

PENGUIN READERS GUIDE

THE CONFIDANT

AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE CONFIDANT*

Annie has always been a part of my life. I was two years old, just a few days short of my second birthday, when she was born. We lived in the same village—N.—and I often happened upon her when I wasn't looking for her—at school, out on walks, at church (p. 7).

So begins the first letter that Camille unexpectedly receives from the mysterious Louis. Without explanation, the letters dive into a reminiscence of a lost childhood love and soon twist into a tale of jealousy, passion, and betrayal. Sharply observed and deeply affecting, H el ene Gr emillon's debut novel and international sensation, *The Confidant*, charts the lengths to which people can be driven by obsession and revenge.

As the letters arrive each week without fail, Camille's initial puzzlement turns to curiosity: Who is Louis? Why is he compelled to write to her of his beloved Annie, a quiet, artistic teenager, and her bizarre friendship with the wealthy Madame M? Louis adores Annie and his heartache is profound as he writes of losing her to the private world inside Monsieur and Madame M's home. The older woman, desperate for a child, makes a cruel and perverted request of Annie; Annie's acceptance of that request, born of misguided affection and youthful innocence, has devastating consequences for both women. Yet Louis never stops loving Annie, and his letters detail her life in all its passion and its pain.

Camille begins to live within the letters, escaping from her own life and into the world of Nazi-occupied Paris and N., the unknown village. But as the pieces fall into place, Camille's curiosity turns to fear that these letters are meant to reveal something of her past that she never could have imagined.

H el ene Gr emillon has created a dual narrative that shifts seamlessly between Camille's Paris of 1975 and Louis's war-torn France, and the characters—young and old, separated by more than thirty-five years—are authentic and compelling. As Louis's letters continue, Annie and Madame M begin to speak through him, sharing two very different sides of the tragic tale and revealing the complicated realities behind their story: the desperate love that inspired Madame M's merciless actions, and the relentless determination beneath Annie's quiet exterior.

The Confidant grabs hold and does not let go; the book's success across the globe is evidence of its haunting appeal. Readers follow Camille as she untangles the knots of this complex, absorbing story and the painful psychological truths of its characters caught at the crossroad of desire and obligation, love and cruelty. *The Confidant* is a smart and intricately plotted novel of secrets kept and lies told that doesn't reveal the full scope of its mystery until the very last line.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hélène Grémillon worked in advertising and journalism before becoming a writer. Born in France, she currently lives in Paris with her family. This is her first novel.

A CONVERSATION WITH HÉLÈNE GRÉMILLON

1. You preface the novel with a few words by Federico Garcia Lorca: “The past wears / its armoured breastplate / and blocks its ears / with the cotton of the wind. / No one will ever be able to / tear its secret away.” What does that quote mean to you?

First of all, I love epigraphs. I always read them before buying a book; for me, that’s the first step. It’s one of my criteria in deciding what to read. I can’t imagine writing one without this soft preamble. That’s why it’s so important, and difficult to choose, but also fun, like a game. I love that moment.

How did I choose this particular one? While I was writing, I put aside some sentences that I encountered along the way (in newspapers, in books, in theater, in life . . .), sentences which seemed to talk about my book, my story. And when I finished *The Confidant*, I reread all of them and immediately this one stuck out. It’s the quintessence of the whole book.

2. *The Confidant* has been translated into many languages. Do you feel that each culture will respond to the novel differently? For example, would the section of the novel that takes place in Nazi-occupied Paris resonate in a different way to a French reader than to an American?

Of course the book will be taken in different ways in different countries. But as far as the setting goes, *The Confidant* is not a historical novel. The story itself is what is important; the rest is only context, not the main focus. My goal is for readers to be carried away by the characters and what happens to them.

3. *Louis and Camille’s* narratives are both complex and detailed. Tell us about how you approached writing and structuring the novel’s twin stories.

At the beginning, I wanted to work on the relationship between the different points of view in the love story. So I wrote the perspective of each character on separate sheets of paper and in different color pens. And after that, I put them together, like a puzzle.

4. *Elisabeth’s* struggle to be a mother and *Annie’s* struggle to be with her child are realistic and emotionally searing. Did your own experiences as a mother play into these parts of the story? How difficult was it to inhabit those moments?

This did not really come from my own experience because it’s not my story at all. I invented it, from start to finish. But obviously, because I am a mother, it helped me to understand my characters more and put myself in their shoes.

5. *One of the strengths of The Confidant is its attention to detail, in both its language and its historical elements. Did you do a great deal of research into World War II and the Nazi occupation?*

I read a lot. I can't say how many books I read and underlined in all directions . . . I was looking for something picturesque, not something that anyone who knows a little bit about the period would know. I tried to find an original angle. Following that, the real challenge is to find just the right element needed to say something specific about my characters (not just to use the element to use the element).

6. *You've had so much success with this first novel. Does the public acclaim and attention affect your process of writing a second book?*

It does, but in different ways. First, I have had to travel a lot for the promotion of the book, and even if that was a really great moment, it also leaves less time for writing and constantly brings me back to the story of *The Confidant*, taking me out of the new story I am writing. On a different note, it has encouraged me and given me more motivation for writing.

7. *Camille is forced to revise her understanding of her family and therefore her understanding of herself. Like Camille, have you ever had an experience that has entirely shifted your way of thinking or being?*

Every day. Obviously not as important as for Camille, but each day, I try to put myself in the place of someone I don't understand and I try to understand them—how they work, why they think the way they do.

8. *The last few pages of the novel are particularly arresting and uniquely presented, moving from prose to poetry. It's a bold decision to shift storytelling techniques at the end of the novel. Why did you make this choice?*

Because it came to me exactly that way. Very often when I write, I have doubts. But when things are very clear to me, I keep them, otherwise I will never finish a book. I'll live my whole life wondering if I should change something else. In my mind I heard these sentences, like a song or a film narrative. When I was writing this passage, I kept thinking about the film *The Usual Suspects*, where at the end all of the different stories come together and reveal what really happened. Poetry was what I found to put rhythm to the revelation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Was Louis right to share this story with Camille? Why did he wait until after her mother had died?
2. What is the significance of Camille's own pregnancy?
3. Which character is, in your opinion, the most to blame for the unhappiness in the novel? Is there any justice in the end?
4. Is Annie a victim or a perpetrator of her own unhappiness?
5. Do you have any sympathy for Elisabeth? What about Paul? Why or why not?

6. In *The Confidant*, does love function as a divisive force, a healing element, or a tool for survival?
7. What impact does a written letter have that a conversation does not? Why does Louis approach Camille this way?
8. Louis is a mysterious figure—we hear from him but never interact with him. What do you imagine he looks like? Describe his life beyond the novel.
9. In their own ways, both Elisabeth and Annie take extreme measures for the well-being of their child. How far would you go for the sake of your family?
10. Would Camille have had a happier life with Annie or with Elisabeth? Does each mother provide something the other does not?
11. How do you interpret the meaning of the final line of the book?