

# **Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932 Study Guide**

**Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932 by Francine  
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# Plot Summary

“Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932” tells the story of how the lives of numerous different characters intersected in Paris in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

At the beginning of the novel Gabor Tsenyi is a Hungarian photographer, living in Paris and trying to build a career as an artist. Louisianne “Lou” Villars is a young girl being trained as an athlete elsewhere in France. Lionel Maine is an American writer living in Paris and writing about his experiences of poverty and romance while pursuing his artistic career. Suzanne Dunois (later Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi) is a language teacher living in Paris and the girlfriend of Lionel Maine. The Baroness Lily de Rossignol is a former Hollywood actress married to the heir of a wealthy car manufacturing company who uses her fortune to fund the careers of artists in Paris. Nathalie Dunois is a 21st century high school teacher, writing a biography of Lou Villars.

In Part One, Lou Villars was sent to a convent school by her parents where one of the nuns, Sister Francis, noticed her talent for athletics and helped her train as an athlete. Sister Francis introduced Lou to her brother, Dr. Loomis, and together the three of them traveled the country so that Lou could compete in sporting events. After one such event in Paris, Lou was approached by Gabor Tsenyi who gave her a business card for the Chameleon Club in Paris. After Dr. Loomis attempted to rape Lou, she ran away. She went to the Chameleon Club where the owner, Yvonne, gave Lou a series of jobs which eventually led to Lou appearing onstage as a performer, dressed in men’s clothes. Lou became involved in a romantic relationship with another woman at the Chameleon Club, called Arlette.

Meanwhile, Gabor took photographs of the people of Paris and attracted the interest and attention of the Baroness Lily de Rossignol. Gabor introduced Lily to his friend Lionel and to Lionel’s girlfriend Suzanne. Suzanne left Lionel after falling in love with Gabor. Lily paid for a replica of the Chameleon Club to be built in Gabor’s studio so that he would not need the permission of the club’s owner Yvonne in order to take photographs of the club’s clientele. Gabor took a photograph of Lou Villars with her lover Arlette, which he named “Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932”.

In Part Two, Lily recruited Lou to be trained as a racecar driver for the Rossignol car company. Arlette broke up with Lou and began a relationship with the corrupt chief of police, Clovis Chanac. Gabor’s first photography collection became a success. On the cover was the photograph of Lou and Arlette. Driven by jealousy of Arlette’s relationship with Lou, Chanac revoked Lou’s racing license on the grounds that Lou dressed in men’s clothes, which was illegal in France. During the ensuing court case Gabor’s photograph was used as evidence against Lou. Lou was fired from her job as a racecar driver and became a mechanic. She was contacted by a German racecar driver who invited her to watch the Berlin Olympics. Whilst in Germany, Adolf Hitler recruited Lou as a spy. In the run up to the German invasion of France, Lionel went back to America and Lily moved to the South of France.



In Part Three, Gabor and Suzanne escaped Paris and went to live with Lily in the South of France. A few months later, all three of them returned to Paris and Suzanne joined the French Resistance. Lou began working as a mechanic for Jean-Claude Bonnet, the deputy minister of information for the Nazis in Paris. Bonnet was injured and a German spy was killed after the brakes for Bonnet's car were sabotaged. Lily's husband was believed to be responsible for the sabotage and was murdered. Lily joined the Resistance. Lou began to work as a torturer at the Gestapo headquarters in Paris. One night Lou, Chanac, Bonnet and some other Germans attended a performance at the Chameleon Club featuring Arlette, the ex-girlfriend of both Lou and Chanac. After Chanac made offensive remarks about Arlette, the owner of the club, Yvonne, demanded that they all leave. Fearing reprisal, members of the Resistance – including Lily and Suzanne - helped Yvonne to escape from France. Suzanne was arrested under suspicion of helping Yvonne escape. Whilst at the Gestapo headquarters, Suzanne was interrogated by Lou. Later, Lou was murdered by members of the Resistance shortly before the Allied invasion of France at the Normandy beaches, which eventually brought about the end of the war.

At the end of the novel, Suzanne writes a letter of complaint about the inaccuracies in Nathalie Dunois' biography of Lou Villars, in which Nathalie falsely claims to be Suzanne's niece and fabricates her account of the night Suzanne was interrogated by Lou. Suzanne states that Lou did her best not to hurt Suzanne and injured her in the most minor ways possible. She encouraged Suzanne to scream out and pretend to be in pain for several hours while Lou read a newspaper. Lou told the Gestapo she couldn't get any information out of her and Suzanne was released.

Sixty years after the events depicted in the novel, an aging Lionel Maine insisted on watching the end of the horror movie "Carrie" over and over again, in which the bloodied hand of the abused protagonist shot up from the grave ready to take revenge against those who had wronged her.



# Part 1: Page 3 – Page 74

## Summary

The opening chapter is a letter from an aspiring photographer called Gabor Tsenyi, written to his parents in Hungary and dated May 14, 1924. Gabor wrote about his first visit to the Chameleon Club in Paris, where Gabor lives. Gabor explained that the club was full of men dressed as women and women dressed as men. Gabor asked the owner of the club, another Hungarian called Yvonne, if he could take pictures of her clientele, but she refused him permission.

The following chapter is the Author's Preface from the biography "The Devil Drives: The Life of Lou Villars" by a writer who claims to be called Nathalie Dunois. In the preface Nathalie explains how she came to be interested in Louisianne Villars, a Frenchwoman who collaborated with the Nazis during the war. This is followed by Chapter One of "The Devil Drives" which discusses the early years Lou's life. Nathalie suggests that Lou's life was forever altered by a head injury she received after being pushed from a swing by her mentally handicapped older brother. Lou was sent to a convent school in which one of the nuns, Sister Francis, took a special interest in her and began to develop her talent for sport.

Next is a "Dispatch to the Magyar Gazette", a Hungarian newspaper, written by Gabor Tsenyi in Paris, 1925. It is a clipping included in another letter Gabor has written to his parents, detailing an interview with an arrested Hungarian counterfeiter in Paris. Gabor admits in his letter that he invented the interview.

The next chapter is Chapter Two of "The Devil Drives" in which Lou is introduced to Sister Francis' brother, Dr. Loomis, who continues Lou's physical education through intensive training exercises and then begins to take her to competitive sports events around the country.

This is followed by a chapter from "Make Yourself New" by an American writer called Lionel Maine, who lived in Paris at the same time as Gabor Tsenyi. He writes about his relationship with his girlfriend Suzanne and his friendship with Gabor. Lionel is very poor and often relies on money sent by his ex-wife, who lives with their son and her new partner in New Jersey.

Next is another of Gabor's dispatches for the Hungarian newspaper and another letter to his parents, dated May 15 1928, agonizing over the fact he must work as a journalist when all he wants to do is work on his photography. The dispatch is about Lou Villars performing an exhibition of her talents at a sporting venue in Paris. Gabor met Lou and gave her a business card for the Chameleon Club.



The dispatch is followed by another chapter from “Make Yourself New” by Lionel Maine, in which Lionel writes about Gabor’s relationship with a French Baroness, Lily de Rossignol, who has taken a special interest in Gabor’s work.

Following this is the first extract from the memoirs of Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi. The chapter title informs the reader that the memoir is “To be destroyed on the occasion of its author’s death.” In this chapter, Suzanne gives her perspective on the meal between herself, Lionel, Gabor, and the Baroness which Lionel also described in the previous chapter.

The next chapter is Chapter Three from “The Devil Drives”, in which Dr. Loomis and Sister Francis took Lou to perform in a sporting exhibition in Paris, which Gabor wrote about for the Hungarian newspaper. Dr. Loomis attempted to rape Lou and she ran away. Not knowing anywhere to go in Paris, Lou used the business card given to her by Gabor to find the Chameleon Club.

This is followed by a Chapter entitled “Yvonne”, in which Yvonne, the owner of the Chameleon Club, takes pity on Lou and hires her as an employee of the club.

## Analysis

The opening letter from Gabor to his parents introduces the reader to the Chameleon Club in Paris, the location at the center of all events in the novel. The club is depicted as a place of freedom where people who do not fit society’s traditional ideas about gender can go to be themselves and a place of artistic expression where performers like Yvonne stir the audience’s emotions with heartfelt performances about their lives and loves. This initial presentation of the club serves to fix in the mind of the reader a golden era before the degradations and compromises that will be required of the club’s performers and patrons during the war.

The reader discovers a lot of information about Gabor through this letter to his parents: Gabor is an aspiring photographer and his father has delayed his own retirement in order to fund Gabor’s advancement as an artist in Paris. Although Gabor expresses gratitude for the financial support his parents have already provided, he also demands further support by reminding his mother that he needs new socks. This is revealing of his character: although he feels gratitude and expresses it with words, his actions contradict his words and show a sense of entitlement and selfishness. If he was really grateful for all his parents are doing for him, he would not demand further assistance so casually. The gap between Gabor’s feelings and his actions remains a central part of his characterization throughout the novel.

In the Author’s Preface from “The Devil Drives” the reader is first introduced to the character of Lou Villars, the novel’s protagonist. The author builds suspense in this section when Nathalie explains that Lou did “evil, unforgivable things” but does not go into specifics, making the reader anticipate discovering who this woman was, what she did, and what motivated her.



The author builds credibility for Nathalie's narrative in a number of ways, but also subtly undercuts it. Nathalie introduces herself in the Author's Preface as the great-niece of Suzanne Dunois, the wife of Gabor Tsenyi who was introduced in the opening chapter, making Nathalie appear to be an insider with special access to knowledge of the events she will be describing. It will not be until the penultimate chapter that the reader discovers this family relationship is an invention. By having Nathalie write in retrospect several decades after the end of the war, the author gives the impression that her account will be an objective analysis of what happened. However, Nathalie explains that because so many of her attempts at research have been blocked by people who are uncomfortable addressing the crimes of Lou Villars she has "had to embroider a bit, fill in gaps, invent dialogue, [and] make an occasional imaginative leap" in "The Devil Drives". Although this decision is presented in the Preface as necessary, it is the first clue that the narrative provided by Nathalie Dunois is unreliable.

Chapter One of "The Devil Drives" opens with Nathalie reflecting on her own writing process and her attempts to discuss Lou's life with doctors in the hopes they could help her explain how Lou's early head injury affected later events in her life. During this passage it is revealed that many people haven't heard of Lou, but Nathalie's description of her life ("her racing career, her court case, and the Berlin Olympics") convinces the reader that Lou's life was exciting and more than worthy of a biography.

After the initial reflection on Nathalie's writing process, the author continues in a more traditional style for a novel, employing a third person omniscient narrator to tell the story of Lou's early years in the past tense. This has the effect of encouraging the reader to accept the events depicted in the chapter as factual, distracting from Nathalie's lack of access to solid facts and the admission that she has embellished the details that she does have access to.

Gabor's fake news report about the Hungarian counterfeiter establishes the theme of reliability. Gabor's news article will be interpreted by readers at the time, and later by historians like Nathalie, to be a factual account. However Gabor admits that the entire encounter is a fabrication.

Chapter Two from "The Devil Drives" features no comments from Nathalie about her own life or her writing process, lulling the reader into a false sense of security by allowing them to forget that Nathalie couldn't possibly have any evidence to support the events that she is describing. The third person past tense narration allows the reader to interpret this chapter as a normal chapter from a novel, giving them no reason to question the veracity of the events being described. This chapter introduces the character of Dr. Loomis, the first in a long line of characters who will take advantage of Lou for their own personal gain, only to leave her abandoned and unsupported once she is no longer of use.

Lionel Maine has been mentioned by both Gabor and Nathalie, but the following chapter from his book "Make Yourself New" is the first occasion where he gives his own perspective on events. Lionel is similar to Gabor in many ways: both men left their home countries to pursue their art in Paris and both men are reliant on family members back



home to support them financially. Lionel's writing style reveals an arrogant and self-involved man who claims not to believe in God, instead only believing in "my talent, my heart, and my cock." This sets the stage for Lionel's later chapters, all of which revolve around his writing career and his sexual relationships.

