



## **Suite Francaise Readers' Groups Discussion Points**

### **About the Author**

Irène Némirovsky was the daughter of a Jewish banker from the Ukraine, Léon Némirovsky. The Némirovskys lived in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where she was brought up by a French *gouvernante*, almost making French her native tongue. Irène also spoke Yiddish, Basque, Finnish, Polish, and English.

The Némirovsky family lived for a year in Finland in 1918 following the Russian Revolution, and then, in 1919, moved to Paris, France, where Irène attended the Sorbonne and started writing when she was only 18 years old.

In 1926, Irène Némirovsky married Michel Epstein, a banker, and had two daughters: Denise, born in 1929; and Élisabeth, in 1937.

In 1929 she published *David Golder*, the story of a Jewish banker unable to please his troubled daughter, which was an immediate success, and was adapted to the big screen by Julien Duvivier in 1930, with Harry Baur as David Golder. In 1930 her novel *Le Bal*, the story of a mistreated daughter and the revenge of a teenager, became a play and a movie.

Irène Némirovsky was Jewish, but converted to Catholicism in 1939 and wrote in *Candide* and *Gringoire*, two anti-Semitic magazines—perhaps partly to hide the family's Jewish origins and thereby protect their children from growing anti-Semitic persecution.

By 1940, Némirovsky's husband was unable to continue working at the bank—and Irène's books could no longer be published—because of their Jewish ancestry. Upon the Nazis' approach to Paris, they fled with their two daughters to the village of Issy-l'Évêque (the Némirovskys initially sent them to live with their nanny's family in Burgundy while staying on in Paris themselves; they had already lost their Russian

home and refused to lose their home in France), where Némirovsky was required to wear the Yellow badge.

On July 13, 1942, Irène Némirovsky (then 39) was arrested as a "stateless person of Jewish descent" by French police under the regulations of the German occupation. As she was being taken away, she told her daughters, "I am going on a journey now." She was transported on July 17 along with 928 other Jewish deportees to Auschwitz. According to official papers, she died a month later of typhus. Her husband was sent to Auschwitz shortly after, and was immediately put to death in a gas chamber.

## **About the Novel**

Suite Francaise consists of the first two sections an uncompleted five-part novel examining life after the German occupation of France in 1940. The novel was written as the events portrayed were actually unfolding and reflects the experiences of Irène Némirovsky and her family.

The first section "A Storm In June" follows the lives of several disparate families and individuals in the immediate aftermath of the German invasion. We share their experiences as they struggle to find a safe refuge with varying degrees of success – we also meet the people who offer that refuge and their opinions of the influx into their homes.

The second section "Dolce" focuses on the lives of those who live in an occupied village including local aristocracy, farmers, shopkeepers and the Germans who now live among them. The local residents are left with the choice of resisting or collaborating but no choice about their feelings for their occupiers.

## **Discussion Questions**

Please note that some of these questions will act as spoilers for the book.

1. Suite Francaise was written as the events in the novel were actually taking place. How does the depiction of these events compare with other novels you may have read? Do you think this contemporary

resonance is a benefit to the story or would you prefer to read a novel written with the benefit of hindsight?

2. A recurring theme of "Storm in June" is the consequences of war on works of art and future artistic works. Can the death of a nation's artistic life be compared to its experiences in wartime? Does the death of art matter in relation to the death of civilians?

3. There is little reference to the experience of French Jews. Is this surprising given the author's background? Do you think it represents a lack of awareness and understanding of the Holocaust while it was actually occurring?

4. In Chapter 10 of "Storm in June" the description of the refugees from Paris says "there was nothing human left..." How does this compare with current depictions of refugees?

5. Does the act of helping family members absolve you of a duty to help others as Madame Craquant believes? Does a moral imperative to help those seeking refuge actually exist?

6. Corte says "A novel should be like a street full of strangers" and this could describe the narrative of "Storm in June". Do you prefer this structure or the more restricted narrative of "Dolce"?

7. How do you view Lucile's relations with Lieutenant von Falk? Is she betraying her country and her family? Does she make the right decision at the end of Dolce?

8. Is the killing of Lieutenant Bonnet by Benoit an act of war or an act of murder?

9. With reference again to Nemerovsky's background and experiences does it surprise you that she was able to portray German characters – particularly von Falk – in such a sympathetic manner?

10. Nemerovsky left plans for the next three sections of the novel. How do you think the stories would have developed?