

Sarah's Secret

FROM THE SAME AUTHOR

Déborah - The Forbidden Encounter

Close call

Four

A Love of Containment

The Makeda Code

Hélène Tavelle

Sarah's Secret

a novel

A riddle based on real facts

The Intellectual Property Code prohibits any copy or reproduction intended for collective use. Any representation or reproduction on any medium whatsoever, in whole or in part made by any process whatsoever, without the consent of the author or his assigns, is unlawful and constitutes an infringement punishable by Articles 425 and following of the Penal Code.

Hélène Tavelle

To my grandmother, Sarah

1.

Caroline pays particular attention to getting ready this morning. She makes efforts to display a sophisticated look that subtly mixes negligence and style.

It's D Day. She has to go to a signing of her latest novel at the Grand Café des Négociants. The famous Lyon brasserie, an institution since 1864, will be privatized to accommodate it. An honor when you know how busy this establishment is on a Saturday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.

She glances at the *Progrès* publication announcing the event:

After a year of absence, Caroline Lacoste comes to meet the people of Lyon and her readers passionate about the adventures of Nina, the teenagers from the suburbs who became an opera singer at 16 and performed on the international stages from the Opéra Bastille to the

Metropolitan Opera or at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden... "Nina" has become a bestseller thanks to the thriller television series made from Caroline's book.

A second opus, Nina 2, has just been published by Grasset Editions. Scent of suburbs, social networks, nervous breakdowns of the unruly young diva, young people are everywhere in this novel. Nina leads the dance from Paris to Dubai, from New York to London.

What's amazing ? The Opera, a privileged genre that has no place in the cities, appears as an almost divine revelation to the heroine. Imperial in tragic operas and cheeky in lyrical fantasies, Nina arouses admiration with her extraordinary breath and charismatic beauty.

A fairy tale of modern times, this novel sounds like a true story in which all the idle teenagers of dormitory towns recognize themselves. The girls of the suburbs are envious. From her early childhood, she sang in the streets, at school, in her room with a hair dryer as a microphone. It is not the Beyoncé, the Shakira or the Angèle but against all expectations, the lyrical singing, which attracts her. Singing The Traviata in the corridors of social housings is a challenge that arouses the mockery of her neighbors.

One day, she met the producer of the greatest soloists, Aaron Lévy, who had come to scout for Roberto Alagna's clip. And the magic began.

Young people adore her, Caroline Lacoste.

Today, the writer surpasses herself to display the appearance of a "businesswoman" or rather a "writer" because she knows that the photos will burst out in the press and social networks. She takes care of her image, essential for the success of her books.

She abandons her usual uniform, jeans and over-size cashmere sweater, for a very classic First Lady look. On the occasion of this special event, she follows the dress code, sober and elegant outfit. She is also careful not to wear the same colors as for the previous dedications. Difficult challenge to respect throughout the Tour de France planned by her publisher.

In Rennes, last week, she was dressed in a red frock coat. Today, she chose a black suit with fringes that perfectly suits her long and slender figure. Hair level, no variant, slightly curly hair with bangs that adapt perfectly to the pretty chestnut waves. She gazes at herself in the huge mirror in the hallway, looking satisfied. The impression of being disguised and entering the stage as in the theater. She plays a role, which is not unpleasant.

She looks back on her fantastic destiny, not even dreamed so unexpected was it.

Far behind her, her history-geo lessons in college to pimply teenagers who didn't care at all about the Second World War, her favorite subject.

Her deep identity as a committed woman, a Jewish militant Zionist, made her prefer this career and this subject in particular. However, it was only indirectly that her ancestors experienced this sinister period of history since the Germans only landed in Algeria at the time of the Liberation. What would her life have been like if General de Gaulle had not launched "I understood you" to the Algerians, inviting many Algerians the French of Algeria, to return to a country where they had no memory ?

Her dear parents knew the intense heat, the red soils, the

thousand and one spicy scents, the family Shabbats. All lived in the same village, near Tlemcen, grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts. They therefore lived in North Africa until September 1962, when they were repatriated to France without anything as her mother, Germaine Touati, born Benhamou, repeats.

This pictorial formula indicates that they had left everything behind, material goods, dead buried in desecrated cemeteries, shops and professions... in this country where they had lived for ages. Their arrival, after a traumatic crossing by boat, was crowned by the contempt of the French who baptized them pejoratively "Pieds-Noirs"*, unaware that they had not asked for anything. The shock of the brutal exodus coupled with the discovery of racism had installed her father in a chronic depression which continued until his death at the age of 58.

Caroline, who came into the world four years after her parents arrived in France in 1966, studied brilliantly but without ambition. She cultivated idleness by spending her free time writing poems in alexandrines or songs, the first of which "There's a party in Istanbul" foreshadowed her attraction to the theme of differences.

More like short stories than novels, she filled her notebooks blackened with crossed out texts. She has kept the famous fountain pen of the time, her muse, the indispensable tool of her inspiration. That was before the computer. Today, she maintains this penchant for full and loose writing for her dedications and also in her notebooks, during her many train journeys.