In Gabor's sporting dispatch for the Hungarian newspaper, the multiple characters and narratives the reader has been introduced to so far start to intertwine when Gabor encounters Lou and gives her a business card for the Chameleon Club. The reader knows this is a significant event in Lou's life because Nathalie has already explained that Lou is best remembered as the woman in one of Gabor's photographs: Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932.

The second chapter from "Make Yourself New" introduces the Baroness Lily de Rossignol, one of the central narrators of the book. The author, by introducing Lily through Lionel's perspective, gives the reader a negative impression of the Baroness, making her appear snobbish and condescending.

The first chapter from Suzanne's memoirs is used to create dramatic irony. Suzanne's perspective gives the reader information that Lionel doesn't have access to, highlighting how limited and egotistical his interpretation of events can be. Lionel believes that the two of them were passionately in love, but Suzanne reveals that she never really loved him. Although Suzanne and Lionel are depicted as a couple in these early chapters, the fact that the name of the memoir's author is Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi makes it clear that she will eventually end up married to Gabor.

Once again in Chapter Three of "The Devil Drives" no mention is made of Nathalie Dunois, the author of this narrative, allowing the reader to forget that these events have been imagined. Chapter Three of "The Devil Drives" is an important turning point in the novel because it marks the moment when Lou becomes involved in the same circle of acquaintances as the other characters.

The "Yvonne" chapters of the novel are unique in the sense that the narrative in these chapters is not mediated by any of the characters from the novel. Like many of the "The Devil Drives" chapters, the "Yvonne" chapters are told in the third person and in the past tense, with an omniscient narrator. However, unlike "The Devil Drives" which is written by the character Nathalie Dunois, there is no internal "author" to these chapters. Although all of the chapters are clearly fictional, this makes the "Yvonne" chapters the closest to the objective "truth" within the fiction, because they are not told from the perspective of one of the characters and are not twisted to suit the beliefs that any of the characters have about themselves and the meaning of their past.

## Discussion Question 1

How is the Chameleon Club depicted in Gabor's first letter?





## Discussion Question 2

How does Lionel's account of the day they had lunch with Lily de Rossignol differ from Suzanne's account of the same day? What does this say about their characters?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you sympathize with Lou Villars in this section? Why?

## Vocabulary

subdued, enviable, modernist, intercession, ermine, martyrs, counterfeit, neurotics, teensy, bootlegger, progressive, pretentious, trivial, hypocritical, enlightened, erotic, disdain, permissible, fresco, grisly



# Part 1: Page 75 – Page 184

## Summary

Next is another letter from Gabor to his parents in Hungary, dated July 15 1928, in which Gabor explains that Lily de Rossignol will be funding his photography. He details an embarrassing dinner at Lily's home where he felt the other aristocratic guests, especially Lily's brother-in-law Armand, judged him for his poverty and his Hungarian nationality.

The letter is followed by another chapter from Lionel's book "Make Yourself New". Lionel described the time immediately following his breakup with Suzanne and the start of her subsequent relationship with Gabor. Lionel met Suzanne and Gabor on the street after Gabor had been taking a photograph of Suzanne pretending to be dead.

Following this is Suzanne's take on the photo shoot, relayed through a chapter of her unpublished memoir. Suzanne was upset by the photo shoot and only agreed to pretend to be dead because of her intense love for Gabor.

Chapter Four of "The Devil Drives" opens with the author Nathalie discussing the meaning of her own dreams, before recounting the various jobs Yvonne gave to Lou at the Chameleon Club which eventually resulted in Lou appearing on stage as a performer.

Next, another letter from Gabor to his parents - written on January 1, 1932 – informs them that the Baroness converted Gabor's studio into a replica of the Chameleon Club so that Gabor could photograph the clientele without needing Yvonne's permission. Gabor reminds his parents of the time he interviewed a Hungarian counterfeiter. The following letter from Gabor, dated January 30 1932, reveals that Gabor's parents were unimpressed with his previous letter, reminding him that he didn't really meet the Hungarian counterfeiter and that he confessed to them at the time that the interview was fabricated. Gabor defends himself and claims that they are dwelling on unimportant details.

Gabor's letters are followed by a chapter from "Make Yourself New" in which Lionel describes the act at the Chameleon Club which featured Lou Villars and her rumored lover Arlette Jumeau.

Chapter 5 of "The Devil Drives" discusses the nature of Lou's romantic relationship with Arlette, another performer at the Chameleon Club.

This is followed by the first extract from the memoir of Lily de Rossignol entitled "A Baroness by Night". Lily reveals that she was married to a homosexual man, Didi de Rossignol. Lily gives another perspective on Lou and Arlette's performance and revealed that on one occasion, after protesting over the rightwing nationalistic tone of their song, Lionel Maine was thrown out of the club. Gabor and Lily made an



appointment with Arlette and Lou to have their photograph taken at Gabor's studio in the replica of the Chameleon Club.

Another chapter from "Make Yourself New" follows, in which Lionel boasts about meeting Picasso. This is followed by a "Yvonne" chapter, in which the owner of the Chameleon Club worried about the growing romance between Arlette and the corrupt police chief, Clovis Chanac. Yvonne hoped Arlette would leave the club to be with Chanac and then she would be able to hire a performer whose songs were less nationalistic and offensive than Arlette's.

In Chapter 6 of "The Devil Drives", Nathalie recounted the day that Gabor took his famous photograph of Lou and Arlette which he named: "Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932". In the following chapter, Suzanne recounts the first time she saw the photograph and claims it unsettled and frightened her because, she now believes, it gave her a premonition of the harm Lou would do during the Nazi occupation.

In Chapter 7 of "The Devil Drives", Arlette left Lou for Clovis Chanac, the chief of police, and the Baroness Lily de Rossignol offered Lou a job as a racecar driver.

In the following chapter, from "Make Yourself New", Lionel complained that the political riots in France had ruined the chances for his recently published book to become successful.

The next "Yvonne" chapter is the final chapter of Part One, in which Clovis Chanac insisted on removing the print of "Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932" from the club.

## Analysis

The reader's impression of Lily has so far been defined by the chapters in which Lionel and Suzanne recounted how rude and condescending she was the day they all met. This impression is further enforced by Gabor's letter about attending a dinner party at her house, where Gabor felt humiliated by her friends and family and hurt that she had put him in that position. At the end of the chapter, when Lily offered to fund Gabor's photography, the reader is given the first hint that her character may have some positive traits.

Lionel's chapter about his breakup with Suzanne gives the first of a series of different perspectives on one of Gabor's photographs in which Suzanne lay on the street and pretended to be dead. Lionel thinks the idea is genius, recognizes what a great artist Gabor is, and concludes that Gabor deserves Suzanne more than he does. Although this chapter ends with the conclusion that a woman is not so important when you're alive and living in Paris, the final chapter of the novel, written by Lionel's granddaughter, suggests that Lionel continued to love Suzanne for the rest of his life.

The idea which Lionel thought was genius in the previous chapter is presented in a new light in Suzanne's chapter which immediately follows. Suzanne presents the idea as



exploitative and dismissive of her. Gabor was interested in photographing the aftermath of Suzanne pretending to be dead, not Suzanne herself. This is symbolic of Gabor and Suzanne's entire relationship in which Suzanne is always secondary to Gabor's art.

Chapter Four of "The Devil Drives" features comments from Nathalie about her own creative processes, which serve to remind the reader that Nathalie's account of Lou Villars' life is not necessarily accurate. Nathalie claims that she constructed this chapter from financial records at the Chameleon Club but then goes on to describe details about Lou's thoughts and feelings that couldn't possibly be found in such records.

The fake Chameleon Club set-up by the Baroness and described in Gabor's January 1, 1932 letter to his parents is a symbol of the novel's obsession with accuracy and perception. Although the photographs taken here will be remembered as depictions of the real Chameleon Club, they were never really taken there. They are representations of the real club, not images of an authentic moment.

Gabor's letter in which he criticized his parents for dwelling on the fact he didn't really meet the Hungarian counterfeiter reflects the theme of the novel. Although Gabor knew at the time that the interview was a lie, in the intervening years he has forgotten the truth and now believes his own fabrications. To various extents, this is true of all the characters in the novel, each of whom have come to accept their own version of the past even when it is contradicted by others.

Lionel's chapter about Lou and Arlette at the Chameleon Club is the first sign of change at the venue. In marked contrast to Gabor's descriptions of the performance the night he first visited the club, the act Lionel describes is vulgar and nationalistic. The club has become more popular and its integrity is starting to crumble.

When the first extract of Lily de Rossignol's memoir appears, the reader is already familiar with her character from the descriptions of Lionel, Suzanne, and Gabor all of which make her appear snobbish and unsympathetic. In her own words, Lily appears more sympathetic and explains that people at the time misunderstood her, including the many people who believed she was sexually experienced due to the years she spent in Hollywood when, in fact, she was still a virgin during the years when the characters frequented the Chameleon Club.

The next "Yvonne" chapter foreshadows the Nazi occupation when the police chief, Clovis Chanac, starts to frequent the club. Soon, everyone involved in the club will be concerned about being spied on by government and police officials, but for the time being Chanac's only interest in the club is his sexual interest in Arlette.

The creation of Gabor's famous picture "Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932" is an important turning point in the novel, which drives the events that follow. The picture fans the flames of Chanac's jealousy, motivating him to destroy Lou's future. The photo will also be used as evidence against Lou in a later trial.



## Discussion Question 1

Does Nathalie Dunois write her book about Lou Villars in a traditional style for a biography?

## Discussion Question 2

Why were some of the characters offended by Lou and Arlette's mermaid routine?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the first extract from "A Baroness by Night" change the perception of Lily de Rossignol that has already been created by the other characters?

## Vocabulary

honeyed, hovels, arrondissement, opium, tenement, indigent, ermine, alchemized, disparate, infamous, torment, stodgy, exudes, suffuses, sacrament, trivial, fixated, lowballing, rhetoric, masquerading



## Part 2: Page 185 – Page 304

### Summary

The first chapter of Part Two comes from Lily's memoir "A Baroness by Night". In it, Lily recounts the story of how she hired Lou to train as a race driver, because Lily believed Lou would bring a lot of publicity to the Rossignol brand of cars. She revealed that Lou underwent an operation to have both of her breasts removed, because it made it easier to drive the racecars.

Following this, Gabor writes to his parents about how much he enjoys photographing racecars. He is making more money now and sends his parents a check along with the letter.

Next is a chapter written by Lionel Maine from another of his books, this one entitled "From Paris in My Rearview Mirror". Lionel recalls that he didn't like Lou because she was too masculine.

Chapter 8 of "The Devil Drives" details Lou's training with Lily's brother-in-law Armand, who taught Lou how to race cars and, Nathalie argues, indoctrinated Lou into rightwing and racist attitudes.

This is followed by a chapter from Suzanne's memoir, in which she confesses she didn't like the work Gabor did during the years he was photographing race cars.

In Chapter 9 of "The Devil Drives", Nathalie claims that her great-aunt Suzanne Dunois told her that she had travelled with Lou to a hospital where Lou discovered that her brother had died. Significantly, Nathalie comments that she has been unable to find any evidence of this occurrence other than her conversation with her great-aunt Suzanne.

Gabor writes to his parents in November 1934 and reveals his fear that Clovis Chanac wants to harm Lou.

In the following extract from "A Baroness by Night", Lily recounts the day Chanac revoked Lou's racing license on the day of a big race which Lou had been expected to win. Chanac revoked the license on the grounds that Lou dressed like a man, which was illegal in France at the time. Next, Lionel recounts the trial in which the Rossignol's attempted to have Lou's license reinstated. Lionel was paid as a reporter for a paper in New Jersey who wanted coverage of the trial. Lionel reveals that a photo of Lou dressed as a man was used as evidence during the trial as well as mentioning that his book "Make Yourself New" had been banned in America.

