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Melanie's Song by Joanna Biggar

“Melanie's Song”

Novel

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A sequel to her 2010 novel, *That Paris Year*, which followed five California girls on their junior year abroad, in 1962, at the Sorbonne, Joanna Biggar's new novel follows the same five characters, again mainly from the point of view of J.J., a journalist for the Pasadena Star. It's a dozen years later and we're back in California. One of the friends, Jocelyn, is a famous movie star; another, Eve, the former wife of an up-and-coming politician, has renounced the world and become a nun in Africa, and Gracie has become a scientist at Cal Tech. The fifth friend is Melanie from the novel's title.

Melanie has “disappeared,” possibly dead.

After her marriage to a celebrated composer and violinist, Hans, collapses, Melanie becomes something of a fugitive, leaving her husband in Rochester, NY, going first to Woodstock and later to the South and elsewhere as a sort of mysterious underground activist before the remains of a woman are discovered at a burned-down hippie commune in northern California, remains that might be hers. The main story is about discovering where and who Melanie really is. This is J.J.'s project, both as a friend and as a newspaper reporter. The mystery of the fire only adds urgency to the

search—as well as a compelling punch to the story JJ is writing for her newspaper.

Like a true investigative reporter, J.J. pieces together the story from interviews and research, personal observation. Much of the background comes in the form of journal entries from the diaries Melanie has bequeathed to J.J., as well as from letters and interviews. J.J.'s sleuthing, not unlike a private detective, is part of the charm of this novel. The accounts she gets of Melanie are often contradictory; J.J.'s job is to sort out the truth. At the same time, she has her own story involving parents, her beloved grandmother, Gran, who is declining, and an old lover, Guy Halbert, MIA in Vietnam, whose memory is still vividly painful. These all blend together, as do the demands of her editor, a bully named Purvis, giving us the picture of a journalist at work, developing her stories, self-editing even as she composes, verifying facts, self-correcting, agonizing over her decisions.

Indeed, one of the strong themes in *Melanie's Song* is what is truth, the limitations of journalism based on “facts.” So many of the perspectives on Melanie are contradictory. By all accounts, her husband Hans is a cold, selfish jerk, and yet his *Symphony in G for Melanie*, which he performs one evening in Pasadena, seems a true expression of love for his “muse.” How to sort out “truth.” Melanie's parents' bogus story about their daughter's “death,” for instance, is clearly self-serving, offensive to J.J.—and others.

As J.J. grapples for the factual truth about Melanie—*Did she really die in the fire?*—she runs hard up against the limitation of facts. Indeed, many of her insights about Melanie come in her dreams. What are the ethical limitations in telling truth? What J.J. finally winds up deciding to do to get to the bottom of Melanie's story—composing *Melanie's Song*, indeed—is one of the surprises of this novel, and I won't spoil it here!

The complaint usually leveled at *That Paris Year* is that Biggar's characters are weak, the five women virtually indistinguishable from one another – privileged California white girls who suffer the same sort of regrets and angst, have similar issues with their parents and have spectacularly lousy love lives. Biggar's strong suit, however, is plot. She can tell a good story in

unique ways, combining flashback and straight story-telling with epistolary narrative that keeps the reader turning the pages as she shuffles focus among various characters like a poker player dealing cards.

But yes, sometimes the characters really do feel like clichés. The novel begins with the discovery of the burned hippie commune, HI-DIDDLE, and interactions with a full-figured café owner, Mama Cass, and her hairy friend Moon. JJ even reflects, “My God ... I end up here, a fugitive on the Mendocino Coast, placing my bets on some caricature named Moon.” Moon’s not the only cliché. There’s also the irascible newspaper editor Bud Purvis, and Jocelyn’s sometimes-lover, Dru, who says things like, “Ah, my curious beauty,” and “You make us seem like, how do you say, sneaky kids.” Think Charles Boyer. Right out of romantic comedies. But these characters all serve a purpose to the plot, so we shouldn’t quibble too much about their shallowness. Moon, certainly, looms large, menacing, even after his inauspicious introduction. Indeed, he is the true villain of the piece. Alice, J.J.’s colleague at the *Pasadena Star*, likewise seems to come from central casting, but she’s no less endearing for all that as the wise newspaper insider with pencils poked into her hair.

Speaking of Biggar’s characters, *family* is another potent theme throughout. Biological families, chosen families, impromptu families. The *demoiselles*, as J.J. calls her *copines*, the girls who spent the year abroad together, are another kind of family. When it comes time to find parents for Jazz, the orphaned son of Melanie, the hippie chick, Cat, speaking to the four remaining friends, urges “the lot of you to draw round him, like a real family would.” Their bond is the glue that holds the novel together as we learn the fates of each of these girls, switching the focus on each.

Time and again the real, biological families appear as failures. Even J.J.’s father, before he becomes the likeable granddad figure, is more a philandering dirty old man. And Melanie’s mother and father—her entire dysfunctional family—often appear loathsome. Similarly, the hippie commune “family” is truly a disaster. Charles Manson even comes to mind!

Melanie's Song is, sentence by sentence, well-written and compelling. For anybody nostalgic about the 1970's, revolutionary politics and the hippie lifestyle, this is likewise a satisfying novel.

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