherine, would like to help but she seems to be part of the problem.

This is no ordinary childhood, and Catherine de Saint Phalle's acceptance of her parents shines through, propelling us head first into their strange, yet beautiful, Parisian world.

Poum and Alexandre is a searingly honest, humorous and moving elegy to family and place, and a meditation on the ways they ultimately define us.

About the author

Catherine de Saint Phalle has been published in France by Actes Sud, Buchet/Chastel and Sabine Wespieser Editeur. She is the author of *On Brunswick Ground* [Transit Lounge 2015], also published in France.

A tutor and translator, she lives in Melbourne, Australia, where she is ensconced with her partner, a poet and bookseller. *Poum and Alexandre* is her first work of non-fiction.

Reviews

'Amid the deluge of memoirs, few are great literature. Proust and Alexandre is a rare and wonderful exception, a work that deserves to become a classic. Catherine de Saint Phalle, a French writer living in Australia, tells the poignant story of her mother, Proust, and her father, Alexandre, through the eyes of a child who is both enthralled and baffled by their relationship, their family ties and the past worlds that haunt them. The writing is full of fresh and original turns of phrase. Her troubled mother has "shipwrecked eyes"; as Alexandre recalls his time in the Resistance, "his face falls, cliff-like into a darker sea". Their flaws and foibles are revealed without judgment, infused with humour and pathos by their observant child. Poetic yet down-to-earth, Proust and Alexandre is a work of sustained intensity, tenderness and generosity of spirit.' Fiona Capp, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 2016.

'This memoir of an unusual, myth-infused childhood is full of love and charm, but with reality always acknowledged on the fringes. It's beautifully written, with some real magic about it.' *Herald Sun Weekend Magazine*, November 2016.

'Catherine de Saint Phalle is a necessary voice, a writer whose work belongs at the centre of our literary culture. Her tale of Paris and a childhood on the fringes sings with urgent elegance.' Kevin Rabalais, author of *The Landscape of Desire*.

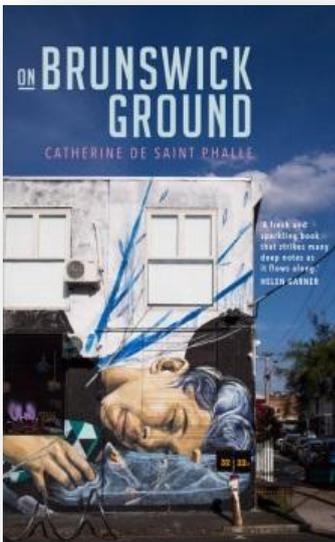
'A memoir of a very gifted writer's unusual parents, woven from myth, history, and family lore. This is a disturbing, bittersweet and poetic rendering of the longing for love and understanding. More than personal, it conjures past worlds, their horrors and their triumphs, as if they were wholly present to us.' Tracy Ryan, author of *Unearthed*, *Claustrophobia* and *Sweet*.

'This book is a wonderful expression of love. I can't decide who I love more here, the elegant, reclusive Proust or the wild-minded resistance man Alexandre. Every page of this delightful memoir bubbles with their Parisian eccentricities. There is a world of emperors and adventures with Homer and the Magna Carta. What makes this story really sing is Catherine's own journey within the tale towards understanding her flawed family world and her place within the chaos. Growing and flowering throughout the work is her own undying love for her unique guardians, Proust and Alexandre.' Ben, *A&R Book World*, October 2016.

'Catherine de Saint Phalle's first work of nonfiction, Proust and Alexandre: A Paris Memoir, is an intricately woven narrative that centres on the author's eccentric and charmingly flawed parents. Her mother Proust is an 'unmotherly' woman with a penchant for Odysseus. Her father Alexandre is a banker who 'smells of honey' and is openly loved by women. It appears an amiable family unit for little more than a chapter, as childhood memories reveal a guilty secret that prompts disapproval and resentment from relatives and friends.'

I was particularly struck by the relationship between the younger Catherine and her father—the rambling joy that Alexandre elicits from their conversations and spirited games. De Saint Phalle's memoir feels like an ode to storytelling, merging tales of Greek mythology and French history seamlessly into her own. It will undoubtedly reward history buffs, but may cause those unfamiliar with such references to stumble. Some readers might also find themselves envying de Saint Phalle's autonomous childhood while simultaneously baulking at her parents' frequent disregard for her wellbeing. This book will appeal to readers who take particular delight in unconventional families and Parisian quirks.' Sophie Teague, *Books+Publishing*, 25 August 2016.