Gabor writes to his parents in September 1935, explaining that his photo of Lou and Arlette at the Chameleon Club was used as evidence against Lou at her trial and regretting his role in Lou's suffering. Gabor revealed that Lily came to his studio to



comfort him. Gabor gave Lily a photograph of her he had taken, which made her cry. Gabor said they thanked each other and kissed before Lily left.

Next, in “A Baroness by Night” Lily discusses her feelings about Gabor’s photograph of her getting out of her Rossignol car and gives a different account of the night Gabor gave it to her. In Lily’s account, Gabor had embraced her and they had tried to make love. The couple gave up as a result of the awkwardness caused by Lily’s inability to admit that she was a virgin. Lily went home.

Chapter 10 of “The Devil Drives” describes the aftermath of Lou’s trial, in which the Rossignols fire her as their driver and set her up in business as an auto-mechanic. Lou sank into a depression and tried to raise her spirits by travelling the country at weekends delivering speeches at women’s sports clubs. Lou was forced to deal with gangsters in the black market in order to obtain engine parts for her clients. Lou received a letter from the German racecar driver Inge Wallherr inviting Lou to Germany. Lou visited Berlin, attended the Olympics with Inge, and met Adolf Hitler who recruited her as a spy for Germany.

Next, Gabor writes to his parents in April 1937 and boasts of his recent career successes. He sends them more money and worries that there will be a time in the new future when he won’t be able to send things to them as freely.

The following chapter is from “Paris in my Rearview Mirror” by Lionel. He met with Gabor, who told him that Lou had asked him if he had any pictures of “bridges, tunnels, armories, that sort of thing.” Gabor and Lionel both agreed this was suspicious and Gabor refused to sell her any photographs.

Lily continues with a chapter from “A Baroness by Night”. She relates the story of her brother-in-law Armand’s murder and why she believes a young Jewish man was framed for the crime. Lily chose this moment to leave Paris and move the South of France.

In Chapter 11 of “The Devil Drives”, Nathalie describes the spying carried out by Lou and Inge in France on behalf of the German government. A woman named Elise Becker revealed to them that the French border fortifications against the Germans ended at the Maginot Line.

In another chapter from “Paris in my Rearview Mirror”, Lionel decided to leave France. Before he left, he covered an execution by guillotine. Lily recounts the last time she saw Lionel before he left France.

## Analysis

In the opening chapter of Part Two, Lily attempts to exonerate herself for any responsibility for Lou’s behavior during the war. Despite the fact that Lily’s decision to train Lou as a racecar driver permanently altered the course of Lou’s life, Lily claims that everything would have happened just the same even if she hadn’t intervened. The refusal to acknowledge how the actions of various characters harmed Lou is repeated



throughout the novel. Lily uses Lou's comparatively more dangerous and offensive crimes as a way to minimize the importance of her own unethical behavior.

Gabor's first letter in Part Two marks a new phase in his career: instead of begging his parents for money and complaining about his jobs, as he did in Part One, he is able to send money to them. As a result of the success of his collection of photographs of Paris, Gabor has now become a successful photographer.

Lionel's complaint that Lou is too masculine in the first extract from "From Paris in My Rearview Mirror" foreshadows the trial in which Lou will be banned from racecar driving for setting a harmful example to French women.

In the first "The Devil Drives" extract of Part Two, the author reminds the reader of Nathalie Dunois and the fact that her version of events is speculative. Nevertheless, her depiction of Lou's relationship with Armand seems plausible, because his anti-Semitic attitudes would help explain why Lou collaborated with the Nazis after the occupation.

The differing perspectives that Lily and Suzanne have towards Gabor's photographs from the world of motor racing are indicative of their differing psychological states at the time the photographs were taken. Lily admires the photos and describes some of them in detail, because the photos were taken at a time when Lily and Gabor were especially close and were travelling the world together. Suzanne doesn't like the photos and insists that they do not represent her late husband's best work, but the reader suspects that this has less to do with the artistic quality of the photographs in question and more to do with the fact they were created at a time when Suzanne and Gabor were far apart from each other and Suzanne was plagued by jealousy of Lily. Significantly, Suzanne praises the artistic merit of the collection of photographs that Gabor took in Paris, when he was with Suzanne.

The events in Chapter 9 of "The Devil Drives" – where Nathalie recounts a story told to her by her great-aunt Suzanne Dunois - will become significant in the penultimate chapter of the novel in which Suzanne Dunois insists that she has never met Nathalie and that Nathalie invented the story of Suzanne visiting the hospital with Lou.

Gabor's impression of Lou Villars in his November 1934 letter is an important counterpoint to all of the other perspectives offered on her life, because it is the only one written without the benefit of hindsight. Everyone else's descriptions of Lou are colored by their knowledge that she went on to collaborate with the Nazis. But at the time, in the years running up to the war, Gabor saw Lou as a victim and was concerned for her safety.

Lionel admits that he fabricated details in the coverage of Lou's trial for the paper in New Jersey. Once again, as with Gabor's article about the Hungarian counterfeiter, this calls into question the objectivity and accuracy of historical records. The reader might think of newspaper articles as factual documents of the past, but Lionel's own account of the time reveals how casually he treated the idea of objective truth. Ironically, Lionel





achieved success with his work when it is banned in America: no one was interested in reading what he had to say until they weren't allowed to.

Gabor's guilt over the relatively minor role he played in Lou's downfall is in marked contrast to Lily's attitude. By training her as a race driver in order to capitalize on the publicity, Lily undoubtedly had more impact on Lou's life than Gabor's photograph did. However, Lily's knowledge of Lou's later crimes alters her narrative, making her less willing to admit to her own contribution to Lou's actions. Gabor, writing at the time, did not know who Lou would become and therefore expresses his guilt over what happened to her without reservation. However, Gabor's guilt also reveals a streak of self-obsession. Out of all the things going on around him, he is most focused on his photograph and the role it has played in the trial. Like Lionel, Gabor's first thought is always of himself and his art.

The differences between the accounts of the night Gabor gave Lily her photograph cannot be resolved within the novel. Gabor's accounts are always filtered through his letters to his parents which, although more revealing than many people might be willing to be with their parents, would necessarily never include a moment in which Gabor was unfaithful to Suzanne. Lily's account is written after Gabor's death, when there is no one who can challenge her interpretation of what happened between them.

Chapter 10 of "The Devil Drives" is considerably longer than any of the other chapters of the book and covers a great deal of information and events in Lou's life. Although the instability of Nathalie Dunois, the author of "The Devil Drives" has been hinted at earlier in the novel, this chapter marks the moment in which the reader experiences serious doubt about the events being described, due to their implausible nature. The scene in which Adolf Hitler personally recruits Lou as a spy is a major indication that Nathalie's narrative is becoming, or has always been, pure fantasy.

Lionel's account of Lou's attempt to procure photographs from Gabor is an important counterpoint to Lou's depiction in "The Devil Drives". Nathalie always depicts Lou as naïve and unintelligent, but the account given by Lionel gives the impression of a woman who knows exactly what she's doing.

Chapter 11 of "The Devil Drives" is significant because it is the moment when Lou discovers the secret about the French border fortifications at the Maginot Line. It has been repeated throughout the novel that Lou's major crime against her home country was the moment when she revealed this location. It isn't until later in the novel that the shaky grounds for this accusation are revealed.

The final chapters of Part Two, written by Lionel and Lily, reveal the self-obsessed tendencies of both characters. For Lionel, the death of the man whose execution he witnessed was only significant in that it convinced Lionel that it was time for him to leave Paris. Lily discusses her gratitude for the publicity work Lionel did during Lou's trial because it led to the Rossignols selling more cars to wealthy Americans: even in retrospect, Lily is more interested in her own financial concerns than the trial which destroyed Lou's life.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does it bother people when Lou wears men's clothes?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the differences between the way Gabor, Lily, and Suzanne talk about the photographs that Gabor took in the world of motor racing? What does this reveal about each character?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think Nathalie's account of Lou's trip to Berlin is plausible? Why?

## Vocabulary

crude, courtship, tipsy, conversants, esoteric, catechism, trenches, possessive, incarnation, silted, catatonics, psychotics, upheavals, melodrama, distraught, tarnished, obscene, sacramental, carousel, cache



## Part 3: Page 305 – Page 387

### Summary

Part 3 begins with an extract from Suzanne's memoirs in which she recalls the German invasion of Paris and how she and Gabor escaped to Lily de Rossignol's chateau in the South of France. At the chateau, they lived a lavish existence but were bored and worried about the people they had left behind. Gabor was most worried about his work, which was stored in a basement in Paris. Lily, Gabor, and Suzanne decided to return to Paris. Once there, Suzanne made the decision to join the Resistance.

Next, Lily defends herself and her husband against any possible accusation of being traitors. The Rossignols sold numerous cars to Nazi officials during the occupation which kept Lily and her family in business.

Gabor writes to his parents again from Paris on December 1, 1940, but he admits in the letter that he has no intention of sending it. He is already under suspicion as a foreigner and he fears making things worse for himself by trying to contact his family in Hungary.

In Chapter 12 of "The Devil Drives" Lou and Inge Wallser ended their romantic relationship and Lou began to work as a mechanic for Jean-Claude Bonnet, the deputy minister of information for the Nazis in Paris.

The next chapter from Gabor's perspective is the preface to a collection of photographs he took of Picasso's studio in Paris. This is followed by an extract from Suzanne's memoir discussing whether or not Gabor was aware of her involvement with the Resistance. Gabor often completed photography assignments under Suzanne's instructions. He later claimed that he knew these were for Resistance activities, but Suzanne doubts whether that is the truth.

In Chapter 13 of "The Devil Drives" Bonnet took Lou to the Rossignol showroom so that he could buy a car from Lily's husband, Didi. Bonnet bought the car that had been owned by Armand, Didi's brother and Lou's former mentor. This is followed by an extract from "A Baroness by Night" in which Lily recounts the night she and Didi discovered that Bonnet had been injured in a car accident while driving the car he bought from Didi. Bonnet's passenger, Lou's former lover Inge Wallser, was killed in the crash. One day as he left the house, Didi was gunned down and died from his wounds. Lily believes that Didi deliberately sabotaged the car in order to kill Bonnet and that Didi was murdered as a reprisal for the sabotage. After Didi's death, Lily was visited by a leader from the Resistance who recruited her to help their cause.

In Chapter 14 of "The Devil Drives" Nathalie reveals that she has been unable to interest any publishers in her biography of Lou and that she will instead have to self-publish her book. She uses this as an excuse to tell a personal story which a conventional publisher would refuse to allow her to include the tale of how Nathalie



began to hallucinate hearing a stone falling down a well while she was writing about Lou. Nathalie visited a psychiatrist who told her that this was a normal part of the creative process but who threatened legal action against Nathalie if she was named in the book. Later in the chapter, Nathalie reveals that Lou was present on the scene of the car accident which killed Inge and seriously injured Bonnet. Nathalie writes that Lou accused Didi of tampering with the breaks.

This is followed by a letter addressed to Gabor, written by his father in January 1943. His father was writing to inform him that his mother has died.

In Chapter 15 of "The Devil Drives" Nathalie continues to reveal herself to be unprofessional and unstable when she announces at the start of the chapter that she has not written anything for the biography in six months due to her work as a high school teacher and the recent failure of a romantic relationship. She recounts that Lou began to be listed as one of the interrogators at the Gestapo headquarters in Paris and goes on to imagine what Lou's life was like at this time. Nathalie accuses Lou of suggesting to the Nazis that Jews being forcibly removed from the city should be held at the Velodrome d'Hiver, where Lou had performed athletic stunts when she first arrived in Paris. Later in the chapter Nathalie writes, in vivid and unpleasant detail, of the torture procedures Lou supposedly carried out when she worked as an interrogator for the Gestapo.

## Analysis

At the beginning of Part 3, Suzanne discusses the motivations of people who decided to write about this time in their lives. She suggests that Lily's memoir is egotistical and claims that Suzanne is undecided whether or not she will agree to have her own memoirs published. However she also suggests that some egotism and pride is justified in these memoirs: the resistance did great and brave things, should they be expected to be humble on top of that? Although Suzanne appears to make excuses for Lily's egotism, it still comes across as a not-so-subtle attack on her former rival for Gabor's affections. This section makes clear that Suzanne's narrative was written after Lily's, allowing her to use Lily's remembrances as an influence on her own.

