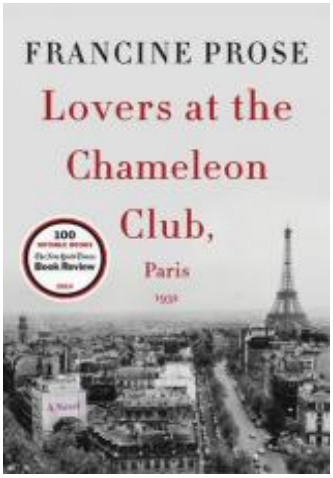
Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932

by Francine Prose



About the Book

Paris in the 1920s shimmers with excitement, dissipation and freedom. It is a place of intoxicating ambition, passion, art and discontent, where louche jazz venues like the Chameleon Club draw expats, artists, libertines and parvenus looking to indulge their true selves. It is at the Chameleon where the striking Lou Villars, an extraordinary athlete and scandalous cross-dressing lesbian, finds refuge among the club?s loyal denizens, including the rising Hungarian photographer Gabor Tsenyi, the socialite and art patron Baroness Lily de Rossignol, and the caustic American writer Lionel Maine.

As the years pass, their fortunes --- and the world itself --- evolve. Lou falls desperately in love and finds success as a race car driver. Gabor builds his reputation with startlingly vivid and imaginative photographs, including a haunting portrait of Lou and her lover, which will resonate through all their lives. As the exuberant '20s give way to darker times, Lou experiences another metamorphosis --- sparked by tumultuous events --- that will warp her earnest desire for love and approval into something far more.

Discussion Guide

1. The story of LOVERS AT THE CHAMELEON CLUB, PARIS 1932 centers around Lou Villars. Who is she? What do we learn about her as the novel progresses? What three adjectives would you use to describe her?

2. The novel is told in the voices of the various contemporaries of Lou. How does this method of narration add to the drama and depth of the story? Do you trust one viewpoint more than another? Did you like one narrator more than another?

3. There is another voice in the novel that is not part of Lou?s circle --- or even of the time --- Nathalie Dunois. What does her voice add to the story? When you learn about Nathalie later in the book, how does it affect your understanding of Lou? What is Francine Prose trying to convey to us about the nature of narrative truth? Can we trust any of the

characters in the book? Can we ever trust personal narrative --- whether in fiction or nonfiction? What are the implications for our understanding of these characters --- especially Lou?

4. Discuss Lou?s circle --- the photographer Gabor Tsenyi, his girlfriend Suzanne Dunois, Baroness Lily de Rossignol, the Chameleon Club?s manager, Yvonne Nagy, the American journalist Lionel Maine, German racer Inge Wallser and even the collaborator Jean-Claude Bonnet. What impact did they have on Lou?s life and outlook? Describe a few of them as individuals and their relationships with each other. What do they each think of Lou? What do Lou?s subsequent actions hold for each of their lives? Choose one character and tell the story from his or her viewpoint.

5. What precipitated Lou?s actions before and during the war? Was it spurned love, lost opportunity or something more? Think about her character. Might Lou have acted the same way even if circumstances were different? How much influence did the Nazis have over her? Think about her childhood. How did the circumstances of her youth shape her? What about notions of nationalism and cultural chauvinism? Did they color who she was? Do you think she ever really considered the consequences of her choices?

6. Talk about the Chameleon Club. What purpose does it serve in the novel? Who were its patrons and what drew them there? What about Lou? How were places like the Chameleon Club indicative of their time?

7. Discuss the Paris that is recreated in the pages of the novel. How is the city itself a character? What is intriguing about Lou Villar?s Paris? Would you have liked to visit this Paris? Can you feel the winds of change shifting in the novel? How does Francine Prose create mood and atmosphere? How do both add to the story as it unfolds?

8. In her biography of Lou, Nathalie writes, ?Not only does creative work mine the rich veins of the unconscious, it also has an uncanny ability to obtain what the artist needs, from the world.? How does creative work ?mine the rich vein of the unconscious?? How does it have ?an uncanny ability to obtain what the artist needs, from the world?? Use examples from this work or another to explain your understanding of Nathalie?s words.

9. What is the role of art in the novel? How is it used to elevate the spirit and how can it be used for evil? Think about the period. How did the Nazis use art to promote their cause?

10. Would Lou feel at home with the political atmosphere today --- the divisions between left and right, the anger over immigration, the ?takers? and the ?makers?? How does Lou?s world compare to today? Use examples from the story to illustrate your ideas.

11. Late in the novel, the Baroness confides, ?During the Occupation we learned to live with fear and humiliation, anger and insults, the witnessing of horrific scenes one could hardly believe were real.? How did their lives and their art change as the political situation shifted --- as their feelings of freedom turned to terror as fascism took hold?

12. At the end of the novel, well after the war, we learn that Lionel Maine is obsessed with the end of the movie *Carrie,* from Stephen King?s horror novel. Why do you think that final scene --- of the dead Carrie?s arm punching through the ground where she is buried --- affects him so much?

13. What are your impressions of LOVERS AT THE CHAMELEON CLUB, PARIS 1932? Did it meet your expectations? What made your group choose to read the novel? What did you take away from your reading? If you've

read other stories that bring to life this period and place, how do they compare to LOVERS AT THE CHAMELEON CLUB?

Author Bio

Francine Prose is the author of 23 works of fiction, including the highly acclaimed THE VIXEN; MISTER MONKEY; the *New York Times* bestseller LOVERS AT THE CHAMELEON CLUB, PARIS 1932; A CHANGED MAN, which won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize; and BLUE ANGEL, which was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Her works of nonfiction include the highly praised 1974: A Personal History; ANNE FRANK: The Book, The Life, The Afterlife; and the *New York Times* bestseller READING LIKE A WRITER, which has become a classic.

The recipient of numerous grants and honors, including a Guggenheim and a Fulbright, a Director?s Fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, Prose is a former president of PEN American Center, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College.

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