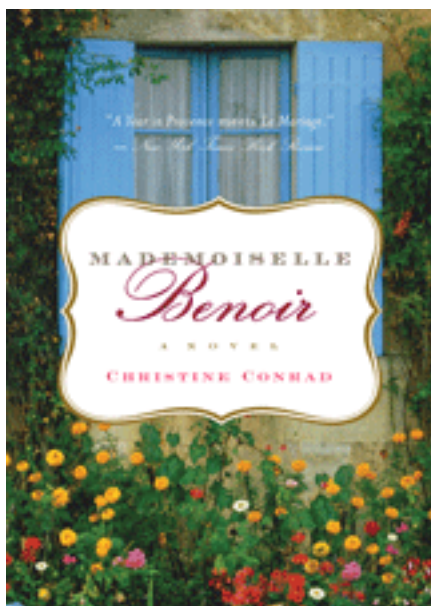


## A Reader's Guide



# Mademoiselle Benoir

by Christine Conrad

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"A lovely, lively novel . . . the letters in *Mademoiselle Benoir* crackle as they describe a love story of depth and power." — Jacquelyn Mitchard, author of *A Theory of Relativity* and *Deep End of the Ocean*

### About the Book

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Having grown tired of the American lifestyle, mathematician Timothy Reinhart exchanges the bustling pace of New York City for the quiet, pastoral reprieve offered by the French countryside, where he can pursue his artistic ambitions. He purchases a small farmhouse in the commune of St.-Jean d'Olt (population: sixty-four), and spends his days painting and restoring the property, regularly interrupting his work to enjoy the sprawling landscapes, long, delectable meals, and the company of his eccentric neighbors. Through letters to his family and friends back home, Tim tells of the seemingly endless charms and peculiarities of his new community and the strong sense of identity its residents so fiercely protect.

When the stunning — and much older — Catherine Benoir enters Tim's life, things become far more complicated. As their relationship quickly evolves from mutually admiring artists to close friends and something more, Tim and Catherine open a Pandora's box of inflammatory consequences. History works against them: from their families' objections to the village-wide feud that ensues, Tim and Catherine face a torrent of emotional and cultural complexities. Love boldly challenges tradition, but will it succeed? Inspired by a true story, *Mademoiselle Benoir* is a deliciously romantic tale.

"A Year in Provence meets *Le Mariage* . . . a pleasant excursion." — *New York Times Book Review*

"A thoroughly satisfying and thoughtful story of love triumphant." — *Booklist*

A BookSense Pick: "*C'est Magnifique!*"

An NPR *Morning Edition* Summer Reading recommendation

## About the Author

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**Christine Conrad** has enjoyed a dynamic and varied career in which she has worked as the New York City film commissioner, as an editor in book publishing, as a screenwriter for motion pictures and television, and as an advocate for women's health. She is the author of three other books, including *Jerome Robbins*, a pictorial biography inspired by her long friendship with the choreographer. *Mademoiselle Benoir* is Conrad's first novel. She lives in Los Angeles.

## Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Mademoiselle Benoir* for every reader.

1. Tim wanted to "get off the American treadmill of success" and find a more "authentic life" in France. Do you agree with Tim's view of life in America? Do you think he was being courageous or just foolhardy in deciding to leave his home country? Would you make, or have you ever made, a similar decision?
2. *Mademoiselle Benoir* is written entirely in letters. How does the epistolary format set a different tone for the book than a first- or third-person narrative might have conveyed? What, if anything, do you think might go unsaid in the letters Tim and his family members write to each other? Why?
3. When Monsieur Bête's desire to continue herding sheep over Tim's property takes shape as a lawsuit, Tim learns more fully the complex laws and customs that govern French life. What are some of the other cultural differences that Tim faces over the course of the novel?
4. Consider the peripheral characters in the story whose influence on Tim is considerable and perhaps surprising — for example, Chicken Lady, Monsieur Bête, Count de Poisson, or Josette. What does each character reveal to Tim that he might have otherwise missed? How does the author use these supporting characters to illuminate Tim's understanding of France and the reader's sense of place?
5. Early in the book Tim writes, "Change may be inevitable, but for the French, tradition is an anchor." How is his perception of tradition transformed once he meets Catherine? In what ways are those changes reflected in his letters?
6. Tim and Marcelline's relationship is at first full of passion and energy. How similar is their struggle to your own experiences, or the experiences of other couples you know? Do you think their differences might have been reconcilable under other circumstances?
7. What makes Catherine such a compelling figure, and in what ways does her personality complement Tim's? How is it that Catherine is able to reject some of the values of her upbringing, while embracing others?