In Lily's first extract in Part 3, she passionately defends herself against the accusation that she and her husband were traitors for selling cars to the Nazis. This accusation is not made by any of the other characters in the book, so the reader is left to assume that the accusations have been made by the general public or the newspapers, not by anyone whose perspective is detailed in the novel. Lily's defensiveness implies that she feels guilty about the cars. It is also evidence that, while she is willing to condemn Lou for her behavior, she is unwilling to acknowledge anything unethical in her own behavior.

Much like the earlier chapter in which Lionel wrote of his meeting with Picasso in Paris, Gabor's preface to his book about Picasso is boastful and egocentric, highlighting the fact that what separates Gabor and Lionel is their level of success rather than their



personalities. While Lionel must boast of a brief conversation in a café, Gabor can boast of a genuine collaboration with the great painter. This section further highlights Gabor's obsession with his art. Whereas Suzanne wished to return to Paris from the South of France in order to be with her elderly mother, Gabor's only concern was to return to his photographs. Unlike Suzanne, Gabor never makes any attempt to reunite with his family during the war. Although the other narrators in Part 3 focus on the war and its devastating impact on Paris, Gabor's extracts continue to be primarily about Gabor's photography career.

Suzanne's discussion of whether Gabor knew about her involvement in the Resistance highlights how little the reader really knows about Gabor. The documents created by Gabor in the novel are all written at a time and to an audience which would make it impossible for him to reveal anything classified or illegal, in the way the Lily and Suzanne are free to do. In this sense, Suzanne has control of Gabor's legacy in more ways than one. She controls his estate (and takes legal action to block any uses of his photography of which she does not approve) but she also controls the public's understanding of Gabor's role in the war. She does not know for sure how much Gabor knew about the Resistance, but her ownership of his narrative allows her to argue that he didn't know what was going on.

The question of Inge Wallser's death, and the attempted murder of Jean-Claude Bonnet, is an important mystery in the novel. Although none of the authors within the novel suggest it, it seems clear to the reader that one potential suspect for the sabotage must be Lou: the mechanic who worked on the car for Bonnet. Lou dies before the end of the war and therefore is never given a chance to document her own version of events. Instead it is left to women like Lily, who is keen to exonerate her husband from the accusation that he collaborated with the Nazis by selling them cars. Lily's keenness to believe that Didi was a secret saboteur could be more of a reflection of her guilt over their business deals with the Nazis, than a sincere belief that Didi was in the Resistance.

Chapter 14 of "The Devil Drives" offers further evidence for Lou being involved in the car crash which killed Inge and injured Bonnet. In this chapter Nathalie appears more and more unstable as an author, which is highlighted by the fact that her psychiatrist has threatened legal action against her if she attempts to include her name in the book. The academic status and value of the book is also lowered by the revelation that no one will agree to publish it and that Nathalie intends to pay for publication herself. It is now clear to the reader that Nathalie's account of Lou's life is not to be trusted. Occasionally, Nathalie will refer to a genuine record or piece of historical evidence which she has used in her biography. In this chapter, that piece of evidence is a note stating that Lou was present at the fatal car accident, which Nathalie embellishes into a story about Lou's grief over Inge's death and her surprise at being asked to inspect the car. Nathalie has already decided for herself that Lou was an infamous traitor and a torturer, so she never puts forth the obvious suggestion that Lou might have been involved in the brake failure of a car she had worked on as a mechanic.



The letter from Gabor's father gives a new perspective to Gabor's character and his actions earlier in the novel. It is never explained why Gabor failed to visit his parents in Hungary in the years before the war when he lived in Paris, and in this letter his father also expresses his confusion as to why Gabor didn't visit home. There is also humor in the letter, despite the tragedy it communicates, when the reader gets a new perspective on some of the more unconventional and revealing anecdotes that Gabor shared with his parents earlier in the novel: his father reveals that before Gabor's success he feared that his son was just wasting his time hanging around in bars and brothels. This letter serves to contrast Gabor's character with Suzanne and to further highlight Gabor's obsession with his art. When Suzanne left her mother in Paris for a couple of months, she was consumed by guilt. Gabor failed to visit his parents for years, but never let that motivate him to visit his mother before she died.

In Chapter 15 of "The Devil Drives" Nathalie becomes increasingly unhinged when she attempts to connect Lou Villars to the detainment of tens of thousands of Jews held in appalling conditions as they were removed from Paris. Nathalie's flawed logic is highlighted when she asks her readers: "Do we know that Lou Villars \*didn't\* do it?"

## Discussion Question 1

What motivates Suzanne to join the Resistance?

## Discussion Question 2

What motivates Gabor to return to Paris?

## Discussion Question 3

What evidence does Nathalie have access to in this section? Are the conclusions she draws from this evidence justified?

## Vocabulary

lexicon, governance, swine, hysterics, brutalizing, profound, conscription, tepid, patrimony, sadistic, deported, contempt, anguish, goblet, collaborators, precedence, adversity, prolonged, brothels, sustained



## Part 3: Page 388 – Page 436

### Summary

The following chapter is titled “Yvonne” and deals with the owner of the Chameleon Club. Arlette began performing at the club again after she left Clovis Chanac. One night Lou came into the club with Chanac, Bonnet, and some Germans. Chanac heckled Arlette during her performance and Yvonne demanded that they all leave her club. She was informed later by a girl from the cloak room that Chanac had made threats against Yvonne. This is followed by an extract from Suzanne’s memoir in which she recounts the efforts of the Resistance to smuggle Yvonne out of France before Chanac could take his revenge. Gabor helped to fake Yvonne’s new identification papers and Suzanne took her to Lily’s house so that Lily could drive Yvonne across the Spanish border. Suzanne reveals that it was at this point that she was arrested by the Gestapo and taken in for questioning.

In Chapter 16 of “The Devil Drives” Nathalie describes the night Suzanne was tortured by Lou at the Gestapo headquarters. Nathalie claims that Lou left Suzanne with such severe scars on her arms, that Suzanne refused to wear any sleeveless clothing even decades after the war had ended.

Next, in a chapter of “A Baroness by Night” Lily describes her journey helping to smuggle Yvonne over the Spanish border.

In Chapter 17 of “The Devil Drives” Nathalie attempts to argue that Lou was involved in a plot to stop the Allied forces invading France from the beaches of Normandy, a plot which led to her violent death. Nathalie claims that Lou became involved with a female agent from the Resistance called Eileen Mitchell, who had discovered Lou’s plan to thwart the Allied landings and arranged for her to be murdered as a result. At the end of Nathalie’s book she visits an aging Eileen Mitchell, but the woman is too old and frail to understand what Nathalie is talking about, or to contradict her version of events.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi writes an outraged letter to the editors of a publication called Liberation, complaining that their recent review of “The Devil Drives” was not sufficiently harsh. Suzanne’s first complaint is that the book claims her husband, Gabor Tsenyi, owed Lou Villars a copy of the photograph “Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932” which he refused to give her. Suzanne contests that this is a lie. Suzanne goes on to state that although Nathalie claims in the book to be Suzanne’s great niece, the two women are not related and indeed have never met. She further contests that her arms were not permanently scarred by her encounter with Lou at the Gestapo headquarters in Paris. Suzanne states that she was not tortured by Lou, although other people she knew in the Resistance had been. On the night she was interrogated, Lou punched her in the face in a way that would cause a lot of blood but minimal pain. Afterwards, Lou sat in Suzanne’s cell for several hours encouraging Suzanne to cry out in pain while Lou sat in a corner and read a newspaper. Afterwards,



Lou informed the guards she was unable to get any information out of her and Suzanne was released. Despite this, Suzanne argues that Lou deserved to be executed by the Resistance.

The final chapter is a Postscript to the Sixtieth Anniversary edition of Lionel Maine's "Make Yourself New" written by Lionel's granddaughter. The granddaughter reveals that Lionel went on to be a very successful author who had many children by multiple women. Towards the end of his life, Lionel became obsessed with the horror film "Carrie" in which an outcast girl is mercilessly bullied by people around her until it provokes her into a murderous rage. In the closing moments of the film, someone visited Carrie's grave to leave flowers for her, and the dead woman's bloodied arm came shooting out from under the ground. Lionel insisted on watching this moment over and over again, but would become enraged if his granddaughter skipped back to an earlier moment in the film when Carrie was happy and flirting with her prom date.

## Analysis

In some ways Yvonne is a similar character to Lou: neither woman is given the chance to tell their own story, but instead has their story told from the perspective of others. However, the other characters in the novel all loved and respected Yvonne, whereas they were intimidated and uncertain around Lou. As a result of this, Yvonne's bravery and spirit shines through in the novel despite the fact she is not given a voice of her own.

Nathalie's graphic description of the torture of Suzanne in Chapter 16 of "The Devil Drives" will be disproven in the penultimate chapter.

Lily presents her rescue of Yvonne in a jovial and lighthearted way which belies the serious danger the two women were facing. Although Lily's memoir is often self-obsessed and egomaniacal, in the one chapter in which she does something truly heroic and admirable she chooses to focus on the fun the two women had together and her respect for Yvonne. Despite her narcissistic tendencies, Lily does not boast about her own bravery or the courage she showed in saving her old friend.

The final chapter of "The Devil Drives" deals with the murder of Lou Villars by agents of the Resistance. Throughout the novel, there has been only one consistent and uncontested accusation made against Lou: that she was responsible for revealing to the Germans that the French border fortifications ended at the Maginot Line. In this chapter, it is revealed that the evidence for this accusation is thin and unconvincing and rests purely on the overheard ramblings of a drunk woman who believed that Lou revealed the location to the Germans after she complained to Lou about her husband's construction business. Suddenly, it becomes starkly clear to the reader that there is no firm evidence that Lou actually committed the one crime everyone is certain that she committed. The chapter mentions that there were many double agents working on the coast of Normandy in the run up to the Allied invasion and that these double agents were responsible for the success of the operation when they successfully convinced the





Germans that the landings were taking place elsewhere. Although it is never openly stated by any of the narrators in the novel, this information – combined with Lou's potential act of sabotage which killed Inge Wallser – heavily implies that Lou herself could have been working as a double agent during her years in the Gestapo. Because Lou was murdered by members of the Resistance, her story has always been told by people who only knew some of the facts. There will never be an opportunity for Lou to explain what really happened during these years.

Suzanne's letter of complaint about "The Devil Drives" brings all of Nathalie's theories and explanations crashing to the ground. By revealing that the two women are not really related, this chapter makes it clear to the reader that Nathalie's book is pure fiction invented by an unstable and uninformed person. Suzanne continues in a similar vein to her memoirs in this extract, by putting Gabor's interests and reputation ahead of her own. Her first and most forceful complaint is to argue against the criticisms of Gabor for not giving Lou a copy of his photograph. Only after making this argument does she address the inaccuracies in the book relating to her time in the Resistance. Further evidence is provided in Suzanne's letter to suggest that Lou was a double agent. When Lou was sent to torture Suzanne, she calmly explained to her that she was going to cause the minimal possible amount of pain and just make it look as if Suzanne had been interrogated and tortured. Despite this, Suzanne still does not put forward the now obvious suggestion that Lou was double-crossing the Nazis. Suzanne claims that other people she knew in the Resistance really had been tortured by Lou, but the reader is now sufficiently familiar with the human tendency to rewrite and re-imagine the past that there is no reason to believe that these accounts are accurate. Suzanne has made it clear throughout her memoirs that no one was ever really sure who was involved in the Resistance because it was too dangerous to discuss and no one knew who they could trust. Was Lou Villars in the Resistance? Was she a forgotten and maligned hero who should be celebrated by the narrators in the novel rather than condemned? The reader will never know.

