



# Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen

*Kate Taylor*

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## **Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen** Kate Taylor

Stretching between turn-of-the-century Paris and contemporary Canada, **Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen** is the story of three women whose lives intersect across time to reveal the intrinsic bonds of our collective and personal histories. It is a rich and compassionate debut, a novel that encourages us to explore the depths of love and memory, of life and of art.

Unable to escape the pain of her unrequited love for Max Segal, Marie Prévost travels to Paris in order to study the writing of her other great amour: the novelist Marcel Proust. Marie is bilingual and works as a simultaneous translator in Montreal, and believes that reading Proust's original papers will give her insights into love and loss that just may mend her broken heart. But when Marie arrives in Paris, Marcel remains as elusive as Max: the strict officials at the Bibliothèque Nationale only allow her access to the peripheral papers of File 263 -- a much ignored and poorly catalogued collection of the diaries kept by Jeanne Proust, Marcel's mother. Despite the head librarian's opinion that they contain only the "natterings of a housewife," Marie begins to translate them, and discovers that Jean Proust's diary is as illuminating for what is *not* said as what is there.

Entwined with Marie's story are the diary entries that she has translated: Jeanne Proust's records of day-to-day life in her Paris household, which make up the second strand of this novel. Jeanne's diary includes all aspects of life at 9 Boulevard Malessherbes, everything from the difficulties of cutting rich desserts from the dinner menu to the latest Parisian headlines to her fears for the health and literary ambitions of Marcel. She's a worrier, Madame Proust, but also ferociously protective and supportive of her frail son, and the trials of her small world come across as powerfully as the goings-on outside her doors. Madame Proust's diary entries, particularly those from the height of the Dreyfus Affair, also convey her experiences as a Jewish woman within a prominent Catholic family and a privileged social class. And it is this thread that makes Marie recognize the difficulties of finding the woman's true voice, given the atrocities to come during the Second World War.

As she continues her work, Marie increasingly explores the devastation of the Holocaust and wonders about our collective responsibility to remembering -- and recording -- its truths. Her explorations of Paris, first limited to the Proustian tour, begin to include memorial sites such as the one at Drancy, a transit camp on the route to Auschwitz. During her travels she comes across references to Max's mother's family, the Bensimons, and begins to make connections between the overbearing mother Max so often complains about and Madame Proust. She also starts to recognize the horrible burden Sarah Segal must carry.

Sarah's story is the third strand of this novel. Sarah Segal -- née Bensimon, then Simon -- was sent to Canada from France at age twelve, just as the Nazis were beginning to round up Parisian Jews. Growing up with her foster family in Toronto, she is never able to escape the loss of her parents, and as a young woman she travels back to Paris to discover that they did, in fact, die at Auschwitz. But despite -- and perhaps due to -- finding out what happened to them, Sarah is unable to fully adjust to her life in Canada. She doesn't know how to communicate with her son or her husband, and finds even the most mundane domestic events overwhelming. It is only when she retreats to her kitchen, determined to fuse her French and Jewish histories by mastering a kosher version of classic French cuisine, that she begins to face her sorrow head on.

**Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen** is Kate Taylor's first novel, and has been highly praised by

reviewers. Most comment on Taylor's wonderful ability to weave together three distinct stories in such a way that the larger truths emerge from among their combined details, and on the subtle way she is able to meld history and fiction. As one literary critic has stated, "**Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen** marks the stunning emergence of a writer from whom we can expect much in the future."

## **Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen Details**

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# From Reader Review Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen for online ebook

## Linda Tuplin says

Interesting book, especially the diary entries and glimpse into who Proust was. But I found the characters a bit confusing as to how they fit into the overall story and had to keep reminding myself of who they were and what/why they were talking.

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## Tim Love says

Sarah, born 1929, was evacuated from Paris to Canada in 1942. She was fostered by Sam and Rachael. In 1951 she returned to Paris to confirm that her Jewish parents had died. In 1956 back in Canada she married Dan Segal, son of Lionel and Clara. In 1966 they had Max, loved in vain by Marie, who goes to Paris to read the original journals of Proust's mother.

