

READER'S GUIDE



The Perfect Circle by Pascale Quiviger

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INTRODUCING *The Perfect Circle*

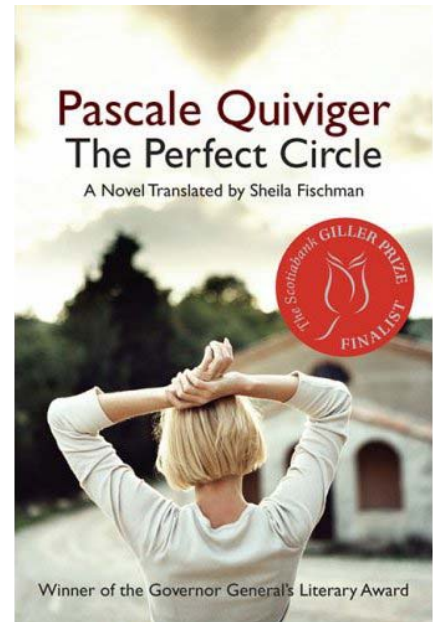
Nominated for the 2006 Scotiabank Giller Prize.

"You're in love, it shows, you don't know what to do." Before Marianne can begin explaining her circumstances, her cousin has already seen it in her face. While vacationing in Italy, Marianne meets and falls in love with Marco, who lives in a small village in Tuscany. He has a habit of leaving Marianne to spend her days alone, creeping back into her life on the occasional evening for supper, conversation, and tenderness. Despite his mysterious lapses, Marianne feels an all-encompassing love – she can't eat, she can't sleep. She feels as if she's waiting to happen.

Marianne returns to her native Montreal, but cannot escape her infatuation. So when Marco calls, asking her to come and live with him, she abandons her life in Canada. Leaving her home, her possessions, and her friends, Marianne returns to Italy hoping for the best, but secretly expecting the worst.

Upon her arrival, Marianne discovers that Marco is a creature of habit. He lives in a perfect circle, made up of his love for his dogs and for the hunt, the people of his town, and the countryside surrounding it all. Marianne finds that she must contend with Marco's mother, who takes care of him as if he were still a child.

Marianne's attempts to connect with Marco leave her on the periphery of his circle, but provide her with the self-knowledge and self-respect that will help transport her home. This first novel by Pascale Quiviger is marked by its luminous language and its unstinting look at what makes Marianne, Marco, and an entire village beyond, tick.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Arms-length

Observes Marianne of Marco, "No one knows you. Except your dogs." Marco rarely favours people with the tenderness he reserves for his dogs. Says Marianne, "Your politeness comes close to rudeness, it's so cold and automatic, it just shows how far removed from anyone else you want to be." Marco also distances himself from Marianne by leaving her at 5 a.m. every morning, isolating her in the empty house and, at least initially, excluding her from the daily meals he shares with his mother. Yet Marianne notices that he is also distanced in a tangible way, saying, "Your arms had a strange way of embracing me, then letting me go right away, as if to avoid holding me, as if to avoid making promises." When Marco stops by the house during their period of separation, Marianne wants to call out to him, but doesn't: "Come back, she wants to cry to him, though she knows that's all it would take to make him leave for good."

Waiting Game

"The world is there," insists Marco, to which Marianne replies, "But it always seems that it's not for me." Instead, Marianne begins to live her life according to Marco's schedule. Even waiting for Marco to return home becomes an activity. "While you wait for him," Marianne says of herself, "serenity is there with you." Marianne describes sex with Marco as "the closest to the state in which one is fully part of the world," suggesting that Marco represents her connection to the world. Yet Marianne's devotion has eventual repercussions; near the end of their relationship, Marianne says she "becomes a dormant thing at the foot of his love."

Mother Knows Best

Says Marianne of Marco's mother, "She's not just a mother, she's a field marshal, with weapons that smell good at mealtimes and a regiment of pots and pans at her command." The mother uses cooking, her traditional matriarchal duty, to cement her hold on Marco: "She realized long ago that she holds onto her men by the stomach, which compensates entirely for the fact that they keep her in the kitchen." Marianne worries she cannot compete with a woman who "knows and submits to [Marco's demands] as to the Ten Commandments." Says Marianne, "Every day spent there was a day spent losing him ... to his mother." In the company of Marco and his mother, Marianne observes that she is "like one mouth too many between child and breast."

Where Am I?

Freed from her past in a new country, Marianne hopes to experience the present. Says Marianne of herself, "During the years that separated you from childhood, you lived in expectation of the present tense, but it never came." But leaving home doesn't seem to enhance her sense of identity as, in the village, "No one ever inquires about Marianne. No one ever talks to her ... They know nothing about her." The very landscape that once offered her escape begins to trap her as "the longest flower stems are as upright as the bars of a cage." During her trip to Assisi, Marianne begins to question whether the life of the traveller suits her. Says Marianne: "The traveller doesn't burden himself with anything. After a moment, he realizes that he no longer burdens himself even with himself."