* The *Pieds-Noirs* (*Ed's note* : french for « Black Feet », are the people of French and other European descent who were born in Algeria during the period of French rule)

With a degree in history and geography in hand, she therefore logically became a college professor. She found herself propelled onto the literary scene at the age of 30.

Her first novel *So Cool !* tales the tribulations of a mother teacher and her teenage daughter who make her see all colors. This is real life ! Trending Vocabulary - Cult Phrases... immediately triggered her literary success.

Then, she chained books, one book a year.

Guest of the literary program, *La Grande Librairie* (Ed's note : The Great Book Shop), she made the buzz on Twitter with the hashtag #Iamsuburb.

– Writing excites me. It gives me strength. It erases all my worries, she explained on the air.

The gains from her first novel, combined with advances on publication from her publisher Grasset that holds a candle for her to write the next one, got the better of her career as a teacher. She was therefore forced to resign from the National Education to devote herself to writing. She lives today, happily, on her innate passion. A great success that she owes to herself alone.

*

8:00

It's time to go down to enjoy her breakfast at which she wants to spend an entire hour. She approaches her face to the magnifying and luminous mirror of the bathroom. She forgoes the poppy lipstick as she vigorously rubs her mouth. It's enough.

Her publisher reserved an Executive Suite with a balcony for her at *the Hôtel de Paris*, which adjoins the place of the dedication. Magali, the press officer, brings together as always all the assets to make Caroline feel good. She is pampered. This is the privilege of successful authors.

Hundreds of copies were delivered directly to the brasserie. She has nothing else to do but be pretty, pleasant, smiling for her readers.

Her only task ? Supplying her fountain pen or rather her three fountain pens with black ink, so much does she fears failure during this signing session.

She loves these enriching encounters with her readers who know everything about her since they started reading her books. The art of writing imposes a solitude which suits her perfectly. But the public and sometimes social events put a balm in her heart. They give her a taste for exchange, sharing and seduction, so important to her balance.

She crosses the lobby, greets the bellhop and slips under the awning at the entrance. What catastrophic weather ! The sky is low and heavy, anthracite gray, the rain is falling as if it had decided never to stop.

– I hope it will not discourage readers ! she says to herself.

She rolls a cigarette with a teenage nonchalance that suits jeans more than the chic suit of the day.

– Coffee and tobacco are my only two faults, she likes to say to give herself extenuating circumstances.

She takes the opportunity to try to reach Elise, her daughter, who has been living away from her for two years,

despite her fourteen years. Caroline gave her the middle name of her beloved grandmother, an untold mystery woman who has long intrigued the novelist that she is.

Caroline was not made to be a mother and therefore had this first and only child at forty years old, at a time when the biological clock was crying out for red alert.

Elise lives in England, at Eton College, the prestigious high school, where she follows a musical and general education. She only goes home to Grenoble for the school holidays. Chance of fate, she was drawn by the piano at a very young age like her great-grandmother, whose middle name she bears. She dreams of imitating her idol, Alexandra Dovgan, a young twelve-year-old pianist whose performances she devours on YouTube. Elise came second at the entrance examination to this illustrious educational institution. The jury praised her grace, finesse and subtlety of play as well as her impressive technical mastery.

She shares the life of some sixty boys and girls, all prodigies, who are between eight and eighteen, coming from countries of all over the world. She wears a 19th century Harry Potter-styled uniform and studies Dickens and Shakespeare. In a few months, Elise began to speak a “perfect posh” English, fluent as she tells her mother, delighted with the progress of her “baby”. Despite this talent, Elise displays a touching humility, which arouses Caroline's admiration. Sparkling, from her childhood, she made those around her crack with her irresistible face. At fourteen, she is tall and slender like her mother. Cats don't make dogs.

Between Elise and her mother, a mutual pride reigns. And then Caroline is grateful to her. She, who had an

uncontrolled anxiety of motherhood and the responsibility that it could generate, very quickly found herself reassured by a child without problem. Elise brought herself up on her own, without angina or other childhood ailments, nor difficulties at school.

She's her best friend. They never stop confiding to each other.

On the sentimental side, Caroline gets along very well with Edouard Lacoste, her ex-husband, a nebulous, disorderly, very intelligent but unlivable philosophy teacher. She kept her name out of habit. Married at the age of twenty, going back to her maiden name, Touati, would have been complicated and would have bordered on schizophrenia. And then, being called Lacoste changed her life. A name much easier to bear than Touati. A new comfortable identity that avoided the fateful question "Where is it from ?" » and her invariable answer "I am not a piece of beef" which shut up her interlocutors.

If she is cash, she likes order. Edouard left his socks and coffee cups everywhere. He worked little. He spent his time on the sofa in front of the TV and football matches with beer and crisps. His only automatic gesture was buying the sports newspaper "*L'Equipe*", every morning. He was preventing her from moving forward. At his side, she forbade herself any project. They drifted apart without a thunderous breakup. The attractive young man had given way to a chubby and disheveled character. She could no longer desire him even if they kept the same intellectual complicity as at the beginning of their union.