One can piece together this chronology from dates and interval-lengths mentioned in the text - the tales are told largely in parallel, dominated by extracts from the journals. Why would Marie (who's not an academic) make such an obsessive trip to Paris? True, she'd read Proust at school and beyond, but that doesn't explain it. Not until much later does she say that she went to see when or whether Mme Proust realised what her son's tendencies were, but I'm not convinced. Marie traces a link from Max to Marcel to Mme Proust to Sarah, but again I can't buy the emotional investment put into the Proust connection. If there was more contact between Marie and Sarah it would make more sense.

There are cross-overs between the stories - Marcel has an english-speaking friend called Marie who goes to Canada; the medical profession; glass and crockery are broken - and there are repeated themes: Jewishness, childlessness, and Mothers worrying about their son's marriages. The later Sarah bores me - too obsessed with food (but Mme Proust's no slouch herself in that regard). The scene where she smashes up her kitchen seems over-symbolic to me.

I think appreciation of the book is easier if you know Proust and like reading Journals - the extensive journal entries are made up, but sound convincing. The general reader will like the writing even so - "There is a place along a riverbank, a few urban streets quickly giving way to small country houses with gardens opening onto the towpath. Men fish, my parents walk ahead of me along the river. Have I visited this place or dreamt it? Was it the destination of a weekend outing or has my imagination given three-dimensional life to a scene painting by Serat or Monet that I must have seen in a museum?" (p.56). That extract shouldn't lead you to think that the book's "Proustian" though - Marie doesn't seem to be recovering anything, with her it's more reconciliation.

At the end the narrator looks forward to writing this book, finding salvation in the shape of literature much as Marcel did, I suppose, and maybe like Mme Proust too. Sarah's not into the Arts, we're told.

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## Silvery says

03, estrellas

Esta novela se compone de tres historias: los diarios de Jeanne Proust; la madre del novelista francés Marcel Proust (En busca del tiempo perdido), una traductora, que precisamente traduce estos diarios y la tercera, es de una niña judía refugiada en Canadá.

Personalmente me quedo con la historia de Jeanne Proust, las otras lamentablemente no lograron mi interés, a pesar de su aparente relación con Madame Proust.

"He encontrado la cura para el desconsuelo. Es la literatura. Aunque no he descubierto nada que el hijo del doctor Proust no supiera hace un siglo" Madame Proust y la cocina kosher.

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## Felice says

There are a few cover images that I am a sucker for. One of them is a kettle. Not a Ma or Pa Kettle but a boil the water kettle. I will always, always examine a book with a kettle on the cover. There was always a kettle on my Mother's stove and I love the shape of them. I guess that's the appeal. Plus I drink a lot of tea too if that counts.

Hence my picking up Madame Proust and the Kosher Kitchen by author Kate Taylor. Once again the power of the kettle (thank you mighty kettle) didn't let me down. This is also a first novel which is another favorite category for me. Madame Proust is a marvelous, thoughtful novel. This is the story of 3 women, 3 different time periods and the power of love and memory.

The Madame Proust of the title is the real Madame Proust. Marie, in Paris from Montreal, is working on a life of Proust but when she arrives at the Bibliothèque Nationale the files containing the uncatalogued diaries of Madame are all she's allowed to see. They are described disdainfully by the head librarian as "the natterings of a housewife". Marie begins the translation and is immediately absorbed in Jean Proust's writings. Jean's worries about her frail son and the management of her household are interesting but it is her writings on the headlines of the day and experiences as a Jewish woman in a Catholic family that bewitch Marie.

Interwoven into Madame's story are Marie's and Sophie's. Marie is burying herself in work in response to a bad love affair with Sophie's son, Max. Sophie is the child of French Jews who died in the Holocaust. She was sent to Canada as a child and adopted. Despite the love of her adoptive family, Sophie is unable to stop worrying and as adult is unable bond with her husband and son.

What binds the experiences of these woman into a novel and not a series of short stories is superior writing. Their need to protect what they love and yet not be able to get close to what they love is moving. The marriage of all the histories and the characters makes this a very successful first novel. That and how very readable it is. Taylor is able to fade in and out of these 3 lives as easily as clouds cover and uncover sunlight.

Happy.

P.S. Confession time. The edition of Madame that I picked up is the one with the kettle, but the current edition is kettle-less and much less attractive, but pick it up anyway, ok?

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### **Tracey says**

I loved this book , I've enjoyed a few hours happily imagining myself in Paris!