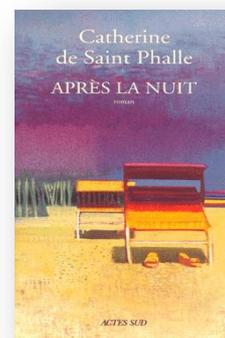
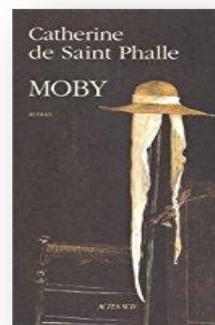
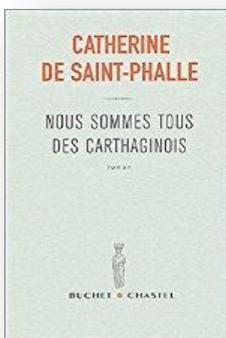
Previous works



'As its name suggests, this novel is set in Melbourne's inner north, the suburb where Jill Meagher was murdered (most cruelly in a street named Hope). Her presence haunts the book, colouring the lives of the women who live and work in the area. Catherine De Saint Phalle's lyrical meditation on loss and grief employs an unnamed narrator as a focal point from which to explore the mutual sympathy of female friendships even as they are all smarting from their own respective problems. It's a quiet, contemplative and affecting book with silvery poetic slivers throughout, a cat's "Confucian dignity" a mind escaping like a "shoal of fish", a face closing "with a slam".' Thuy On, *The Sunday Age*, 24 June 2015.

'Assured and poetic, the book has the affectionate and closely observed feel of an outsider who has made herself at home. Verdict: on solid ground'. *Herald Sun*, 11 July 2015.

'In On Brunswick Ground Catherine de Saint Phalle writes with a grace of style and searing authority about the way Melbournians live now. Here, steeped in the intimacies and desires of a community, she proves herself an engaged and engaging novelist we can't afford to ignore.' Kevin Rabalais, *Australian Book Review*, December 2015.



For discussion

- *Poum and Alexandre* is a memoir. Discuss the differences and similarities between memoirs, autobiographies and personal narratives.
- Discuss how memory works, especially when it comes to writing a memoir. How close do you think a memoirist can get to the truth? What factors can influence their ability to be 'truthful'?
- Paris is more than a background to this memoir. How does the city function in the lives of this family?
- Discuss the importance of Sylvia in Catherine's life.
- When visiting Mont Saint-Michel, Alexandre questions Sylvia about her childhood. Sylvia decides to answer, because *'she knows them well by now and sometimes hands over what they want as a treat'* [p198]. What does this tell you about the power dynamics between Sylvia and the people for whom she works?
- Compare and contrast Poum and Alexandre to Mummy Joyce and Daddy John. How does each couple affect Catherine's personality and view of the world?
- When describing her parents, Catherine states *'To be accepted by the clan when they have broken all the clan rules is their constant worry. They want to belong but, like Odysseus, they have to wander the seas in search for home'* [pp18-19]. Did you feel that little Catherine also felt she had to 'wander the seas' – as presented by her parents – in order to be accepted and belong in her own home?
- Poum once told Catherine that she felt it *'a great shame'* when women did not share the spirit of the harem – *'a hand on the shoulder, a touch, a reassuring smile, a pressed kiss on a tear-stained cheek'* [p45]. Yet Poum rarely shows signs of affection towards Catherine. Discuss.
- What is the basis for Poum's attraction to Alexandre, and Alexandre's attraction to Poum? What do you see as the power dynamics of this relationship? Is Alexander really the stronger person? Discuss.
- Poum's behaviour at home is a direct contrast to her behaviour when out. Why is that? Which is the 'real' Poum? Discuss.
- Poum frequently laughs at inappropriate times. Actor and comedian Bill Crosby believes that *'through humour, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it.'*¹ Do you think Poum's inappropriate laughter is a coping mechanism, or do you think there is a darker reason for it? Discuss.
- When Poum takes Catherine to visit an old great-aunt, *'she and my mother speak in the forbidden tongue'* [p102]. Why is Spanish a 'forbidden tongue' when at other times – such as when going to church – Poum emphasises her Spanish heritage?

