

Mistral's Daughter Short Guide

Mistral's Daughter by Judith Krantz

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Characters

Krantz mixes in the names of the famous with her fictional characters; in this case such luminaries as Picasso, Chagall and Matisse make an appearance. But the main characters, Mistral and the three Lunel women, are straight from romantic fantasy. Each of the women is a familiar type: Maggy is the beautiful young model with questionable morality but a heart of gold.

She is first Mistral's mistress, then mistress of a rich American banker, with whom she produces Teddy.

Teddy's beauty is her first identifying feature; the second is that she falls instantly, totally and ecstatically in love with Mistral upon first meeting, this despite the fact that Mistral is married at the time to another woman.

Interestingly enough, there is not a single hint of gossip from any of the people who knew Maggy and Mistral that Teddy might be Mistral's daughter. Krantz avoids this touch of scandal not only by making it clear that Teddy is the daughter of the rich American banker, but also by keeping the supporting characters oblivious of the irony. Her reason: This is true love, obsessive, isolated and uncaring about others sacrificed in its fulfillment, but absolute and undeniably true love.

Fauve is a somewhat more original creation. She inherits her mother's beauty and her father's strong character, and also is forced to deal with the most complex of moral and personal decisions. It is only in Mistral himself that Krantz creates a three-dimensional mixture of appealing and appalling characteristics.

Mistral is obsessive about his painting and later his love for Teddy. He is ruthless, and his talent drives him with a force that, in the business world would be ambition but in the art world is a drive to create. He is selfish in his private life and rudely isolated in public. But much is forgiven because his art is neither self-serving nor trifling, and his love, when given, is given absolutely and without reservation. His suffering at the untimely death of Teddy is as obsessive and selfish as his love had been, and it is only when Fauve shuts him out of her life that he transcends the personal pain to create art which arises out of a fuller understanding of himself, his past crimes, and the power of love and faith in the modern world.



Social Concerns

As with most of her novels, Krantz's main concern in *Mistral's Daughter* is the true nature of love. She uses her knowledge of the world of fashion magazines to give a sense of the reality behind the glamorous business of modeling. The illusion of beauty and perfection is achieved only through a daily grind, persistent discipline and ruthless competition. Miracles can happen; the "ugly" girl off the street can be next year's beauty, as styles change and she discovers her charismatic relationship with the camera.

The most interesting exploration undertaken by Krantz in this novel is the world of the artist, in this case a French painter named Julien Mistral.

Krantz portrays the colossal egotism of a great painter which the lesser beings, mostly women, who serve him willingly accept as inherent to his greatness. Krantz is convincing in this, for she also captures the obsession of the artist's perspective, which views the world through a highly personal, startling and yet ultimately illuminating manner. By placing the reader inside Mistral's head as he paints his first great canvases of his mistress Maggy Lunel, readers begin to sense what drives him to the exclusion of caring for one who loves him. Mistral believes in the power of great art to transcend a simple recording of visual input and become a definitive statement of the essence of the object painted.

Techniques

More than Krantz's other novels, *Mistral's Daughter* relies on coincidence. Teddy's entire life story seems to be created simply to bring her, inexorably, to the moment when she and Mistral first see each other and fall in love. Similarly, it is almost too much to accept when the first young man to whom Fauve feels any serious attraction turns out to be the son of Mistral's betrayed dealer. Krantz also manipulates the sequence of events through a series of early and unexpected deaths.

Maggy's rich American banker drops dead after bringing her to New York, leaving Maggy to fend for herself. Of course she does, admirably. But it leaves the reader wondering why the character has been written out of the story so ruthlessly. Similarly, Teddy is killed off in a boating accident just after bearing Mistral his beloved Fauve. Are the two Lunel daughters left fatherless and motherless merely to intensify their relationship with Mistral and Maggy? The sensation is one of the arbitrary manipulation of events in both cases.

Themes

In many ways this is a novel of retribution. By spanning three generations of Lunel women, Maggy the free-spirited artist's model, her daughter, Teddy, the stellar model, and Teddy's daughter Fauve, Krantz explores the way in which selfishness and cruelty bear fruit in unforeseen ways. She also makes a strong case for the power of love and forgiveness to undo damage and restore the human spirit.

By setting the novel in the years before, during and after the second world war, Krantz touches on the issue of the French resistance and collaboration with the German conquerors. Mistral, in his artist's sanctuary in rural France, is concerned only with acquiring canvasses for his paintings and staying clear of trouble. Therefore he turns away from old friends in need, including his Jewish dealer. He also becomes friendly with the local German commandant, who provides him with the necessary art supplies. It is this treachery which bears the cruelest fruit, for his beloved daughter, Fauve, learns of this betrayal. Shocked at the revelation of the feet of clay belonging to this otherwise awesome man, she cuts him out of her life, much as he in the past cut out those who loved and needed him. Mistral makes amends in the only way he knows how, by painting the greatest series of paintings in his career, dealing with Jewish themes, and which he leaves in his will to Fauve as his final attempt to communicate his new understanding.



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