- 8.** Pauline is adamantly opposed to her sister Catherine's deepening romance with Tim. What fuels her fury — is it a firm grounding in cultural tradition, a long-standing familial power struggle, or something else entirely? Are Pauline's views justified? What do you think of the reactions of the Catholic clergy members to her accusations? In your mind, what is the purpose of marriage?
- 9.** If Tim and Catherine had fallen in love in America, do you suppose things would have been any easier for them? Would there have been the same opposition to a relationship between an older woman and a younger man? Aside from the gap between their ages, what is unique about their relationship and the way it evolves?
- 10.** Through short reunions with his longtime friend Brian and his former love-interest Kristen, Tim has the opportunity to think about how much his life has changed, and what he has left behind. How are Tim's realizations about the past significant?
- 11.** What do you make of the marital struggles Holly mentions in her letters to her brother, and how does Tim's experience in France affect her thoughts on the difficulties she faces at home? How do you imagine her story unfolding after the book finishes?
- 12.** The act of eating in France is a "semireligious rite" Tim writes, "I can understand how over time the appreciation for food became an antidote to chaos." How does the emphasis on food — as both an aesthetic pleasure and a basic human need — play into the story?
- 13.** The epigraph at the beginning of the book reads: "Love is a dwelling where being there is enough" (Wallace Stevens). Why do you think the author chose this quote, and how would you apply it to the novel?
- 14.** How do Tim and Catherine find resolve amidst the great conflicts they face? How does the notion that "life requires continual acts of bravery" — something Catherine and Tim agree upon — resonate throughout the story?

## **A Conversation with Christine Conrad**

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### **How did you come to write *Mademoiselle Benoir*?**

In 1992, a friend gave me the surprising news that her son, an American male in his thirties living in New York, had decamped for rural France. This fact interested me extremely, as many of us fantasize about such a move, but few of us have the courage to carry it out. So I was always eager for periodic news of his progress: he was restoring an old farmhouse; he was painting seriously; he had a French girlfriend.

Then news came that he had been "adopted" by a quite grand French family. Stories of the family took on an enchanted Jane Austen quality. There were three sisters who painted, sang, and sculpted. They lived in a nineteenth-century château with beautiful parklands and vineyards sprawling down to the river. Then I began to hear of the young man's budding friendship with one of the sisters, also a painter. And then, seemingly out of the blue, I was told that the young man and the sister had fallen in love and planned to marry. The woman was beautiful, charming, cultured, unmarried . . . but she was nearly twice his age. News of the impending wedding had the effect of a cluster bomb exploding inside the woman's family, uncovering incendiary layers hidden beneath the surface of

this seemingly idyllic French country scene.

Shortly thereafter, on a trip to Paris, I met the newly married couple, and then later traveled to visit them at the woman's family château. I was completely enthralled by their romance and the extraordinary strife it inspired, and I knew immediately that it was a one-of-a-kind tale, one that resonated for me with that writer's sensation: This is my kind of story. Even better, it was a story with something for everyone. Given my long screenwriting experience, I was sure it would make a wonderful film, but I also knew that to do justice to the rich complexity and uniqueness of the French setting, it cried out to be a novel.

### **Did the writing involve special research or travel?**

Once I committed myself to the story, the ultimately mysterious and ineffable process that became *Mademoiselle Benoir* began: a slow alchemy of imagination and research that would transform the bare outlines of a story into a work of fiction that was completely my own.

I began doing research on yearly trips to France — scarcely a hardship! — and at the same time I read a wide array of books about French culture and history. I was determined to create for the reader a sense of place that was immediate, alive, and rich with the uniqueness of France that conformed with my own experience. I was very fortunate to have the cooperation of the couple, who shared details of the progress of their romance and life together in interviews and correspondence. But I would write three other books before I became solely focused on *Mademoiselle Benoir* in 2001. Every step of the way, I felt so lucky to be working on a book for which my belief and enthusiasm never flagged. I loved every second of the research process — although admittedly not every second of a long writing process — and I never doubted that if I did my absolute best the story would have universal appeal.

### **How closely does *Mademoiselle Benoir* resemble the events that inspired it?**

The novel as finally realized is in every way an imagined story. The location in France, names, characters, ages, events, and so forth have all been transmuted and are only loosely related to real events. Although some of the characters have real-life counterparts (the couple, of course), a majority of the characters — such as Count Fishy and Monsieur Bête — have counterparts in French society but are completely invented by me.

My inspiration for the letter form was actual letters from the young man to his family, but the letters in the book are all fictional. What I discovered in the early stages of my writing process was that the letter form gave immediate access to a character's emotions, and that the form was organic enough to how the story unfolds, providing the points of view of the interested parties on both sides of the Atlantic. My ultimate goal was to create a real page-turner, so that as you begin reading, the letter form fades and you are immersed in a world that holds your interest completely.

**Which character in *Mademoiselle Benoir* do you most identify with?**

The most obvious answer would be Catherine Benoir — and yes, of course, I couldn't have written this book if I didn't identify strongly with her. But I identify just as strongly with Tim, as it is his voice that propels the story forward, and his American eyes through which France is viewed. In fact, I'm sure that all of the characters — both the good and the bad — carry a piece of me within them.