

FICTION

A PARISIAN PRESENT INTRUDES ON A LONG ISLAND PAST

The Art of Regret

BY MARY FLEMING

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By Eleanor Bader

At the start of Mary Fleming's insightful second novel, *The Art of Regret*, Paris resident Trevor McFarquhar is something of a sad sack.

The bike shop he owns is barely bringing in enough money to pay the rent on his shabby, under-furnished, studio apartment and he and his financially successful younger brother, mom and stepfather barely talk to one another, having settled into a thoroughly superficial relationship several decades back. He's pushing 40, has few friends and wants only "casuals" — multiple-night stands with comely young women that include neither strings nor emotional intimacy.

And although Trevor once dreamed of becoming a professional documentary photographer, a serious bike accident right

has the emotional wherewithal to broach these topics. Even more worrisome, he has to accept that raising them might hasten Helen's death or drive an even bigger wedge between them.

This is big stuff and the novel does not tackle these issues within a linear time-frame. Instead, long before the Big Reveal, a host of things happen. Among them, a prolonged transit

strike forces the city's people to become bike riders, filling Trevor's once-moribund shop with eager customers. Indeed, the volume becomes so overwhelming that Trevor hires an assistant, an undocumented Polish immigrant who quickly makes himself indispensable. In addition, a stroke of serendipity brings a dog into Trevor's life, giving his days an unfamiliar but oddly comforting routine and structure. Lastly, there's his relationship with Stephanie, an inappropriate sexual partner — or maybe an unhealthy obsession — that he knows cannot and should not be sustained.

As is obvious, there's a lot going on in *The Art of Regret*. Furthermore, the streets of both working-class and bourgeois Paris are presented in vivid detail. So, too, are political observations about social class,



TYRONE WALLACE

before he was scheduled to mount his first exhibition as an up-and-coming twenty-something derailed his career, leaving him mired in low-level depression, a condition he has done nothing to shake.

What's more, he's haunted by the past and the deaths, one year apart, of his sister and father. The family had been living in Long Island, New York, when five-year-old Franny was hit by a car. A year later, his dad tumbled off the roof of their home while supposedly securing a television antenna.

But was his death really an accident? Or did his dad commit suicide?

Trevor only knows what he was told as a 10-year-old kid, but he continues to stew in confusion and grief; this reaction is made worse by his mom's silence about what actually happened. Other questions also nag at him. Why, for example, did his mom move the family to Paris almost immediately after these tragedies occurred? Why did she marry Edmond, a Parisian financier, so quickly? Even more important, why didn't they ever talk about Franny? Had his mother completely forgotten their earliest years as suburban Americans?

Flash forward 30 years and Trevor's mom, Helen, is now dying of cancer. This gives Trevor an urgent, now-or-never opening to probe topics he had long assumed were verboten. The situation is, of course, highly fraught and Trevor has to determine if he

discrimination against immigrants, the sexual politics of family life and the pervasive belief that a heterosexual couple is incomplete without children. Relationship ethos are probed as are the limits of friendship and personal autonomy. In addition, a well-crafted denouement that addresses reconciliation — the healing that often accompanies forgiving those who trespass against us — gives the novel added heft as well as intellectual staying power.

Beautifully written, tender, evocative, and moving, *The Art of Regret* is a cogent reminder that risk-taking is essential to a well-lived life. Trevor's bravery in speaking to his mother about long-suppressed issues pays off, allowing him to parse the past with an adult understanding of mourning and its aftereffects, and open himself up to deeper relationships with friends and potential mates. It's hopeful and realistic, inspiring and heartfelt.

No one wants to die staring down a bushel of regrets or lamenting a roster of should-haves. Both Helen and Trevor provoke us to figure out ways to make sure that we confront our demons, push boundaries and live as fully as possible. I, for one, want to thank Mary Fleming for the reminder.

HERITAGE



ALL PHOTOS JIMIN KIM

BEATING THE DRUM

The annual Bronx Native American Festival, brought together hundreds of members of indigenous communities in the Western Hemisphere on Sept. 29. The gathering celebrates, and works to preserve and pass down indigenous cultures through dance, poetry, song

and food. Bobby Gonzalez, a Taino poet and lifelong Bronx resident, founded the festival 25 years ago.

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