The final chapter of the novel uses the 1970s horror movie "Carrie" as a symbol for Lou Villars. In "Carrie" the outcast protagonist is mistreated, bullied, and abused by everyone around her, just like Lou. At the end of his life, Lionel was obsessed with the scene in which Carrie's bloodied hand shot up out of her grave, intent on taking revenge against those who had wronged her. This suggests that the mistreatment of Lou weighed heavily on Lionel's mind in his later years, making him worried about the consequences that those who mistreated her might face. When Lionel's granddaughter rewinds the tape to a different moment it symbolizes the attempts to define Lou as a killer. The granddaughter is interested in an earlier part of Carrie's life, before she was defined as a monster. Lionel's anger at being shown this earlier, contradictory depiction of Carrie/Lou shows his commitment to believing the consensus opinion of Lou Villars as a criminal and a traitor. Lionel, and all of the other narrators in the novel, refuse to accept that they might have been wrong.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does the Resistance help Yvonne?

## Discussion Question 2

In the Postscript to "Make Yourself New", what information does the reader discover about the lives of all of the characters in the years after the war?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think Lou Villars was a traitor to her country?

## Vocabulary

lavished, patrons, crucial, chic, absolution, intermittently, tapped, pious, cyanide, geriatric, coax, indeterminate, masochistic, distortion, degraded, psychoanalytical, heredity, vexed, staccato, incestuous



# Characters

## Lou Villars

Lou Villars is the protagonist of the novel. Despite this, she is the only main character who does not give her own version of the narrative. Instead, the life and personality of Lou Villars is constructed by the other characters in the novel, most significantly by the amateur biographer Nathalie Dunois who wrote a self-published biography of Lou called “The Devil Drives”. In Nathalie’s version of Lou’s life, Lou was obsessed with Joan of Arc and traumatized by the mysterious fate of her mentally ill brother, although none of the other authors within the narrative make these claims.

Lou was a junior athlete before becoming a performer at the Chameleon Club in Paris, a champion race car driver, a self-employed mechanic and, during the war, a torturer at the Gestapo headquarters of Nazi occupied Paris. Doubt remains at the end of the novel whether Lou was a Nazi collaborator or a member of the French Resistance and, because Lou left no record giving her version of events, the reader is left to piece together the story of her life from a variety of unreliable and contradictory sources.

Lou’s ambiguous gender identity made others suspicious and hostile towards her and the reader is left with the suspicion that Lou’s outsider status and refusal to conform to contemporary norms motivated the other authors in the story to believe rumors about Lou’s involvement with the Nazis without questioning their accuracy.

## Gabor Tsenyi

Gabor Tsenyi is a Hungarian photographer living in Paris. The reader never discovers what Gabor’s real name is: Tsenyi is a pseudonym which Gabor adopted because it is the Hungarian word for “genius”. Gabor’s main contribution to the narrative comes in the form of the many and frequent letters he sent to his mother and father back in Hungary, documenting his early struggles making a living in Paris and his subsequent success as a famous and successful artist.

Gabor’s letters reveal a man who is first and foremost interested in his art, much more so than the people and politics surrounding him. When Gabor returned to Nazi-occupied Paris, he did so because he feared for the safety of his photography collection, not out of a desire to fight the Nazis or to protect his loved ones. Although he often professes his sadness at being separated from his parents, he makes no attempt to visit them in Hungary and consequently misses out on seeing his mother before she died.

Gabor’s obsession with his art at the cost of those around him is symbolized by his most famous photograph “Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932”: a photograph of Lou Villars with her then-girlfriend Arlette Jumeau. This photograph graced the cover of Gabor’s first book of photographs which established him as a professional artist but was later used in a court case against Lou which destroyed her career.



Although Gabor agonizes in his letters to his parents about the damage his photographs have caused to the people who appeared in them, it does not stop him continuing to put others in risky situations for the sake of his art: even in Nazi-occupied Paris he stops on the street to photograph a man selling black market goods. Gabor's influence endures for the longest of any of the other narrators: his photographs of pre-War Paris, members of the Resistance, and the eventual liberation of the city remain famous long after his death. However his influence on the events at the time is minimal compared to other characters who actively sought to change the world around them.

## Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi

Suzanne Dunois (later Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi) is Gabor Tsenyi's girlfriend and a member of the French Resistance. Suzanne's version of events is delivered in the form of a memoir, written after Gabor's death and after the publication of accounts written by Lionel Maine and Lily de Rossignol. Despite her courageous work in the Resistance, Suzanne's influence in the novel and her focus in her memoirs revolve around her romantic relationship with Gabor. This is symbolized in the letter Suzanne writes disputing the accuracy of Nathalie's book "The Devil Drives": before correcting mistakes relating to Suzanne's time in the Resistance, she first corrects any misapprehensions about Gabor's personality and his art. Even after his death, Gabor remains Suzanne's first priority.

Suzanne is less openly boastful and arrogant than the other narrators when it comes to discussing her past, but her writing nevertheless radiates a sense of moral superiority which comes across as egotistical and is summed up by her indecision over whether or not to publish her memoirs. Suzanne criticizes Lily's egotism in publishing her own memoirs about their time together in the Resistance and Suzanne's desire to feel superior to Lily causes Suzanne to change her mind about whether or not to publish her own side of the story: she is torn between a desire to set the record straight and the desire to appear morally superior to those who have already published their own self-aggrandizing accounts. Suzanne and Lily resent each other because they were rivals for Gabor's love. Lily de Rossignol criticizes Suzanne for her "certain self-righteous quality, earnest, even pious."

## Lily de Rossignol

The Baroness Lily de Rossignol is Gabor Tsenyi's patron and the wife of Didi de Rossignol, the owner of a French car manufacturing company. Lily's perspective is told through extracts from her commercially successful memoir "A Baroness by Night", which was written after Lionel Maine's contributions but before Suzanne's.

Lily worked as an extra in Hollywood for a number of years and, as a result of this, people around her assumed that she was promiscuous and sexually experienced. However, Lily reveals in her memoir that during the early years that the novel depicts,



she was a virgin because her husband, Didi, was a closeted homosexual who did not reveal this fact to her until after their marriage.

Lily did many courageous things during her time in the Resistance, including helping Yvonne Nagy escape from the country across the Spanish border. However, Lily's heroism is tainted with her tendency towards defensiveness and carelessness. She often failed to help others in situations where her wealth would be of use: when Lionel's girlfriend was threatened with deportation, when Lou Villars was searching for her brother, and when Suzanne wanted to contact her mother in Paris while she was staying with Lily in the South of France. Lily was also accused of taking advantage of others during the occupation because she bought numerous paintings from artists at a price much lower than their worth and because her husband continued to do business with the Nazis through their motor manufacturing business.

Lily was in love with Gabor Tsenyi while he was in a relationship with Suzanne, which led to tension between the two women that subsided during the war years, but reemerged in their respective memoirs.

## Lionel Maine

Lionel Maine is an American author living in Paris. Lionel's perspective is told through his two books "Make Yourself New" which he wrote during his years as a poverty-stricken artist in 1920s Paris and "Paris Through My Rearview Mirror" an account of the years leading up to the war which, as the title implies, was written in retrospect. Lionel's depiction of events is seen through the lens of his own egotism and self-obsession and his interest in others reflects the extent to which they affect him. Much like Gabor, Lionel is incapable of considering the world around him except through the lens of his own art. Unlike Gabor, Lionel's talent is not widely recognized during the years the novel depicts, although he goes on to be a well-respected author in subsequent decades. Lionel's arrogance is summed up in the chapter in which he attends an execution and, in the process, describes himself as being a member of the literary elite: "I'd be joining the long line of literary lights who had followed the masses to watch the guilty brought to violent justice. Byron, Dickens, now Lionel Maine."

Lionel and Suzanne were in a relationship before Suzanne left him for Gabor. In the postscript to the 60th anniversary edition of "Make Yourself New", Lionel's granddaughter suggested that Lionel loved Suzanne for the rest of his life. Lionel's attitude to women makes his account less reliable than some of the others: his descriptions of Suzanne and Lily mainly revolve around his relative sexual desire for each of them and his description of Lou Villars focuses on how masculine (i.e. how unattractive to Lionel) she is. Lionel fails to give any real insight into the historical impact these three women had through their work with the Resistance and the Gestapo.



## Nathalie Dunois

Nathalie Dunois is a high school teacher and author of the book “The Devil Drives: The Life of Lou Villars”. As the novel progresses, Nathalie’s chapters become less and less plausible until the reader discovers in the penultimate chapter, through a letter of complaint from Suzanne Dunois, that much of Nathalie’s contributions to the narrative have been fabricated. In the opening sentence of “The Devil Drives,” Nathalie claims to be Suzanne’s great-niece, but in Suzanne’s repost she states that not only are the two women not related: they have never even met. However Francine Prose included many details before this point to imply to the reader that Nathalie is unstable and her version of the life of Lou Villars is not to be trusted: a psychiatrist Nathalie was visiting threatened legal action against Nathalie for trying to include her name in the book and Nathalie was unable to find a traditional publisher for her biography so decided to self-publish. Further to this, Nathalie often included details from her own life which were unconnected to the subject of the book including mentioning the difficulties of high school teaching and the recent failure of her romantic relationship.

By the end of the novel, it becomes clear to the reader that many of the character traits ascribed to Lou are actually Nathalie’s own personality traits which she has projected onto her subject. Nathalie suggested that Lou had a tendency to lie and make up connections during times of emotional distress (depicted in the chapters devoted to Lou’s breakups with Arlette and Inge). The reader discovers in the penultimate chapter that Nathalie herself is prone to lying: she has fraudulently claimed to be related to Suzanne Dunois. Nathalie also claimed that Lou had an obsession with Joan of Arc. It is heavily implied that this was Nathalie’s own obsession, not Lou’s, when it is revealed in the coda to “The Devil Drives” that Nathalie teaches at a school called Lycée Jeanne D’Arc. Nathalie’s preoccupation with the idea that Lou was evil prevents her from noticing the evidence in her own research which implies that Lou was a double agent working for the Resistance.

## Eva “Yvonne” Nagy

Eva “Yvonne” Nagy, known throughout the novel as Yvonne, is the owner of the Chameleon Club in Paris. As such, her character is symbolic of the club as a whole. Her club provides a sanctuary for the other characters where they feel free to express themselves and revel in the purity of art found in the performances at the club.

However, as the novel progresses the integrity of the club deteriorates firstly through a racist and nationalistic act involving Lou Villars and Arelette Jumeau and then again during the occupation when the club was frequented by Nazi officers. The popularity of Yvonne and of the Chameleon Club amongst the other authors within the book protects her from any harsh criticism related to the racist routine and acceptance of German clientele. When Yvonne eventually protests and removes Clovis Chanac, Lou, and some Germans from the club, Suzanne, Lily and other members of the resistance unite to help her escape the country.



Chapters which focus on Yvonne are unusual because they are told in a straightforward fiction style in the third person and the past tense, without the addition of an internal author presenting the information. This makes these chapters appear more reliable to the reader because the information is not filtered through the perspective of another character.

## **Arlette Jumeau**

Arlette Jumeau is a performer at the Chameleon Club. She is the girlfriend of Lou Villars and later the girlfriend of corrupt police chief Clovis Chanac. Arlette plays the role of the femme fatale, using her sexuality to ruin the lives and careers of other characters in the book including Lou and Yvonne. She appeared alongside Lou in Gabor's photograph "Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932".

## **Clovis Chanac**

Clovis Chanac was the Chief of Police and later became a gangster during the years of the Nazi Occupation. His love for Arlette motivates him to destroy Lou's career. Jealous of Lou, and the evidence of her relationship with Arlette documented in Gabor's photograph, Chanac used his position to revoke Lou's racing license.

## **Didi de Rossignol**

Didi de Rossignol is the owner of the Rossignol car manufacturing company. Despite being homosexual, he is married to the Baroness Lily de Rossignol with whom he has a complicated but affectionate relationship. Didi continued to sell cars to the Nazis during the Occupation. Both Nathalie Dunois and Lily argue that Didi sabotaged a car which led to the death of the informer Inge Wallser and the injury of the Gestapo's Jean-Claude Bonnet. There is no evidence to suggest that Didi was responsible for the car crash, other than Lily's belief that he was.

