



RANSACKING PARIS

by Patti Miller

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THE STORY

It must mean something, a dream that can propel you to the other side of the world. Couldn't it be the heart wanting something it needs, this longing for elsewhere? After all, we are all strangers wandering around this planet, apparently lost most of the time, looking for something or someone – or some place.

What does it mean to fulfil a dream long after it seems possible? When Patti Miller arrives to write in Paris for a year, the world glows 'as if the light that comes after the sun has set had spilled gold on everything'.

But wasn't that just romantic illusion? Miller grew up on Wiradjuri land in country Australia where her heart and soul belonged. What did she think she would find in Paris that she couldn't find at home? How could she belong in this city made of other people's stories?

She turns to French writers, Montaigne, Rousseau, de Beauvoir and other memoirists, each one intent on knowing the self through gazing into the 'looking glass' of the great world. They accompany her as she wanders the streets of Paris – they even have coffee together – and talk about love, suffering, desire, motherhood, memory, the writing journey – and the joys and responsibilities of ransacking.

Exploring truth and illusion, self-knowledge and identity, and family and culture, Miller evokes the beauty, the contradictions and the daily life of contemporary Paris.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patti Miller grew up on Wiradjuri land, dreaming of Paris. She is the author of the award-winning memoir *The Mind of a Thief* (UQP, 2012) which won the 2013 NSW Premier's History Awards (NSW Community & Regional Prize) and which has been set for the VCE English curriculum. She has written best-selling writing texts, *Writing Your Life* and *The Memoir Book*, as well as a novel and four memoirs, including *Ransacking Paris*. She is Australia's foremost memoir teacher, holding workshops in Sydney and Paris.

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DISCUSSION NOTES

1. 'It must mean something, a dream that can propel you to the other side of the world. Couldn't it be the heart wanting something it needs, this longing for elsewhere?' (p 4) What do you think the author is looking for in Paris?
2. What does the author mean by 'ransacking'? Why does she do it? Does her ransacking succeed? In what ways do we all 'ransack' other people and places?
3. Why are the French memoirists featured in this story of a year spent in Paris? Which memoirist would you like to have coffee with and why?
4. What is the significance of the bees in *Ransacking Paris*?
5. 'It's over now, the daily care of small bodies and tender minds, and although they no longer orbit around us, we can't let go being the centre of their lives yet.' (p 85) How much is this book about various types of transition?
6. The author is looking under the surface of tourist Paris at class and race, privilege and disadvantage – e.g. the gypsy story (p 85 and p 194), the idea of 'halves' (p 214), and 'the people' (p 123-127). How much does this change your view of Paris?
7. 'I could never be one of those women who subsume themselves in serving a great man.' (p 227). What do the memoirists, including the author, say about love and sex (p 223-230)? With whom do you agree the most?
8. 'How strange and strong memory is, with its own structures and its own translucent textures, more fine and enduring than reality.' (p 222) What does this mean? Is memory more powerful than reality?
9. What does the author mean when she says, 'I have never seen my face.' (p 60) and 'I exist as a fabrication.' (p 261)? Do you think these statements are true? How central do you think they are to understanding the whole book?
10. What does the ending, where the author says she is 'absurdly pleased to be of use', reveal about her quest in Paris?

FURTHER READING

The Mind of a Thief (UQP, 2012)