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### **Cherop says**

I've had this book in my collection for a few years now. I was intrigued by the cover and the title. I only started reading it this past week and enjoyed it quite a lot. I would rate it more highly except that the story is told from the perspective of 3 women and I felt that this weakened the book overall since the story line of Marie and Max just did not work for me. I thoroughly enjoyed the historical diaries of Mme. Proust and this is what carried me through to the conclusion of the book. Overall a satisfying read. I have a copy to swap with anyone who has a book I might want to read. I am open to titles beyond those on my "to-read" list.

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### **Larry says**

I finished this some time ago but failed to write a review as I don't like to be too critical but i just have to say this was a disappointment.

As one who will read anything about Proust this was a tantalizing prospect. Let me say at the outset that it is well written overall but falls down in achieving what is promised a coherent knitting together of the various threads that make up the novel. At a little shy of 500 pages I think it could have done with some serious editing, the best parts are the diary of Mme Proust. Its when the story of Sarah (Max and Marie) comes to the 1980's and 90s that the story becomes pedantic and uninteresting.

The thread (over a century) that joins the periods and characters is at best thin and somewhat contrived. The author says through one of the key characters Marie towards the end "I had some faint sense of a link between Max and Proust, a hunch..." I feel that's about it not much more than a hunch. The critics (I don't read before I read a book) say that the links are "Intricately structured" etc., I can easily see that characters in different times bear some resemblances but nothing that one could add specificity. That Jewish mothers dote on their sons, that those same sons may not provide grandkids as they may be gay is not something that only happened to Mme Proust in 1900 and a mother in Toronto in 1990 and sufficient to formulate a story!

There are some nicely written portions of the book and I repeat the diary section is excellent. I wanted to like this more but alas!!!!

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### **Montserrat says**

La coberta de l'edició espanyola és un veritable horror. No explica ni evoca res del llibre.

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**Katie says**

helps to have read (at least some of) *Remembrance of Things Past*, but probably still enjoyable.

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**Gayla Bassham says**

Lovely and engrossing. Sarah in particular is a very compelling character.

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**Rachelle Urist says**

I was sometimes confused while reading this book. The author switches voices, from one narrator to another, during the course of the story-telling. When I couldn't tell whether the narrator was Sarah, Marie, or someone else, it was frustrating. On the other hand, the research that went into the stories, particularly into the diary that Taylor creates for Mme. Proust, is spectacular. The diary entries held my attention throughout. Ditto for the story of young Sarah, sent to Canada from Paris by her parents just before the deportations of Jews under Hitler. But the parallel stories, ie, the stories of the adult Sarah, her son, Max, and Max's friend, Marie, all of which serve as foil to the older stories (the Proust family story and the story of young Sarah Bensimon), resemble their prototypes a bit too closely for my taste. It felt contrived.

Still, the whole is impressive for its erudition, its investment in examining and reclaiming historical fact, and for sharing the concerns of yesteryear by showing how they remain very real, continuing concerns today. For anyone interested in French language and literature, this book has particular appeal. I loved learning more about Marcel Proust and his family, particularly his Jewish mother (though Marcel was raised in his father's Catholic faith). By making Mme. Proust's contemporary incarnation a holocaust survivor, we get a better sense of what the Dreyfus affair may have meant to Mme. Proust, who never quite fit in with her Catholic family-through-marriage. Sarah's losses make everyday life a series of prospective horrors. Her anxieties, while hard to bear (even for the reader) make sense. The parallel stories of their sons, both promising young men with talent to succeed on several fronts, are rife with disappointment. The mothers cannot abide their sons' homosexuality.

I wish I knew whether the confusion I suffered during the reading has its source in me or in the writing.

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**Alison says**

About what I expected from Kate Taylor. It will lead to some interesting discussion at book club.

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**Catherine Davison says**

There was a lot I really liked about this book, I liked the scenes with the researcher going to the French

library to read MmeProust's diaries and recognising in the extracts the beginnings of Proust's famous work. I still haven't read the Remembrance of Things Past, I remember saying in my twenties I'd read it before I turned forty .... ah well I'll read it before I turn sixty. This book however was interesting in its fictionalisation of Proust's constantly worried mother but the more modern mothers in the story worried that their sons might be gay and not give them grandchildren, no, their concerns didn't seem relevant and the story lost its cohesion by trying to draw a connection between the three mothers. An ok read but I'm not recommending it.