## **Armand de Rossignol**

Armand de Rossignol is Didi's brother in law. He trained Lou to be a racecar driver and Nathalie Dunois argues that he indoctrinated Lou with anti-Semitic and nationalist beliefs, explaining Lou's later collaboration with the Nazis. Both Gabor and Lily confirm that Armand did hold such beliefs and Gabor recalls that Lou expressed racist sentiments to him one night at the Chameleon Club. Armand was murdered under mysterious circumstances, possibly by a Jewish extremist or possibly by an ex-lover.



## **Inge Wallser**

Inge Wallser is a German race car driver. Nathalie Dunois argues that Inge invited Lou Villars to attend the Berlin Olympics and was instrumental in recruiting Lou as a German spy. Nathalie also suggests that Inge and Lou were in a romantic relationship. Inge was killed in a car crash which many of the characters in the novel believe was caused by an act of sabotage.

## **Jean-Claude Bonnet**

Jean-Claude Bonnet worked for the Gestapo in Paris during the Nazi occupation of France. Nathalie Dunois argues that he recruited Lou Villars to work for the Gestapo and that Lou worked as his mechanic before becoming a torturer at Gestapo headquarters. He was seriously injured in a car accident which investigations concluded had been an act of sabotage.

## **Ricardo de la Cadiz Blanca**

Ricardo de la Cadiz Blanca is a doctor in Paris and, later, a prominent member of the Resistance who recruited both Suzanne and Lily to the cause.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Chameleon Club

The Chameleon Club symbolizes the gap between who people really are and what they present to the world. Although many of the club's clientele live traditional and respectable lives, at the club they dress as members of the opposite sex and behave in ways they wouldn't in public.

The performances at the club represent the state of mind of the other characters at each point in the narrative: the first sequence in the club focuses on the raw emotion of Yvonne when she sings about the death of a former lover, reflecting Gabor's passion for art and expression which brought him to Paris; Arlette and Lou's nationalist routine reflects the growing political tensions in France in the years before the war; the song about a woman calling home to check in with her staff (in which she is informed of a series of disasters before the staff insist that everything is fine) reflects the spirit of denial and alarm that gripped the French as the Nazis invaded; and after the occupation, the performances in the club were used to send coded messages to the Resistance, reflecting the new seriousness of the characters' lives.

## “Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932”

Gabor's photograph “Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932” is symbolic of the way the other characters treat Lou Villars: defining her in a way which suits their own needs and desires, often at the expense of Lou herself. Gabor launches his career through this photograph, but it later ruins Lou's life when it provokes the jealousy of Clovis Chanac and is used as evidence against her during her trial. Others use the photograph to retrospectively condemn Lou for her work with the Gestapo: Suzanne argues that the photo unnerved her because it gave her a premonition to the night she would be arrested. Lou is best remembered as the subject of this photograph, while her own life and thoughts have not been recorded. The reader has no access to the real Lou Villars, only the versions of her created by others, most notably this photograph.

## Gabor's Photograph of Suzanne

Gabor's photograph of Suzanne involved her lying on a street in Paris pretending to be dead, a sequence which was symbolic in a number of ways. First, the photoshoot symbolized the nature of the relationship between Gabor and Suzanne in which Gabor's art was always given precedence over Suzanne's wellbeing. Suzanne hated being involved in this photograph and found the experience of pretending to be dead on the street degrading and upsetting, but she didn't share this fact with Gabor. Later, Gabor revealed his true purpose in arranging the photograph. He wasn't interested in photographing Suzanne lying in the street, but instead wanted to capture what the aftermath looked like after her body was removed. This is symbolic of the purpose of the



novel as a whole. The narrative of the novel is less interested in documenting the facts of what occurred during these years in Paris, just as Gabor was less interested in capturing the image of Suzanne lying on the street. Instead, both Francine Prose and Gabor Tsenyi are more interested in documenting the aftermath of the events depicted, Gabor by photographing the street once Suzanne has left, Prose by documenting the retrospective thoughts and feelings of her characters many years after the events of the novel have taken place.

## Gabor's Photograph of Lily

Gabor's photograph of Lily shows her getting out of her Juno-Diane Coupe. The photograph symbolizes the way people with different perspectives will interpret evidence in a different way, which is a key theme in the novel. Lily's interpretation of the photograph is influenced by her love for Gabor. At the time the photograph was taken, Lily was convinced that Gabor was not in love with her. The first time she saw the photograph she noticed the car first and only afterwards wondered who the "old" woman getting out of the car was. The fact that the car, and not her, was the focus of the picture made her realize that she would never have a romantic relationship with Gabor, but when Gabor describes the photograph to his parents his focus is entirely on Lily. When Lily looked back on the photograph in retrospect, it made her realize that Gabor had been in love with her when he took it.

Suzanne's interpretation of the photograph is influenced by her jealousy and dislike of Lily. When Suzanne describes the photograph she claims that it is clear that Lily has no idea the photo is being taken – a sign that she is uninterested in other people - but in Lily's account she insists that she was hyper-aware of Gabor's presence and spent the rest of the day thinking about the fact he had taken her photo.

## Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc is a recurring symbol in Nathalie Dunois' biography "The Devil Drives". Nathalie argues that the young Lou Villars became obsessed with Joan of Arc after being told her story by her grandmother. Nathalie uses Lou's supposed interest in Joan of Arc as a way of explaining Lou's later behavior suggesting that Lou, like Joan, believed she was working for the greater glory of France. In the coda to "The Devil Drives" it is revealed that Nathalie works at a school named after Joan of Arc, perhaps suggesting that it is Nathalie's who has an obsession or special connection with the Saint, rather than Lou.

## Juno-Diane Coupe

The Juno-Diane Coupe is a car made by the Rossignol family and driven by Lily. It is used in the novel as a symbol of the Lily's vanity and her superficial nature. Lily regularly drops the name of the car into her memoir, often in circumstances where it appears an incongruous detail intended to highlight her own wealth and style. When Lily



recalls the highly dangerous mission to help Yvonne escape across the Spanish border, she also recalls her pleasure at being given an opportunity to drive her beautiful car.

The hood ornament on the coupe was designed to look like Lily and is used to reflect Lily's platonic relationship with her husband, which Lily initially expected to be sexual. When Didi compliments the beauty of the hood ornament it makes Lily cry, because she wishes he would appreciate her beauty and physical attributes instead of the car's. It is revealed that, many decades after the events depicted in the novel, Lily was killed in a car crash while driving the Juno-Diane.

## The Replica Chameleon Club

When Yvonne refused Gabor permission to photograph the clientele at the Chameleon Club, Lily paid to have a replica of the club built in Gabor's studio so he could invite people to have their portraits taken there instead. This is symbolic of the gap between reality and the depiction of reality which forms the center of the novel. At the end of the novel the reader is forced to acknowledge that there is no absolute objective account that can explain the events of the novel or the life and motivation of Lou Villars. All that exists are replicas of what happened, created elsewhere rather than at the time, just like Gabor's photographs taken at the replica club are merely replicas of the atmosphere of the Chameleon Club, not the real thing. Like Gabor and Lionel's fake and exaggerated newspaper reports, photographs of the replica are later accepted as being authentic: Yvonne hangs the prints in the club and claims they were taken there.

## Forged Currency

Forged Currency is used as a symbol of artistic license and resistance. When Gabor first writes about the Hungarian counterfeiter convicted for making forged French currency, Gabor himself counterfeits the article. Gabor believes he is digging at a greater truth, the poetic truth that motivated the counterfeiter, rather than the plain unvarnished facts that a newspaper editor would expect but which wouldn't get to the heart of the story. The bills feature a portrait of the Hungarian counterfeiter himself: the author signing his work. Yvonne carries two of the forged bills with her because they amuse her, but when she hands one to Lily during their escape across the Spanish Border the bill becomes a symbol of resistance against authority and the desire for free individual expression.

## Lou's Lighter

Lou Villars allegedly used a lighter to torture her victims while she worked at the Gestapo. Nathalie Dunois refers to the lighter as a symbol of Lou's evil, but later evidence in the book makes the reader question whether Lou ever really used it as a weapon of torture. In the end, the lighter becomes a symbol of the way authors such as Nathalie Dunois can twist historical facts to appear in a certain light, even in circumstances when there is no evidence to substantiate the claims.

## Picasso Guillotine Sketch

The sketch of a guillotine drawn by the painter Pablo Picasso in a café in Paris is a symbol of Lionel Maine's arrogance and self-obsession, as well as Lionel's relative inferiority to Gabor. Lionel wanted to keep the sketch as evidence that he had spent time with the great painter, but Picasso sensed this and kept it for himself because he felt it was presumptuous of Lionel to expect something he'd drawn for free. Lionel continued to tell the story of the night he met Picasso because he thought it made him look interesting and well connected. This contrasts with Gabor, who actually collaborated with Picasso, and wrote the forward to a collection of photographs of the great man's work. Lionel's granddaughter confirms that Lionel continued to tell the story of the night Picasso made the sketch long into his nineties.

# Settings

## Paris

Paris is the main setting for all of the events in the narrative and in many ways the novel serves as a love letter to this vibrant and inspiring city. Paris represents different things to different characters.

For Gabor, Paris represents artistic freedom and opportunity. He moved to Paris to pursue his ambition to become a photographer and his ability to capture engaging and magical moments in the streets of nighttime Paris launched his career, through his first collection of photographs.

For Lionel, Paris is an exciting alternative to his boring and uninspiring former life as a newspaper reporter with a wife and child in New Jersey. For Lionel, Paris is all about sex and romance.

Paris is Suzanne's hometown and represents her family: when Suzanne returns to Paris after the Nazi occupation, her primary motivation is to get back to her mother who refused to leave the city when the Germans invaded. Suzanne's connection to the city is more personal whereas Gabor and Lionel's connection is more intellectual. Suzanne is the first of the main characters to start working for the Resistance to defend her city. For Lily, Paris represents entertainment and an escape from boredom. Her reason for returning to the city was how bored she had become trying to wait out the occupation in a chateau in the South of France.

## The Chameleon Club

The Chameleon Club is a symbol for the book's themes about perception and reality. Like a chameleon which changes color to match its background, the characters in the novel change their behavior to fit with their surroundings and change their narratives about the past to suit their own desires about how they wish to be perceived. At the start of the novel the Chameleon Club represents freedom of expression, but the freedom the club offers becomes tainted by the political and historical events occurring around it.

## Gabor's Studio

Gabor's studio is a location of tension between Gabor, Suzanne, and Lily. Lily pays for the studio in order to help Gabor pursue his photography career and builds him a replica of the Chameleon Club in the studio which Gabor uses to take some of his most famous and enduring photographs. Despite being gifted to Gabor by Lily, it is also the location in which Suzanne and Gabor spend most of their time together meaning Lily must be cautious about visiting Gabor when Suzanne is there so as not to spark her jealousy.



## Convent of Saint Bridget

The Convent of Saint Bridget is the boarding school that Lou Villars attended as a child. Nathalie Dunois suggests that this was a happy time in Lou's life and that she was taken under the wing of one of the nuns, Sister Francis, who noticed Lou's talent for sport and helped to train her as an athlete. In Nathalie's version of events, Lou's time at this location was one of the only happy occasions in her life.

## Vélodrome d'Hiver

When Lou Villars first arrives in Paris she performs in an athletics demonstration at the Vélodrome d'Hiver. This is the location where Lou first met Gabor and where Gabor gave Lou a business card for the Chameleon Club, a fateful encounter which brought Lou into a new circle of acquaintances. During the occupation the Vélodrome was used to detain tens of thousands of French Jews awaiting deportation to concentration camps in Germany. Nathalie suggests that the coincidental link between Lou's athletics demonstration and the detainment of the Jews at the same location means that Lou was responsible for the suggestion to use the Vélodrome.



