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EMILY L.

By Marguerite Duras

Translated from the French by Barbara Bray

112 pp. Pantheon

Marguerite Duras, Goncourt Prize-winning author of *The Lover* and the screenplay *Hiroshima, mon amour*, combines again her gifts for the literary and visual arts in this arresting story that is part novella, part projective personality test laid upon a canvas. In a French quayside cafe in late summer, the French narrator, accompanied by the man she's been having an affair with that is "taking forever to die," grows absorbed by a British couple nearby. Impelled by an inescapable fear that is her "main point of reference," the narrator, a writer, projects onto the wan Englishwoman a life history that seems inextricably tied to her own and especially to her attempt to give it clarified shape as a story. The Englishwoman has been with the British Captain all her adult life--he was her first lover--but, as often with Miss Duras, love is accompanied by destruction. The woman, whom the narrator calls Emily L., had written poems in her youth which years later win high praise, but the Captain, unable to understand them or the part of her that needs to create, destroys the most important one, the poem-in-progress that would have cast light on the "internal difference where the meanings are." The poem remains unfinished, the couple remains together, the woman remains unfulfilled. Barbara Bray's restrained translation never obtrudes on the precision and spareness of the prose, the juxtaposed deadly accurate realism and oxymoronic surrealism: "I give up on you. At the same moment I stop talking to you forever and speak to you for the first time." The narrative floats freely between past and present tense to scramble any linear sense of time in favor of a poetic rendering of space--images and ideas planted firmly, then encircled with narrative and lucent description. With her typical depth shining through the minimalist surface, Miss Duras raises probing questions about love, art, fear and haunting sadness. Ultimately, she seems intent on obliterating any personal past with its limitations and horrors in favor of creating a fresh one free of pain and fear, free even of rational understanding as the narrator seeks "the unintelligibility of truth." This slender gem of a book, which has sold over 100,000 copies in France since it appeared in 1987, adds to the mounting evidence that Marguerite Duras is among the most important Continental writers of recent decades.