She finally succeeded, somehow, to make him accept the divorce. Already retired, as he is twelve years her senior, he

stays very little in Grenoble and travels to unlikely countries like the good adventurer that he is. He has become a kind of Mike Horn (Ed's note : the TV presenter) who manages to live in the wild without fearing for his survival.

Caroline tells herself that he, too, must be satisfied with their separation because she would never have embarked on such adventures.

She suspects him of voluntarily moving away from "the base", that is to say from their city, Grenoble, because he would not bear to see her start a new life. He is still in love with her and does not display the slightest conquest. It doesn't seem to be a concern. He still gives her a bouquet of flowers for her birthdays. He even has her favorite fruits and vegetables delivered regularly.

Married in 1986, she divorced ten years later at the same time as she became a writer. Probably because she found neither listening nor interest on the part of this lazy husband. Since then, she has been flying from adventure to adventure without ever having really shared the life of another man.

She is described as a cool, frank and sincere woman. Obstinate, she's raw formwork. She launches her four truths to any disruptive. She counts her friends on the fingers of her hand.

*

English messaging. Elise cannot be reached.

The hotel breakfast is as she likes them.

Caroline with her meter seventy-five is all in length. No

figure problem. "Breakfast" is her favorite meal that she would not miss under any circumstances. She sets her sights on pancakes and maple syrup, raspberry jam sandwiches, scrambled eggs.

Her table neighbor gives her an admiring and amused "Good appetite" as this attitude differs from other women, attentive to everything they eat.

She has lunch with the journalist of the *Progrès* newspaper, Head of the Culture Department, Paul Dumontal. Press coverage is decisive for sales. She willingly submits to the exercise. She cherishes the interviews of these literary critics, often benevolent, it must be said.

It is the Grasset Editions that regale. Installed in a caulked space with opulent burgundy hangings, out of sight, they can't help but observe themselves in the many mirrors that surround them. Caroline only takes the starter of the day, smoked salmon, warm toast and a bouquet of green salad. The visibly hungry journalist, meanwhile, orders the generous *Lyon menu* with nothing less than three dishes of regional specialties, invigorating.

After a coffee accompanied by a little 100% cocoa dark chocolate, Caroline declares herself ready to enter the arena.

The restaurant closed its doors to customers to accommodate the event of the day. The Chief of Rank goes out on the sidewalk, the first slate announcing :

Dedication Meeting of Caroline Lacoste

Part 1 : 2 p.m.-4 p.m.

Tea Time

Caroline immediately validated the idea of this user-friendly principle, in two parts. From 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., Tea Time. From 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., Cocktail. Enough to satisfy her numerous readers. She is very moved to meet them.

She sticks her nose to the window, impressed by the line that grows stronger minute by minute in the pouring rain.

– That would make a great advertisement for a brand of umbrellas, she said to the waiter, glued to her like a bodyguard.

In a single file, the public gathers while waiting for the opening of the brasserie. The doors open. The author is on edge like an artist invaded by stage fright before going on stage.

She welcomes each of her fans like a loved one she hasn't seen for a long time and from whom she awaits news. Everyone goes there for their selfie with the writer. She is machine-gunned by the readers, thrilled to finally be in front of their star. She personalizes each dedication from two or three questions to the person concerned. Caroline thus displays her respect for her readers who most of them have followed her since her beginning.

She is proud to also seduce, thanks to *Nina*, an audience of young people from the suburbs usually not keen on reading. It's her difference.

Warm atmosphere to reach the large table, covered with white damask fabric, where Caroline is signing her latest book. You have to be patient. A long procession of readers, or rather one should say female readers (because men are rare in this joyful queue) wait patiently without impatience. They gossip with each other and don't feel any animosity

even though time passes. They had to plan quite a long time, so at least the afternoon. Some come from afar, Dijon, Valence, Annecy, Geneva... A happy mixture united under the same flame.

- Do you like Caroline Lacoste ?
- I love Caroline Lacoste, her stories are so romantic and so true.
- From the first, I was hooked. Since then, I buy them all.

A little further on, in the alley next to the crowd, a woman with a rowdy redhead who probably just wanted to have her coffee, exclaims :

- I'm jealous. What do you find in this chick ?

Readers find it hard to step aside after getting their top reward and stay admiring the author. So much so that a crowd now surrounds Caroline. This small group discusses with the writer about everything and nothing and in any case not only concerning the book. They want to know everything about their idol.

The uniformed hostess, responsible for managing the flow, has thrown in the towel, it seems. A walkabout that Caroline cherishes. She always likes to highlight the dedication of Albert Camus to his illiterate mother : *To you who will never be able to read this book*. She therefore refines her writings and addresses her readers personally, avoiding banalities. Thus, they all proudly show to their neighbor the unique text dedicated. They feel important. This is why Caroline's signings are real events shared on social media and in the press.