# Themes and Motifs

## Reality and Perception

The central theme of the novel is Reality and Perception and whether it is possible to separate the two. All of the information given to the reader (except, notably, the “Yvonne” chapters) is filtered through the perspective of one or more of the novel’s characters, making it impossible for the reader to confidently determine who is telling the truth. For example, Gabor’s accounts are limited because they are letters sent to his parents, meaning that he would be unwilling to reveal any information that might reflect badly on him or to discuss personal matters such as his feelings for Suzanne and Lily. Lionel’s accounts are another example of the gap between reality and perception. His books are intended to depict the life of a virile American writer in Paris and, as such, leave out any elements of Lionel’s time in the city which do not serve the image of himself he is attempting to promote. Through Lionel’s account the reader is given an impression of Lily and Gabor’s relationship which makes it seem crude and superficial, whereas Lily and Gabor’s own accounts reveal how important they were to each other. Whereas in Lionel’s account, he and Suzanne were deeply in love and she left him because he had mistreated her, Suzanne’s account argues that she never really cared for Lionel which appears plausible to the reader as her devotion for Gabor shines through her memoirs so clearly.

The two exceptions in the novel are Yvonne and Lou, both of whom are major characters but neither of whom are given the chance to tell their own side of the story. However, each woman’s lack of their own personal narrative has a different effect in each case. For Lou, her lack of ownership of her own narrative allows others to use her story to suit their own needs: no one is concerned that Lou has been misrepresented by history, instead being content to let the narrative of the evil collaborator go unchallenged. However with Yvonne, the other characters join forces to give a positive impression of the woman even though there are elements in the narrative (such as the nationalistic and racist performances at her club) which might make her appear unsympathetic to the reader. The “Yvonne” chapters are not authored by any of the other characters, their only author is Francine Prose, which leaves the reader with an interesting question. Is Prose’s interpretation of her characters’ motivation really any more trustworthy than the several unreliable narrators she has included within the novel?

The best the reader can do is to weigh the relative merit and truth of the information they are presented with, giving more weight to incidents and events that are confirmed from more than one perspective. For example, Gabor claims in a letter to his parents that he kissed Lily, but Lily claims that he attempted to have sex with her. In a chapter of one of Lionel’s books, Lionel recalls a conversation with Gabor in which he admits that he “almost” had sex with Lily, which appears to substantiate her account of that night. This theme gets to the very heart of the human experience, by suggesting that there is no such thing as objectivity or accuracy when it comes to interpreting the events of the



past. Like the characters in the novel, all humans are subject to the prejudices caused by their own perspective and their own interests.

## Historical Accuracy

The theme of Historical Accuracy is explored through the biography “The Devil Drives” and through the various newspaper reports written by Gabor Tsenyi and Lionel Maine. Photographs, as records of events that actually occurred, could be considered as historically accurate, but their context changes their meaning. Gabor’s famous portraits of the clientele at the Chameleon Club were later thought of as accurate documents showing the real club although they were in fact taken at a replica.

Nathalie uses historical records, such as the log books from the Gestapo headquarters in Paris, to research her biography of Lou Villars. However, these sources only give “The Devil Drives” the appearance of being historically accurate. Nathalie uses the tiniest of historical details to lend credibility to her story, which largely consists of hearsay and speculation about Lou’s motivation and thoughts. A key example of this is the ledger in which Nathalie found evidence that Lou was present on the scene of the car crash which killed Inge Wallser: from this one small line of historical evidence, Nathalie creates an entire chapter of speculation about how Lou felt about her death and why she accused Didi of sabotage.

Nathalie invents long and detailed descriptions of events in Lou’s life for which she cannot possibly have any historical evidence, but by intertwining her description of Lou’s life with genuine historical events she seeks to give credibility to her inventions. When Lou is recruited as a spy for Germany, Nathalie invents what happened and weaves her version of the story around the events of the Berlin Olympics of 1936. On the night Lou first met Adolf Hitler, she and Inge Wallser were also depicted meeting the infamous Nazi documentary filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl directed the documentaries of the Berlin Olympics that summer and Nathalie uses descriptions of Riefenstahl’s real documentaries to add authenticity to her fictional account of Lou’s time in Berlin that year.

Both Lionel and Gabor worked as journalists during their years in Paris in order to make ends meet while they pursued their art and both men also fabricated details in the reports that they wrote. News articles are the kind of document that later generations look to as accurate reflections of events but, through the open inaccuracies and fabrications depicted in Lionel and Gabor’s journalism, the novel puts newspaper accounts under the same microscope as Gabor’s letters, and the memoirs of the other characters. There is no source which can be wholly trusted. Gabor’s journalism is also used to demonstrate the extent to which first-person accounts and recollections of events may also be deemed historically inaccurate: although at one stage Gabor openly admits to his parents that he invented the entirety of his interview with the Hungarian counterfeiter, he later forgets that it was made up and comes to believe his own fabrications. The reader is left to wonder how many of the other first-hand recollections





of events in the novel were also distortions which the characters later came to believe were historical fact.

## Gender Identity

The theme of Gender Identity is explored through the character of Lou Villars. Although born female, Lou dressed as a man during her time as a performer at the Chameleon Club and later underwent an operation to remove her breasts while she was a racecar driver. Lou's refusal to conform to expectations of her gender led to the destruction of her racing career, when she had her license removed due to her insistence on wearing male clothes. It was argued in court that Lou was setting a bad example to other French women by refusing to dress in a traditionally feminine way. Many of the questions surrounding Lou's gender relate to modern day debates about gender identity and the recent surge in media attention for the transgender community who are gaining recognition and acceptance in American society.

The novel depicts how much more difficult it was for people like Lou Villars in the past to build a life for herself which was not constrained by the way her society viewed gender. Lou's failure to conform to expectations of her gender is at the heart of how so many characters managed to take advantage of her vulnerability: Lou's unusually masculine levels of athleticism were exploited by Dr. Loomis; her sexuality and ambiguous appearance was exploited by Yvonne at the Chameleon Club; and her unusual appearance and breast removal operation was exploited by the Rossignols to promote their brand of cars. Lou's ambiguous gender identity is popular in the context of the Chameleon Club when she is presented as a sexual object intended for the gratification of the audience during her performances with Arlette. But Lou's unfeminine appearance is considered threatening in contexts where it cannot be interpreted in a sexual way, such as the race tracks. Lionel in particular has difficulty knowing how to interact with Lou and admits that this is because of her ambiguous gender. For Lionel, women are only interesting as sexual objects. He lusted after Suzanne and defines Lily as someone who shows no sexual interest in him. Lou tries to talk to Lionel about car motors, which he cannot interpret as in any way sexual, leaving him incapable of having a conversation with her.

Lou's life is contrasted with the life of Lily's husband, Didi de Rossignol, who also failed to conform to society's expectations of his gender but who did not suffer the severe consequences that Lou did. Didi was a wealthy homosexual man and his wealth and gender allowed him a level of freedom which was denied Lou. Didi was able to run his own business, marry a woman, and still continue with numerous homosexual affairs. Whereas Lou, because she was a woman, was denied the inherited wealth and access to employment which Didi had access to as a man. This shows the lack of equality when it comes to expressions of gender identity: it was much easier for men who didn't fit society's expectations to build a life for themselves which circumvented those expectations than it was for women.



## Collaboration and Resistance

The theme of Collaboration and Resistance links the personal themes relating to the characters to the historical themes relating to the major historic events which form the backdrop for the novel. The questions which are asked on a personal level of the novel's characters are questions which apply to the whole of France under Nazi occupation: to what extent is collaboration justifiable? How can secret acts of Resistance be proven or substantiated?

Suzanne's memoir touches on a social problem in post-war France in which many people sought to deny that the French public was aware of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, such as the deportation of French Jews depicted in a chapter of "The Devil Drives". Suzanne insists that even in the South of France (part of the non-Nazi controlled region of the country) people were aware of what was happening and the degradations taking place. One of Suzanne's motivations for writing about her past, and one of the reasons she is unsure about whether she will destroy her memoirs, is because she wants people to know the truth: that the French were aware of what the Nazis were doing during the occupation years.

The novel also touches on the suggestion that those involved in the French Resistance exaggerated their acts of bravery. This is explored through the various accounts given of Lou Villars' time as an alleged Gestapo torturer. Although Suzanne admits that Lou saved her from being tortured, she does not allow this information to exonerate Lou, because she claims she knew other members of the Resistance who Lou really did torture. However, the novel explores in depth the tendency to exaggerate and misremember details from the past, making the reader question whether the Resistance fighters who told Suzanne they were tortured by Lou were telling the truth. People who survived the war were able to define and rewrite their own involvement in a way that those who were killed could not. Lou was executed by members of the Resistance shortly before the Normandy landings which would bring about the end of the war in Europe. Because of this, her story has been told by others.

In post-war society, no one wanted to admit to having collaborated with the Nazis (which is why Lily goes to such great lengths to defend her family's business interactions) and everyone wanted to claim they had been a courageous member of the Resistance (leading Gabor to tell Suzanne he knew his photographs were aiding the Resistance, although Suzanne was sure he didn't know). Lily is especially concerned that the actions of her family could be interpreted as collaboration after the war. The Rossignols did business with the Nazis throughout the occupation of Paris and Lily attempts to reframe this a noble act on their part: they wanted to make sure that the workers in their factories could continue to have jobs and feed their families and doing business with the Nazis was a regrettable but necessary part of taking care of their work force. No one who survived the war would choose to write an account of their lives which demonstrated that they collaborated with the Nazis, so the reader is forced to look into the subtext of each of the accounts to consider the extent to which the characters might be implicated as collaborators.

## The Public and the Private

The theme of the gap between The Public and The Private is symbolized by the Chameleon Club. The club's name carries the message of the theme: like a chameleon which changes the color of its skin to suit whatever background it finds itself in, human beings must change their appearance and behavior to suit the locations they find themselves in.

At the opening of the novel, the Chameleon Club symbolizes the private realm, where people can feel free to be themselves and free from the restrictions placed on them by society: at the club men dress as women and women dress as men and no one comments on it as unusual or immoral. The distinction between what is public and what is private begins to blur as the war approaches and again after the Nazi occupation. Arlette and Lou's nationalistic routine forces people to acknowledge their political position in public, for example when Lionel is so offended by the song that he protests about it during the routine and is thrown out of the club as a result.

During the war, the Chameleon Club is no longer a place of free private expression: it has become a place where everyone is wary and careful not to reveal too much of themselves to the Germans who have begun to attend the club. In the opening chapter, the performance in the club symbolizes honest and heartfelt artistic communication. During the war, the performances are used to communicate covert messages to the Resistance, the very opposite of honesty and openness. After the occupation the public/private split is no longer a matter of keeping up appearances in public for the sake of seeming conventional: it has become a matter of life and death.

It is necessary for members of the Resistance to keep their activities secret in public, but also in private. Suzanne never discussed the Resistance with Gabor during the war and Lily didn't discuss the Resistance with her husband Didi, meaning that she could never know for sure whether Didi was involved in the act of sabotage which killed Inge Wallser. However, keeping everything private can also have dire consequences. Unlike many of the other characters in the novel, Lou Villars left no written record of her time in Paris or any documents that might explain her motivation and behavior during the war. As a result, Lou's legacy is left at the mercy of other people. Her privacy in life allows others to define her in public after her death.

The difficulty of switching between the contradictory demands of public and private life is symbolized by Yvonne's first ever pet chameleon who she named Darius. Darius died when a German admiral put him onto a paisley patterned scarf. The chameleon was killed by the exhaustion of trying to turn himself into so many different colors. This is the threat for all of the characters of the novel: that they will attempt to present themselves in different ways to different people for so long that they will no longer have any sense of who they really are and their true self will be destroyed.



# Styles

## Point of View

The unusual use of Point of View is the defining characteristic of the novel. The story is told from the Point of View of several different characters: Gabor, Suzanne, Lionel, and Lily. Further to this, there are interpretations put forward by characters who weren't witnesses to the events depicted in the novel: Nathalie Dunois in her biography of Lou Villars, and Lionel's granddaughter in her postscript to a 60th anniversary edition of one of her grandfather's books. Each character who contributes their own Point of View does so in a different way and with different effect.

