

27.02.2023

Review

Behind Appearances — A Review of Sanaë Lemoine's "The Margot Affair"

by Viviana De Cecco

Truth and lies, illusions and reality, loneliness and the life of a couple. These are some of the themes that are addressed in this book by Sanaë Lemoine, who was born in Paris to a Japanese mother and French father and grew up between France and Australia. The novel *The Margot Affair* (2020), which belongs to domestic and women's fiction, stirred up a seesaw of mixed emotions for me. I found myself immersed in a story that is not only about betrayal and wrong love, but also about misunderstanding between parents and children, the inability to communicate, the awkwardness of growing up, social conventions, and unbound ambition. At times I also felt pity and tenderness for the main character, a fragile and lonely young girl who has to face the delicate transition from adolescence to adulthood without guidance.

The story is told from the point of view of Margot, a 17-year-old girl who lives in Paris with her mother Anouk, a charming theater actress who seems to embody the model of the cynical and selfish woman, devoted solely to her career and unable to establish a relationship of affection with her daughter, who has always considered her almost an outsider. Although Anouk is single and unmarried, she has never prevented her daughter from meeting and try to build a relationship with her birth father, a well-known French literature professor and minister of culture who has already built a new family. Margot knows that her father is married to another woman, Madame Lapierre, who belongs to high society and has given him two other sons. Although she knows that her father has a double life and that he has never legally recognized her as his daughter, Margot does everything to attract his attention and, in order to please him, she would go so far as to enroll in the faculty of political science, despite her passion for literature. Margot seems to live waiting for him to call her, to remember her birthday, or to take her to spend a weekend with him in Normandy.

Except for a few outings with her friend Juliette, throughout the summer of her seventeenth year, Margot seems to be paralyzed in a suspended universe. The apartment where she lives with her mother practically becomes the center of her world and she feels imprisoned in the routine and monotony of a life from which she would like to escape. This is why she takes refuge in her illusions, feeling invisible and abandoned by everyone, remaining anchored in her unrealizable dreams. Being unable to see reality for what it is, she tries to turn her existence around through an encounter with Brigitte and David, a pair of journalists and ghostwriters who seem on the surface to be united by perfect love. But again, when Margot confides in both David and his wife, her naiveté prevents her from understanding the consequences to which these searing confessions will lead her.



Sanaë Lemoine © Gieves Anderson

By revealing her family's innermost secrets, Margot allows Brigitte and David to exploit this information and to break out a scandal. Another central theme is precisely the contrast between public and private life, between what we want to show to others and what we want to keep secret. To what

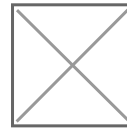
extent can we claim to know the people around us? The human soul is a tangle of unfathomable feelings that no one but ourselves can truly know. In my opinion, this novel shows that there is always a difference between our public face and our inner one. Even Brigitte and David, behind the facade of the loving couple, hide insecurities and thirst for revenge. Margot herself is always worried about the judgment of others, and Anouk does not want to accept her role as a mother but only act on stage, where she can always look beautiful and cheerful.

However, when major French newspapers publish an article in which the secret relationship between Anouk and the minister comes to light, something unexpected happens: Margot's father dies in his sleep from a fulminating heart attack. Although it may seem like a contradiction, from this moment Margot begins a journey to really get to know him. As she discovers more secrets that her father hid behind a mask of respectability, she realizes that she never actually knew who he was. Behaving differently according to his role as father, politician, husband, and lover, he always showed that he was unable to take any responsibility in the private sphere and did not have the courage to give up his public ambitions for love. Although he is very much in love with Margot's mother, he chooses to marry a woman from the upper class, which ensures his rapid social and political rise. He is described as a man who embodies a commonly encountered male model in contemporary

society: men who fail to come to terms with their emotions and to manage them conscientiously. Raised in a family that endured the suffering and starvation of the years following World War II, he was always driven to pursue success, as if he was tasked with erasing the suffering of war through the accumulation of money. His sudden death, however, represents a turning point for Margot that leads her toward significant change, both psychologically and emotionally.

This is a complex book that explores the different facets of the human soul, particularly the female one. Women are the real protagonists of this story, with their contradictions, fears, weaknesses and cruelties. They would all like to play the part of perfect, happy women, fulfilled by work and family, but in reality they conceal deep in their hearts the fragility of those who feel imprisoned in a loveless life. I appreciated the fact that the characters are very realistic and that there is no clear distinction between good guys and bad guys, because each one represents the contradictions of the human soul, with its merits and flaws. At other times, however, I was surprised by the naive and immature behavior that Margot displays and which leads her to make rather rash and even selfish choices.

I was also puzzled by the fact that both Anouk and Brigitte see the family as an obstacle to individual freedom and that they think that young adults, once they leave home, no longer have the right to seek moral support from their parents. Family love should, therefore,



"The Margot Affair" by Sanaë Lemoine

be sacrificed on the altar of personal fulfillment, and even Margot's mother believes that affection towards her daughter is a weakness. "Too much affection is a handicap," says Anouk, who is always quick to judge her daughter negatively, considering her just a spoiled little girl who is always complaining and never happy with what she has. Margot, therefore, has grown up without the guidance of adults, unable to understand her sense of loneliness. This somewhat cynical view of family relationships led me to wonder to what extent parental weaknesses and mistakes can affect the psychological growth of children and how young people can achieve independence and maturity without nevertheless feeling lost and without a point of reference to turn to in case of need.

Margot herself in the last chapter asks, "What happened to daughters like us? Would we flee our families, wanting to be far away, wishing to carve out a life that was ours alone, far removed from where we come from? Or were we always destined to return?"

Since I don't want to give any spoilers to my readers, I can only say that the author was able to create a compelling plot that never lapses into banality. A series of events unfold in the last chapters that keep the reader in suspense and some of the main characters turn out to be the opposite of how they were at the beginning of the story. The ending is by no means a foregone conclusion and, in part, leaves the reader with the feeling that the characters have evolved, both positively and negatively. In particular, Margot and her mother are finally able to look at each other with different eyes and discover their more vulnerable side.

In addition, through evocative writing and detailed descriptions of the environment, the writer makes the scenes almost cinematic. While reading, I almost had the impression that I was walking the streets of Paris with Margot, sitting at the café with her and her mother, taking in the scents of the flowers in the city parks, tasting the food that is served at the parties that Anouk and Margot attend.

Sanaë Lemoine's novel is a captivating and intriguing story that explores the dynamics of human relationships such as love, family, or friendship in an original and engaging way and is able to give its readers both well crafted entertainment and ample amounts of food for thought.