Perfect Circles

Marianne describes Marco's life as, "The perfect circle ... The universe on the scale of a village that you never leave. Every face is known, every word predictable." While Marianne is uprooted ("a foreigner who sleeps in Marco's family house") Marco is a citizen of the village, surrounded by his extended family. In the village, "They grow like plants in a pot so old, beneath a sky so blue that they suffer without ever thinking of any possible elsewhere." When she journeys outside the village to Assisi, Marianne says, "As soon as the train started up, I realized that I was intact, really, that I was myself, that I was able to step outside the perfect circle." Near the end of the novel, Marianne observes that, for her, "Happiness asks to move along with life, it requires that perfect circles be broken."

Q&A WITH PASCALE QUIVIGER

1. Where did the idea for this story come from?

The idea came from my travels to Italy, a country I immediately felt attracted to. I had the vertiginous temptation to leave everything in order to live there (which I eventually did). But at the core of this vertigo was a strange paradox: I felt more at home than anywhere else, yet it was a world of which I knew nothing and into which I often lost all my bearings. The book is mostly a result of diving into such a paradox, feeling damaged by the experience, and needing to write on identity issues.

2. Marco is stoic and broad, and loves nothing more than hunting and shooting. Is he the epitome of the "masculine man?" Is this what attracts Marianne?

I didn't mean to make Marco an epitome of masculinity. I am not sure such a thing exists (or should). Mostly, Marco impersonates the paradox I mentioned above; he makes Marianne feel at home yet keeps her in the margins of his world. Their relationship could be read as an extreme example of the difficulties partners often have in deeply accessing one another. I think that Marianne is attracted by that which remains, until the end, a sort of forbidden space in Marco's life. Hunting is the extreme metaphor for that; this is where Marco is most free to be himself, his most protected area of intimacy. And the more he protects his intimacy, the more Marianne feels challenged to access it.

3. Marco is unwilling to change or incorporate Marianne into his life. Is this chauvinism or does he simply have trouble understanding Marianne's unhappiness?

Marco is trapped by the weight of his culture and family dynamics. To a certain extent, he is a freethinker and a rather marginal character; but he doesn't manage to blossom out of the very narrow traditions of his village. He sees in Marianne an invitation to live closer to his real self, as well as a threat to the self he is used to living by. He gets involved in the relationship, but fails to develop its full potential. Traditions (most strongly represented by his mother) overtake his attempt to break free. Fear is what best explains his behaviour as far as Marianne is concerned. To a certain extent, both Marianne and Marco are invited to break free of a mould through the relationship; Marianne will make it, at the risk of madness, and Marco won't, for the sake of safety.

4. Marianne never retaliates against Marco's mother. Does this passivity reflect Marianne's doubts about her own worthiness?

Marianne reaches a stage of utter disorientation during which doubt is cast on everything, including her sense of worth. This is, in great part, what paralyzes her. But I also see Marianne as more of an observer than a participant in things. She genuinely tries to understand the rules of the world she has entered into, and is tiptoeing so as not to disturb it.

5. Once she makes the decision to return to Italy, it often seems as though Marianne lets the world happen to her. Is she waiting for salvation?

I wouldn't say "salvation," no. But she is somehow waiting for a higher truth to be revealed to her. She seeks to access a deeper sense of self, a sense of self that is detached from the one she carries in her own country, different from the skin she grew up in. Her journey could be understood as a sort of painful and reckless initiation to adulthood.

6. Marianne's initial descriptions of Italy and her affair with Marco are quite romantic. These descriptions are juxtaposed with her later descriptions of the village as poverty-stricken and monotonous. By the end of the book, is she closer to understanding "reality?"

At the beginning as well as the end, Marianne views the village according to her own state of mind. She first injects a lot of poetical meaning in her vision, which becomes gradually altered by depression. The interesting thing is that neither of those versions of the village is true or false: they are only perceptions. We often assume that "reality" has negative qualities and, vice versa, that romantic aspects of life are bound to be proved "unrealistic." We could easily turn that around and say that Marianne first saw in the village extraordinary characteristics that daily life tends to erode; Marianne could see things that other people couldn't perceive anymore. We touch upon a very philosophical question here: is there any such thing as an objective reality outside of what we perceive? To function in life, of course, I have to assume that the answer is "yes." But as a novelist, I have the luxury to believe it isn't.



ABOUT PASCALE

Pascale Quiviger was born in Montreal. She holds both a master's degree in Philosophy and a degree in Fine Arts. She lives in Italy, where she paints, writes and teaches visual arts. She has exhibited in both Canada and Italy, and has published a collection of short stories, *Ni sol ni ciel* (L'instant même, 2001). She is married and has a daughter.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss Marianne's devotion to Marco. Why does she fall in love with him? What does he represent to her?
2. How is Marco's conception of life different from Marianne's? He distances himself from people, yet doesn't seem to feel her sense of dislocation.
3. Near the end of the novel, Marianne says that, when she returns to Canada, Marco's dog Fulli will be "the one and only lost friend." Do Marco and Marianne relate better to the dogs than to each other? Why or why not?
4. What is the root of Marianne's unhappiness? What is she searching for?
5. What is the importance of the "angel" in Assisi? What does he help Marianne to realize?
6. Marco means everything to his mother, who uses food to cement her hold on him. Who holds the power in the relationship?
7. Is Marco's treatment of Marianne unfair? Is Marianne complicit in her own unhappiness?
8. How do you feel about the people in the village? Are they stuck in a "perfect circle?" Is their existence stagnant?
9. By the end of the novel, has Marianne learned anything? If so, what?