Nathalie's Point of View is colored by her own preconceptions about her subject and no evidence she uncovers can sway her from the belief that Lou Villars was an evil collaborator. Nathalie's lack of qualifications as a historian, and the evidence of her unstable personality, makes her Point of View fundamentally unreliable.

Gabor's accounts were written at the time and therefore lack the kind of retrospective revision and insight of some of the other authors. In some ways this makes Gabor's insights more honest. For example, Gabor is the most sympathetic towards Lou because his account is the only one written without any knowledge of the crimes she was accused of during the war. In other ways, Gabor's account is less reliable because he is unable to consider the long-term significance of his actions and the events he witnesses, whereas Lily and Suzanne, writing in retrospect, are able to contextualize their stories within the overall history of the period. Gabor's concerns are more personal and self-interested than many of the other authors, but this is because Gabor's extracts were not written with the intention that they would be read by the public. Most of Gabor's writing is addressed to his parents, making the personal and emotional focus of his words understandable.

Suzanne, Lily, and Lionel all wrote memoirs about their time together in Paris. These accounts were written in retrospect giving all three authors the benefit of hindsight which Gabor did not have. Lionel's Point of View is colored by the fact he left Paris before the Nazi occupation and, more significantly, by the hope that his memoir will lead to success and fame upon publication. Lily, too, was motivated by the desire for public recognition when she wrote her memoir "A Baroness by Night" - which, Suzanne informs the reader, was very popular and commercially successful - resulting in Lily using a lighthearted and popular writing style, rather than a serious or difficult style. This has the effect of making Lily seem a more superficial character than Suzanne. Suzanne, on the other hand, is unsure about whether she will publish her memoir or destroy it, making her account less financially motivated and therefore perhaps more accurate. However, because Suzanne's account was written last she has the benefit of having already read what Lionel and Lily had to say before she began to write. Often Suzanne corrects the earlier authors (by claiming Lionel was wrong to think she was looking for him after Ricardo's party and that Gabor was never in love with Lily). Suzanne's access



to the Point of View of the other characters gives her an advantage when it comes to the narrative and makes her seem better informed than the others when she chooses to correct details from their memoirs.

Perhaps the most significant Point of View in the novel is the one which doesn't exist: the Point of View of Lou Villars. Lou is entirely constructed through the Point of View of others, leaving the reader to create an impression of her by reading through the lines of all of the other characters' words.

## Language and Meaning

Different styles of language are used for each narrator in order to reveal character. Nathalie uses over-the-top and often pretentious descriptions in "The Devil Drives", revealing her tendency to embellish her book with details she has made up as well as her amateurish writing abilities: "Pollen blew in the breezes that rattled the plane trees and covered the pavement with pearlescent chartreuse dust." Gabor's language is more intimate and direct, because his extracts are addressed to his parents not to the general public: "Don't worry. You can read on. I swear my only desire was to photograph Yvonne and her clientele." Lionel's language reveals his arrogance, his preoccupation with sex, and his disproportionate faith in his own talent. The focus of Lionel's language is always himself and the City of Paris, with history and the other characters always secondary to those two interests: "What is a woman after all? You are alive and in Paris." Suzanne's language is often self-effacing, much less confident and assertive than Lionel and Lily: "Had I been less self-centered, I might not have been so hurt by how little Gabor's parents seemed to have heard about me." Lily's language is lighthearted and breezy even when discussing serious and worrying events, reflecting her superficial nature: "Anyway, Paris was no longer fun. Did no one see what was coming?"

## Structure

The book is structured in three parts. Part One deals with the early life of Lou Villars and the lives of Gabor, Lionel, Suzanne and Lily, in 1920s Paris. After Lou arrives in Paris, her life intersects with the others and the later chapters of Part One deal with Lou's time working at the Chameleon Club and the lives of the other narrators during the early 1930s.

Part Two deals with the second half of the 1930s, the growing fear of war, and the upcoming Nazi invasion of France. The chapters dealing with Lou focus on the destruction of her career as a racecar driver and the beginnings of her involvement with Nazi Germany. Part Two ends when Lionel flees Paris, ahead of the invasion.

Part Three deals with Paris during the Nazi occupation of France in the early 1940s. The chapters focus on the work of Suzanne and Lily as members of the Resistance and Lou's work with the Gestapo. The final two chapters of Part Three are both written in the 21st Century, looking back at what was written in the earlier parts of the novel.

Although the narrators are all writing from different points in time, the novel is still broadly chronological. “The Devil Drives” chapters are presented in chronological order from Lou’s childhood through to her death at the hands of the Resistance. Gabor’s letters and his other extracts are also included in chronological order. Chapter numbers are not provided for the extracts written by Lionel, Lily, and Suzanne so it is not possible to determine whether the order they are included in the novel is the same as the order they were written in the memoirs. However the memoir extracts are presented in chronological order in the sense that the extracts included in Part One cover the 1920s and early 1930s, the extracts in Part Two cover the late 1930s, and the extracts in Part Three cover the 1940s. This chronological foundation in the structure helps the reader to understand and follow the story despite the numerous and contradictory versions of events presented by the novel’s various narrators.



## Quotes

Paris is an insomniac's heaven. There is always something to photograph, something hidden in the shadows. One can see so much more in the darkness than in the light of day.

-- Gabor (Paris May 14, 1924 paragraph 46)

**Importance:** Gabor writes this to his parents in the opening chapter of the novel. On the surface, he is telling his parents that his insomnia is a blessing in disguise because it helps his art, but his words also carry the theme novel's theme of perception and reality. Although some accounts may seem clearer (like a photograph taken in the light of day) other less clear accounts may offer a deeper kind of truth (like a photograph taken in the darkness).

Lou Villars did evil, unforgiveable things. So what does it say about the biographer, me, that researching and writing her life has given new meaning and purpose to my own less dramatic, less reprehensible existence?"

-- Nathalie (Author's Preface: The Mystery of Evil paragraph Final)

**Importance:** The concluding words in Nathalie's preface to her biography of Lou Villars serve two key functions. They build anticipation in the reader, eager to discover the details of the terrible things Lou did and they reveal Nathalie's motivations. She is more interested in the effect her writing has on her own life than in giving an accurate account of Lou's life.

If I believed in God, or in anything except my talent, my heart, and my cock, the first thing I would thank the deity for is my survival instinct.

-- Lionel (Reflections on Self-Pity, Paris, October 1928 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** This statement from Lionel's memoir "Make Yourself New" reveals his arrogance, his confidence, and his self-interest. Of all the things to thank God for, Lionel chooses to do so for one of his own positive personality traits. Despite his complete lack of success at this point in the novel Lionel remains confident in his artistic talent. The quotation also reveals Lionel's preoccupation with sex and romance.

Any sane, self-respecting woman would have said "Are you out of your mind?" But love, it seemed, had obliterated my sanity and self-respect.

-- Suzanne (2nd Extract from the (Unpublished) Memoirs of Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Suzanne reflects on what made her agree to pose on the street for one of Gabor's photographs whilst pretending to be dead. This quotation sets the stage for Suzanne and Gabor's entire relationship, in which Suzanne's own wants and needs are permanently secondary to Gabor's art.



When I look at that photo, I think: too bad that woman doesn't know that she is still young and beautiful enough to make the photographer love her. What a pity she doesn't know that he already does.

-- Lily (3rd Extract from "A Baroness by Night" paragraph Final)

**Importance:** Lily describes how she feels looking at Gabor's photograph of her getting out of the Juno-Diane coupe. This quotation reflects the use of hindsight and retrospect as narrative devices in the novel. Lily interprets the meaning of the photograph and her relationship with Gabor differently when she is writing her memoir to how she viewed those same things at the time. Lily also takes a sly jab at Suzanne by claiming Gabor was in love with her.

No one knew what to do about the war and the Nazis and so forth. Later hardly anyone knew why they did what they did. Or what they did, for that matter. Most French people, including myself, settled on a story, stuck to it, and more or less believed it.

-- Lily (6th Extract from "A Baroness by Night" paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When Lily discusses life in Nazi occupied Paris, she suggests that people did not really understand their own motivations and actions at the time but that they would later invent a story to explain what they did. This is, essentially, what all of the authors within the novel are doing: rather than relaying facts, they are interpreting and rewriting their own lives in an attempt to understand themselves. Lily's casual use of "and so forth" in relation to such serious matters underscores her superficiality.

As Lionel said, her enemies would have won, no matter what. But my photos helped destroy her. The baroness begged me not to take it to heart. This was not the first time that great art had been used for evil purposes. I thanked her for her kindness, but I remained inconsolable.

-- Gabor (September 16, 1935 paragraph 23)

**Importance:** Gabor writes these words to his parents after his photograph of Lou is used as evidence against her at her trial. Gabor is the only character who ever admits to having harmed Lou or contributed to her suffering. However, his guilt is still self-centered, which causes him to attach more importance to his own art than is really accurate while subtly bragging about how great the baroness thinks he is.

After the war, things got more complex, as they always do. Cliques and factions formed. There were resentments, publicity grabs, inflated claims of personal heroism when in fact we'd all been brave. Otherwise we couldn't have done it.

-- Suzanne (7th Extract from the (Unpublished) Memoirs of Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Suzanne reflects on what happened to members of the Resistance after the war and points out that many of the accounts (perhaps including her own?) are not to be trusted, because they feature exaggerations and attempts to garner publicity.





He would repeat them several times. Was he helping me remember them? After the war, he said, Yes, he was. I had been raised to be truthful but during those years our lives depended on lying. Sometimes I wondered if we would ever get used to telling the truth again.

-- Suzanne (6th Extract from the (Unpublished) Memoirs of Suzanne Dunois Tsenyi paragraph 18)

**Importance:** Suzanne writes about how Gabor used to repeat coded messages from radio broadcasts which Suzanne needed to remember for her work in the Resistance. The secrecy of these years meant all of the characters became accustomed to lying, making it difficult for any of them to give an accurate account in their memoirs. This quote also shows the control Suzanne has over Gabor's legacy. He did not write his own memoirs of the time, so it is left to Suzanne to influence the reader's perception of how much he knew.

Later, when I learned that Suzanne was arrested on the night we left, I felt not only guilty but morally unclean to think that, while she was being tortured, Yvonne and I were having the time of our lives!

-- Lily (8th Extract from "A Baroness by Night" paragraph 18)

**Importance:** The moment when Lily recalls the night that she helped Yvonne to escape across the Spanish border reveals that Lily believed Suzanne was tortured the night she was arrested. Suzanne declares in the penultimate chapter that the torture never occurred, but the fact that Lily has heard the tale suggests that Suzanne was happy to let the story be believed by others after the war. Suzanne was evidently not always so quick to correct historical inaccuracies. The quotation also continues the rivalry between Lily and Suzanne, as well as Lily's tendency to be flippant, to great comic effect.

What I do know, and why I am writing to you, is what didn't happen. And those are the lies (I assume only two of many) that this Nathalie Dunois has written about me in her mendacious book with its cheap romance-novel title.

-- Suzanne (Paris July 12, 2011 paragraph Final)

**Importance:** When Suzanne writes her letter of complaint about Nathalie's book, she is only concerned about the lies it contains which involve Suzanne and Gabor. No suggestion is made that the lies being told about Lou Villars are equally harmful, or that Lou may have been equally misrepresented or misunderstood.

I was curious as to why my grandfather was interested in the story of a pubescent girl so betrayed by her classmates that she turns into a killer.

-- Lionel's Granddaughter (Postscript to the Sixtieth Edition of "Make Yourself New" paragraph 33)

**Importance:** Lionel's interest in the horror movie Carrie is a metaphor for how he felt about Lou Villars which proves that Lionel was haunted by guilt in his later years because of his belief that the horrible mistreatment of Lou by the other characters caused her to commit terrible crimes.