¹ Paul Marcus, *How to Laugh Your Way Through Life: A Psychoanalyst's Advice*, Karnac Books: London, 2013, p102

For discussion [continued]

- Compare and contrast Poup's and Alexandre's attitudes to religion.
- *'One day, much later, Poup tells me that she has never lived an entire day without experiencing utter terror'* [p88]. Both Poup and, to a lesser extent, Alexandre, talk of living in fear. What is the basis for these fears? Discuss.
- Discuss Poup's and Alexandre's fascination with gruesome deaths.
- After finding herself in Graylingwell Hospital's men's high-security ward by mistake, Catherine writes: *'Being in that place also helps me understand that wolves, werewolves, the criminally insane and schizophrenics are like my mother, Poup, Marie-Antoinette. They swim in the same pond and understand the same things'* [p73]. Did you take this to mean that Catherine thinks her mother insane? And why do you think she gives three descriptions of the same person – 'mother', 'Poup', 'Marie-Antoinette' in the same sentence? Discuss.
- Why is the Magna Carta – a charter dating back to 1215 – so important to Alexandre, rather than any other charter in history? Discuss.
- Alexandre tells Catherine that *'people doubted Odysseus was Telemachus's father. But his son would invariably answer: "my mother has always told me I was Odysseus's son – and I believe her"',* and that is how she should answer anyone who *'says the slightest thing to you at school or anywhere'* [p212]. What does Alexandre fear might be told to Catherine, considering how much of his life he has already told her?
- Catherine is not very surprised to hear of brothers and sisters. How do you think she views her brothers and sisters and their mother? Do you think they are 'real' to her, or more like the historical and mythical characters her father tells her about?
- Alexandre is full of daring and bravado, yet he is nowhere to be seen when Catherine is caught by a priest, after being told by Alexandre to turn off the lights in a church in Chartres [p238], and at another time, he worries that she may not believe what he tells her: *'You believe me, don't you? I don't know what I would do without you, little one'* [p190]. What does this tell you about Alexandre's real character? Discuss.
- When Catherine is fourteen, Alexandre's tales of women with little power suddenly change to tales of bravery. Why is that? Consider the way Alexandre has talked about, and behaved towards woman throughout the book. What does this change tell you about the way Alexandre really sees women, including Catherine? Discuss.
- Poup and Alexandre experienced a number of traumas and emotional problems in their lives. Did you feel these were passed down to Catherine? Where do you stand on the nature versus nurture debate?
- When, as an adult, Catherine wants to show a friend the Château de Saint-Cloud, whose high walls she has walked upon and whose moat she has wandered along with Alexandre, she discovers it was burnt down during the Revolution in 1789, and nothing is left of it except a copper plaque indicating where it had once stood. Did this affect how you then saw other events described in this memoir? If so, where and why? Did this make you question Catherine's reliability as a narrator? Discuss.

Suggested reading

Road Series – Hugo Race [Transit Lounge, 2016]

Farewell to the Father, Timothy Elliott [Pan Macmillan Australia, 2016]

A History of Silence – Lloyd Jones [Text, 2013]

His Stupid Boyhood – Peter Goldsworthy [Penguin, 2013]

A Moveable Feast – Ernest Hemingway [Vintage Classics, 2000 (1964)]

Iran: My Grandfather – Ali Alizadeh [Transit Lounge, 2010]

What Maisie Knew – Henry James [Penguin Classics, 2010]

Of Ashes and Rivers That Run to the Sea – Marie Munkara [Random House Australia, 2016]

Pictures from My Memory: My Story as a Ngaatjatjarra Woman – Lizzie Marrkilyi Ellis, Laurent Dousset [Aboriginal Studies Press, 2016]

The Family Law – Benjamin Law [Black Inc., 2010]

The Long Goodbye – P.J. Parker [Hardy Grant Books, 2016]

The Elegance of the Hedgehog – Muriel Barbery [Europa Editions 2008 – Fiction]

Suite Française – Irène Némirovsky Penguin Vintage [2015 (1941) – Fiction]

The Suitors – Cécile David-Weill [Other Press, 2013 – Fiction]

Lessons in French: A Novel – Hilar Reyl [Simon & Schuster, 2013 – Fiction]

The Ladies' Delight (Au Bonheur des Dames) – Émile Zola, [Penguin Australia, 2001 (1883)]

The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris – Edmund White [Allen & Unwin Australia, Bloomsbury USA, 2015]

Poum and Alexandre
Catherine de Saint Phalle
Transit Lounge Publishing

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