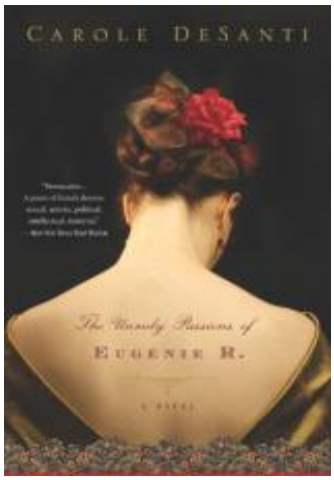
The Unruly Passions of Eugenie R.

by Carole DeSanti



About the Book

France?s Second Empire (1860?1871) was an absinthe-soaked era during which real estate speculation and railway money created untold fortunes, while prostitution was a state-regulated enterprise that touched every stratum of society. It was also a time of sweeping social upheaval, culminating in a crushing Prussian invasion that cut Paris off from its food supply. Transporting us to this tumultuous time through the eyes of a beautiful, world-wise survivor, **The Unruly Passions of Eugénie R.** provides lush territory for reading groups.

This captivating debut novel traces the transformation of Eugénie Rigault, a naïve seventeen-year-old girl who follows her first love to Paris, only to find herself abandoned, pregnant, and penniless. Over the years, Eugénie develops into a fiercely determined, influential woman who never loses sight of the power of loyal friends, and the art of self-creation. After she is forced to abandon her infant daughter, Eugénie spends the next decade fighting to get her back, making a meager living in the treacherous waters of sexual commerce. Along the way she falls in love with an artist, a woman, and a revolutionary. Paris, the gleaming center of art and civilization in Europe, is enjoying its final years of prosperity before galloping headlong into the Franco-Prussian War. For Eugénie it is an addictive landscape, even as her fortunes ebb and flow. But as the gates of the city close against the advancing army, Eugénie must confront a bitter discovery about the man who set her fate in motion all those years ago.

This guide is designed to enhance your experience of Carole DeSanti?s **The Unruly Passions of Eugénie R.** We hope it will enrich your reading group?s exploration of this extraordinary novel.

Discussion Guide

1. ?I will be your protector,? Stephan tells Eugénie in chapter one, as she prepares to leave for Paris. Why is she vulnerable to betrayal, again and again? As she matures, how does she reconcile her need for a protector with her need for independence?

2. What is the effect of Eugénie?s storytelling style, and her confession that she had been pressured to write a memoir (though she doesn?t like to write)? What is ironic and amusing about the book?s sensational title, which would have caught the attention of censors in nineteenth-century France? How did the epigraphs from courtesan Céleste Mogador enhance the book?s realism?

3. Midway through the prologue, Eugénie asks, ?How does a woman learn to doubt herself? When does it happen, and why?? How would you respond to these questions? Is an American woman living in the twenty-first century less likely to doubt herself?

4. Discuss the lovers who truly capture Eugénie?s heart: Stephan, Chasseloup, Jolie, and Henri. What do they each offer her? How do they reflect various stages of her life?

5. Who are the power brokers in Eugénie?s world? How does she use her power once she is able to employ servants and recruit young girls to follow in her footsteps? Does the Napoleonic Code, meant to support established social values, benefit Eugénie?

6. How did you react to Giulia?s test of wills on the bitterly cold night when she refused warmth? In this novel, what separates those who survive from those who perish? How would you have fared if you had been in Eugénie?s circumstances?

7. Discuss the role of artists during the Second Empire, when new wealth led to new audiences for painters like Chasseloup. How does his vision as an artist compare to that of Eugénie?s mother?

8. How did you react to Beausoleil, the wealthy southerner who gives Eugénie a reprieve from poverty? How is he able to reject the idea of freedom for his slaves while he, as a gay man, experiences limited freedom himself?

9. Jolie and Odette form a circle of friendship that sustains Eugénie and other women. What enables them to be generous with each other, when resources are hard to come by? How does ginger cat Clio contribute to this circle of love?

10. Explore the many appetites described in this novel: for food, sex, beautiful clothing and jewels, opium and wormwood. What were your favorite scenes in which the author brings these hungers (and their fulfillment) to life?

11. What does Eugénie discover about herself when she travels to Auch? How are her memories of Tillac, her family?s village, transformed by her visit? Have you ever experienced a similar homecoming?

12. How does Eugénie?s identification with motherhood contour and influence her life? How does her definition of motherhood seem to differ from that of the society around her?

13. What do you predict for young Berthe?s future? What will she think of her mother, and of womanhood in general?

14. How does Eugénie?s registration as an *inscrit* hold her ?unruly passions? in check? On balance, does this situation help or harm her, or both? What are your thoughts on societies that regulate and tolerate prostitution today?

15. What did Eugénie help you discover about Europe?s history? Do the complaints raised by the Paris Commune have any resonance today? What can fiction teach us about history that a history book cannot?

Author Bio

Carole DeSanti is Vice President and Editor at Large at the Penguin Group, where she has championed numerous independent voices in women?s fiction, including Terry McMillan, Tracy Chevalier, Marisha Pessl, Deborah Harkness, and Penelope Lively. DeSanti clandestinely researched and wrote **The Unruly Passions of Eugénie R.** for more than a decade. She has been profiled in *Poets & Writers? Magazine*, published in the *Women?s Review of Books*, and awarded fellowships at the Five College Women?s Studies Research Center and at Hedgebrook.

Critical Praise

"This astonishing debut is a panoramic story of war and peace, love and betrayal, innocence and hard-won wisdom, told through the eyes of a compelling woman who kept me at her side through it all."

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