REVIEW

Paradisi Gloria: The Art of Turning Everything Upside Down

by Amandine Mazas

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With her debut novel, Élise Lespade delivers a work of remarkable scope, in which family secrets, violence, and intertwined destinies come together in a narrative of extraordinary mastery. A rare literary discovery, one that leaves you deeply moved and not quite the same after reading it.



It all begins with a letter. Written from her prison cell, nineteen-year-old Zoé Bromberg addresses Isabelle in the hope of receiving help. Her voice is lively, familiar, and at times insolent. We immediately sense her anger and distress, but also a certain determination. I loved this opening, which is almost disconcerting in its directness, plunging us without preamble into the private world of a character about whom we know virtually nothing.

The narrative then draws us into the winding history of the Bromberg family. We meet Dimitri, a fighter pilot with a violent temperament; his brother Gaspard, whose fate is intimately bound up with his own; and Alexis, an aviator whose arrival will profoundly transform their lives. Chapter by chapter, their individual stories intertwine, gradually revealing the contours of a family marked by secrets, rivalries, and tragedy.

But what might have been no more than a dark family saga soon takes on an entirely different dimension. I had no idea just how thoroughly this novel would captivate me.

A Remarkable Narrative Architecture

Élise Lespade constructs her story like an enormous puzzle, whose pieces are gradually revealed to us. Different periods intersect, points of view alternate, and narratives fit together. Each character brings their own understanding of events, sometimes incomplete, sometimes contradictory. And yet, despite this extraordinary complexity, I never once felt that I was losing my bearings.

This is one of the novel's greatest achievements: its ability to bring together a multitude of characters, timelines, and family connections without ever sacrificing the reader's understanding.

I was fascinated by this construction. At times, I found myself thinking back to a conversation several chapters earlier, or to a detail that had initially seemed insignificant, only to realize suddenly that it carried an entirely different meaning. Watching the pieces gradually fall into place, discovering connections I had never suspected, made reading this novel an exhilarating experience.

The author also excels at knowing how to end each sequence. She knows exactly when to interrupt a narrative, when to shift our attention, and when to leave a revelation suspended. How many times did I feel compelled to read on immediately, unable to bring myself to stop just as another truth seemed about to emerge?

The suspense is constant, yet never at the expense of the writing. This is a deeply literary novel that also possesses the remarkable narrative momentum I so love finding in great works of storytelling.

Dense, Precise, and Deeply Immersive Writing

From the very first pages, I was struck by the quality of Élise Lespade's prose. Her descriptions are almost cinematic in their precision. Places take shape, gestures become visible, sounds seem to reach our ears. We do not merely follow the characters: we genuinely feel as though we inhabit the scenes alongside them.

This is a sensation I have rarely experienced with such intensity. I was no longer simply reading about what was unfolding before me. I felt as though I were witnessing it firsthand, hearing the conversations, sensing the atmosphere, and moving through the settings alongside the characters.

The language is rich and elevated, sometimes demanding. It has something of the great classical literary tradition in its attention to detail, the construction of its sentences, and its determination to explore the most subtle movements of thought.

This density requires genuine concentration. This is not a light read, the kind of book one can casually leaf through. But its demands never diminished my enjoyment. Quite the opposite. I loved immersing myself in this abundant prose, taking the time to appreciate its nuances and discovering everything that such carefully crafted writing could bring to a narrative.

I would, however, express one reservation concerning certain dialogues, particularly Isabelle's. Their notably elevated register sometimes struck me as more characteristic of written prose than spontaneous conversation, even in her exchanges with her former husband. There is occasionally a slight distance between the sophistication of the language and the naturalness of the situation. This reservation, however, did nothing to diminish my admiration for the literary craftsmanship on display.

The Power of What Remains Unspoken

Perhaps this is where, in my view, Élise Lespade's greatest talent lies. In a novel whose descriptions are so rich and detailed, the author paradoxically demonstrates an extraordinary command of what she chooses not to explain. Sometimes, a single word or an expression casually slipped into a conversation is enough to transform our understanding of a character.

