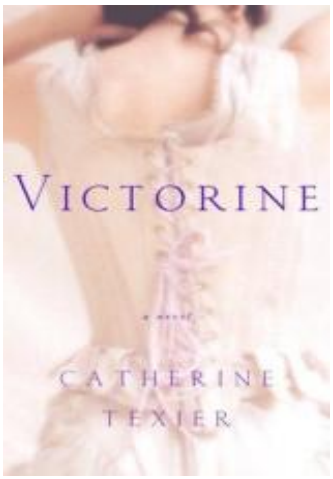
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Victorine: A Novel

by Catherine Texier



About the Book

In this lush, lyrical, and marvelously evocative novel, Catherine Texier takes a mystery from her family's past and draws from it a portrait of a remarkable woman --- her great-grandmother Victorine. A young schoolteacher in a quiet province in France, Victorine had married and had two children. But when she falls desperately in love, she makes a startling choice, leaving her family for her lover and a new life in Indochina.

On a single day in 1940, as Victorine reflects on her past, we travel back with her, from the willow-lined canals of her childhood home in Vendée to sun-drenched days and languorous nights along the Mekong River at the dawn of the twentieth century. Hers is an unforgettable story of adventure and self-discovery --- of a woman's struggle between duty and independence, tradition and freedom, longing and regret.

Discussion Guide

1. How would you describe Texier's style? Why has she chosen the structure of a single day late in Victorine's life interwoven with flashbacks? How does this structure work with the plot and the atmosphere of the novel? What effect does the structure have on the reader that a straightforward, chronological structure would not have had? What is the purpose of Texier's prologue and epilogue?

2. Describe the different places in **Victorine**. What do the landscapes hold for the characters and the story? How do the characters react differently to the various landscapes? How are Victorine's houses in both Vendée and Vietnam described? Why are they described in such detail?

3. How has growing up in a small village in Vendée, on the Atlantic coast of France affected Victorine, her personality

and desires? How has it influenced her decisions and compromises? Why does she escape this world, and then abandon her new life and return to France?

4. Why is the tale of how Victorine got her name important? Does it reveal anything about her and what she is going to be like? How do her childhood and her parents affect the adult Victorine? Describe her parents. In what ways is she similar to her father? How does he encourage her to follow her dreams?

5. Antoine tells Victorine, "I will not betray you." But Victorine reflects that she is the betrayer. Discuss the theme of betrayal in this novel. What types of betrayal occur in the novel? Who betrays whom? Is silence a betrayal? Antoine tells Victorine, "It's your silence that is poisoning your life." Do you agree with this statement? Are the French betraying the Vietnamese? Are they betraying the democratic ideals of their home country?

6. What is the role of opium in the novel? How do the various characters react to it and change their opinion of it over the course of the novel? How do the French use it to control the Vietnamese? How do various people use it to control others? Why do the French tax opium? What do you learn about French colonialism in Indochina through reading **Victorine**?

7. Discuss the theme of the corset and the unhooked woman in **Victorine**.

8. Compare/contrast Antoine and Armand. How does each court Victorine and win her heart? Why is she attracted to each man? How are her relationships with each man different and similar? What determines and undermines Victorine's romantic attachments? How do the events of the novel shift her ties to each man? Armand explains to Victorine, "If you're never satisfied with what you have, you'll always be miserable." Does she have a satisfying relationship with either man?

9. "How can she, just like that, walk from one man's bed to another's?" Victorine asks herself. How and why does she?

10. Describe her relationship with the Buddhist monk. What do they share? What does she learn from him, and perhaps him from her? How is he different from the other men in her life?

11. Contrast Victorine with the other women in the novel --- her sisters and Armand's sisters; her mother; Camille. What is her relationship like with these various women? Why does she want to continue working when all the other women around her are housewives?

12. What kind of mother is Victorine? Why doesn't she take her children with her when she escapes to Vietnam? How motherhood transformed or hindered Victorine? What is Victorine's mother like?

13. The novel raises the question of whether responsibility to one's children and husband and society are more sacred than duties to oneself. Discuss the tension between responsibility and freedom in Victorine's life. How does she both escape and embrace her feelings of captivity and independence? Does she remain true to herself with her decisions?

14. Victorine is filled with references and allusions to books and to writing. In what ways is the novel both telling a story and commenting on the importance of stories/novels in our lives? What is the importance of novels about women and far off lands to Victorine? Who are her favorite novelists? Name some of the books mentioned. What is the

significance of all the reference to writing ? postcards, journals, letters, teaching the students to spell words, learning Chinese calligraphy?

15. Why does Victorine throw away the notebook of her journal entries after keeping it all these years?

16. "She had a passion for the ocean." Discuss the abundant ocean and water (the canals of Vendée, the Mekong River) imagery in **Victorine**. What do the beach and the ocean represent for Victorine? What about the stuffed seagull?

17. How does food weave its way in the novel? Can you remember any of the meals the characters eat in Vendée or Vietnam?

Author Bio

Catherine Texier is the author of three previous novels, **Chloé l'Atlantique**,**Love Me Tender**, and **Panic Blood**, and a memoir, **Breakup**. She was the coeditor of the literary magazine Between C & D, is a regular contributor to the *New York Times*, and has written for *Newsday*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*,*CosmopolitanMarie Claire*, and *Nerve.com*. Texier lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

"I was so impressed by Victorine. Yes, it's love again, but such a candid view of it and in such an original voice. It's a haunting and remarkable read."

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Publication Date: April 20, 2004
Hardcover: 336 pages
Publisher: Pantheon
ISBN-10: 0375421246
ISBN-13: 9780375421242