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## **Maddy says**

I assumed this book would be a lot fluffier than it is. It deals with some pretty heavy stuff and seems to deserve a heavier, one-or-two word name , as opposed to a character and an important symbol from two different stories (which are, of course, related).

On the whole, I liked it, though it's definitely a "tell, not show" sort of book, in that character's motivations are spelled out in narration, rather than only having their actions indicate their motivations. Telling is generally considered a lower form of story telling than showing. (I feel like I should cite something for that, but I run into it in a lot of critical reviews of art, especially for TV and film.) But I personally don't mind, especially when done by Milan Kundera, the King of Expository Narration. That said, it does seem a bit clunky in this book. There are some parallels between the three entwined stories that seem a bit...obvious. (Present day Marie pines after a guy who, we find out late in the book, is gay. The historical artist and translator Marie who's friends with Proust is implied to be in love with him! Coincidence!) And yet, some motivations remain weirdly obscure to me - it's not clear to me why Current Marie pines after a gay man for so long, and 5 years after cutting off the friendship, makes an impulsive decision (flee to France! Study Proust!) that seems more like fresh grief than the frustration of not being over someone that you feel you should be over. (This is coming from someone who knows the latter feeling all too well. I'm puzzled by Current Marie's complacency about her own habits - but perhaps I'm more self-critical than she was. I don't see any frustration of not being able to control your own emotions even after a long time. It's not clear if she's seen other people, distracted herself with hobbies etc or just rolled over and accepted she'll love a gay man for 5 years. Yikes.)

I can't decide if I appreciate the author's decision to use three intertwining tales spanning a century to examine the psychology of neurotic women who are much too attached to the men in their lives. On the one hand, it's a hazard of being female that most (including lots of feminists, I'm sure) would like to ignore. The author doesn't directly state that this may be a byproduct of a patriarchy where (bourgeoise) women don't work outside the home, but it is implied that while Mme Proust and Sarah may die (or at least get to age 70) neurotically worrying about and cossetting their sons and seemingly having little of their own identity, Old-Timey Marie Nordlinger and Current Marie can possibly pull themselves out of sexual attachments to gay men via their careers (and by identifying with men and male agency, as Current Marie decides to, like Proust, move from translation to authorship, non-agency to agency). It may take 5+ years though, career ladies; be warned.

On the other hand, it's really, really hard to sympathize with neurotic characters who don't have a lot of agency (even when they can), even if enough back story is given (over-narration!) to make their insecurities believable and understandable. I assume the author wanted to reclaim the negative stereotype of smothering mothers and pathetic fag hags (?) but I'm not sure it's entirely successful. Sarah is the most pathetic but also the most unlovable character and her cathartic moment is not followed up on. Again, the over-narration tells us that she's finally able to grieve her son's grandparents and her grandchildren\* (nice line!) but we don't see



a follow up to see if it stuck, or if it made her less emotionally-distant-yet-anxious. There's some hope, I guess.

Lastly, I've read a lot of these first-person-narrator-starts-to-write-the-novel-you've-just-finished stories lately (I suppose it's inevitable if the novel addresses the importance of novel-writing in a post-modern way) and man, it's getting cliched fast. I don't quite understand how Current Marie knows enough of Sarah's life to write the novel as it's implied that Max doesn't talk about it much. Perhaps Sarah's life is entirely Marie's imagination, which adds another (to me) vaguely annoying post-modern unreliable narrator layer.

\*The complete non-mention of possible gay adoption brings up (a) the fact that this book was written before national legalized gay marriage in Canada and (b) the book's theme that adoption is not enough (for Sarah anyway) and the loss of blood relations haunts your life. In some ways this book is completely politically incorrect. Women are neurotic beings completely tied to their relationships with men! Adoption will never fill your aching need to belong! Come to think of it, this book probably barely passes the Bechtel Test, very surprising for a book written by a woman with three female protagonists.

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## **Debby says**

It is hard to say I read this book ....As I struggled up to page 130 + and then skipped all the diary parts and read a bit more and then read the two last pages .

This is a "found" book .That is I found it in a box ,downstairs .The title sounded promising ,but I could not get in to the book .The diary part sounded very modern and written by a younger person then Proust's mother (this is not an actual diary ). There was something in the tone of the whole book that did not suit me .I could not find anything "magnificent " ,neither a fresh view of the periods she tackles in this book .

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