I particularly remember one passage in which just a few words led me to reconsider entirely a relationship I had thought I understood. I was struck by the simplicity of the device and the power it carried. Nothing was emphasized, nothing was explicitly explained. And yet everything had changed. What impressed me most was this ability to bring a truth to light without ever seeking to impose it on the reader.

Élise Lespade does not feel the need to comment on every revelation. She allows us to discover them, to grasp their significance, and sometimes even to feel their full force before we fully understand their implications.

Certain pieces of information thus compel us to mentally reconsider dozens of pages we have already read. The story is constantly transforming before our eyes, without ever losing its coherence. I found this approach to storytelling both subtle and intelligent. The author trusts us. She allows us to observe, to question, to understand. What a pleasure, as a reader, to feel that nothing is being spoon-fed to us!

A Family, Its Wounds, and Uncertain Truths

Beyond its plot, *Paradisi Gloria* explores human relationships and the forms of violence that can reverberate across generations with remarkable depth. The family emerges as a complex space where love coexists with domination, where protection can become control, and where the wounds of the past continue to weigh heavily on people's lives.

The transmission of violence is one of the novel's central concerns. How does one grow into adulthood in a destructive environment? Can we escape what we have suffered? To what extent does our past explain our actions without necessarily excusing them? These are questions that stayed with me throughout my reading.

I was particularly moved by the way Élise Lespade gives her characters such depth. They are never reduced to their actions, their wounds, or their lies. As their pasts gradually come to light, our perception of them evolves. We may feel compassion, anger, and sometimes even incomprehension. It becomes difficult to confine them to any definitive judgment.

The novel also challenges our relationship with truth. Memories can be disputed, testimonies can contradict one another, and certainties can collapse. Through the trajectories of her characters, Élise Lespade shows just how difficult it can be to distinguish what we know from what we believe we know. Even love is examined in its most troubling dimensions: the need for another person, dependency, guilt, and the sometimes blurred boundary between attachment and what destroys us.

I was also touched by the way the author portrays deeply flawed individuals whose lives are shaped by histories that sometimes exceed their control, without ever absolving them of all responsibility. Nothing is simple in this world. It is precisely this complexity that gives the narrative its profound humanity.

An Ending of Chilling Beauty

I will refrain from revealing the novel's final twists. They deserve to be discovered at the pace intended by the author. But I cannot leave its ending unmentioned.

Having admired the intelligence of this novel's construction over hundreds of pages, I was struck once again by the way Élise Lespade chooses to bring her story to a close. The ending is unforgettable, at once beautiful and chilling.

It is not simply what it reveals that stayed with me, but the way the author chooses to leave us. Right up to the final lines, she maintains her command of the narrative, her ability to suggest rather than explain, and to let words have their full effect without seeking to soften their impact.

I closed the book with an emotion that is difficult to define, caught between admiration for such a remarkable literary achievement and the strange feeling of having to leave behind a world that had completely absorbed me. Perhaps this emotion best captures my reading experience.

At one point, I caught myself thinking how fortunate it was that this novel ran to more than 700 pages. Not because its length felt like a challenge, but because it gave me more time to spend in this world. Had the book been shorter, I think I would deliberately have slowed down my reading to postpone the moment when I would have to close it. That is perhaps one of the greatest compliments I can pay a novel: not wanting to reach its end, while being utterly unable to stop reading.

For a debut novel, Élise Lespade displays extraordinary literary ambition and narrative mastery. She succeeds in bringing together the richness of a sweeping family saga, the depth of a meditation on human relationships, and the tension of a suspenseful narrative.

Paradisi Gloria is far more than a captivating story. It is a genuine literary experience: demanding, unsettling, and deeply moving. A novel that impressed me as much through the virtuosity of its writing as through the emotions it stirred.

An absolute favorite, and one of those novels that continue to inhabit us long after we have turned the final page.

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— Amandine Mazas

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