

Paris, He Said,' by Christine Sneed

By Robin Black

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If the American dream is a steady income, a home of one's own and the promise of a better future for the kids, then the American Fantasy might be summed up in one word: Paris. (Paree!) A Parisian vision of romance, indulgence and beauty has resided in the less responsible quarter of our national psyche since Ben Franklin spent nine years there, wined and dined, wooing and wooed. Franklin, Hemingway, Stein — and Carrie Bradshaw, too. The imagined Parisian life is a heady one, so when the aspiring painter Jayne Marks, the central figure in Christine Sneed's intricate new novel, "Paris, He Said," is offered an all-expenses-paid existence in the City of Light by Laurent Moller, a handsome, elegant, older gallery owner who also happens to be her lover, how can she possibly turn him down?

She can't. She doesn't. Sneed, author of the story collection "Portraits of a Few of the People I've Made Cry" and the novel "Little Known Facts," uses this irresistible offer as the kickoff for her third book's events, as Jayne sets out to live the fantasy. There is, however, a condition to the deal. "What you do and what I do outside of the apartment, that is not for the other person to worry over," Laurent says early on, ushering in what Jayne later describes as a "don't ask, don't tell" policy toward other lovers.

Part of Paris's allure has always been precisely this licentiousness, this laissez-faire posture toward infidelities. But what happens when the imagined becomes reality to one for whom it is not the norm? That's certainly one question this novel asks, as Jayne struggles over whether Laurent's proviso bothers her, liberates her or both at once. But "Paris, He Said" is about more than the double-edged sword of open relationships.

The book's true heart lies closer to the potentially even more discomfiting subject of ambition, and it is this focus that elevates "Paris, He Said" — from merely an entertaining novel about a near-universal fantasy to a serious - exploration of how one manages the hunger for recognition and success, and why one might harbor ambivalence about that aspect of oneself. Jayne, who shows no notable self-consciousness at being financially supported by a powerful man 20 years her senior, balks at the notion that she so much as dreams of showing her work in his gallery (perfectly and perhaps inevitably called *Vie Bohème*). But why shouldn't she hope he'd show her work? Why does it seem more shameful for a young woman to fantasize about professional recognition than to accept full financial support, a free and luxurious ride? These questions are not answered in the book, and it's not clear they can or should be. That they are raised is enough to add a satisfyingly complex and unexpectedly poignant element to Sneed's narrative.

To be clear, that poignancy arises from Jayne's journey toward understanding herself, and also from the section of the book in which Laurent tells his own story of realizing the limits of his painting talents; it does not arise from the central romance. "Paris, He Said" is no more a story about a specific interpersonal relationship, idiosyncratic, intimate and messy, than is any fairy tale. Even as Jayne and Laurent murmur *Je t'aime*, their arrangement seems more like a didactic hypothetical, concocted for the purpose of exploring thorny issues, than a believable love story.

This may or may not be what Sneed intended, but it is a defining characteristic of the work. “Paris, He Said” is not a book about being in love, even if at first blush it seems to want to be. It is a book about self-discovery, an absorbing, original tale about the questions we all end up confronting as we grapple with the interplay between who we are and who we think we want to be.

PARIS, HE SAID

By Christine Sneed

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Robin Black is the author, most recently, of the novel “Life Drawing” and of the forthcoming collection “Crash Course: 52 Essays From Where Writing and Life Collide.”

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