

## Book Club Kit

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## About Valérie Perrin



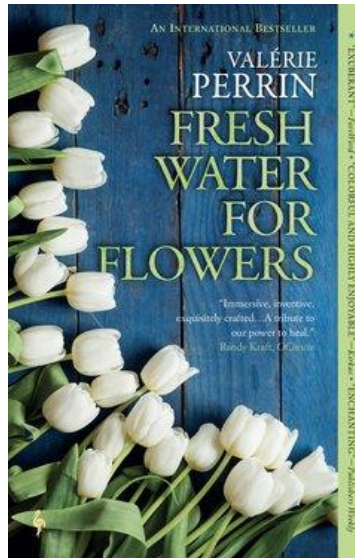
[photo by Valentin Lauvergne]

**Valérie Perrin** is a photographer and screenwriter who works with (and is married to) Claude Lelouch. She was born in 1967 in Remiremont, in the Vosges Mountains, France. She grew up in Burgundy and settled in Paris in 1986. Her novel *The Forgotten Sunday* (2015) won the Booksellers Choice Award and the paperback edition has been long-selling best-seller since publication. Her English-language debut, *Fresh Water for Flowers* (Europa, 2020) won the Maison de la Presse Prize, the Paperback Readers Prize, and was named a 2020 ABA Indies Introduce and Indie Next List title. It has been translated into over thirty languages. *Figaro Littéraire* named Perrin one of the ten best-selling authors in France in 2019, and in Italy, *Fresh Water for Flowers* was the best selling book of 2020. Perrin now lives in Normandy.

Source:

<https://www.europaeditions.com/author/275/valerie-perrin>

## Synopsis – Fresh Water for Flowers



Violette Toussaint is the caretaker at a cemetery in a small town in Bourgogne. Her life is lived to the predictable rhythms of the often funny, always moving confidences that casual mourners, regular visitors, and sundry colleagues share with her. Violette's routine is disrupted one day by the arrival of Julien Sole—local police chief—who has come to scatter the ashes of his recently deceased mother on the gravesite of a complete stranger. It soon becomes clear that Julien's inexplicable gesture is intertwined with Violette's own complicated past.

Source: <https://www.europaeditions.com/book/9781609456764/fresh-water-for-flowers>

## My Weekly Interview

### Q&A With Valérie Perrin, Author of *Fresh Water for Flowers*

Source: <https://www.myweekly.co.uk/2021/06/11/qa-with-valerie-perrin-author-of-fresh-water-for-flowers/>

June 11, 2021

#### **Claire Gill**

When did you start writing fiction?

When I was 10 years old, at school. I think it was about an abandoned dog. Since then, I've become the sponsor of an animal shelter. And a novelist.

My teacher fell in love with the little poem I'd written on the theme of abandonment and empathy. She had it printed and we all studied my piece in class. Since I was a bad pupil who didn't like school, I've never forgotten that extraordinary event.

Tell me a little more about the path that led to the publication of your first novel.

I was 48 when my first book was published. My path was that of a mother, a wife. Of a reader. Of someone who had to work to pay the rent and fill a shopping trolley each week. And that doubtless helped me, as the years went by, to fill notebooks with ideas, with desires.

Until my first novel, *Les Oubliés Du Dimanche*. I sent it to an editor in December 2013, and signed my publishing contract in January 2014.

Could you elaborate a little on what you hope your readers will love, in *Fresh Water For Flowers*?

I hope they will love everything. The various plots, my way of telling them. I hope they will love laughing and crying. Staying up late so as not to leave the story.

Thinking only of the story. I also hope they will love getting it wrong, not having guessed where I'm leading them to. And above all, I hope they, like many readers, will consider Violette as their sister, aunt, mum, friend. Part of their family forever. I think, too, that they

will end up understanding Philippe. And that they will seek to meet a Sasha or a Julien in real life.

Finally, as they close *Fresh Water For Flowers*, I hope they will phone those they love to say “I love you”.

**How did you feel when you heard that your first novel was going to be published?**

When I walked out of my French publisher’s — Albin Michel — in January 2014, straight after an interview with the woman who would become my editor, I wasn’t walking, I was floating. Even today, I feel as if I did that journey back home on a flying carpet. Not only did my editor say she wanted me to sign a contract, but also that the book had been loved unanimously by the reading panel.

**What advice would you give to those who aspire to be authors?**

To work. Not to lose hope. So, to stick at it. Not to aim to write exquisite sentences. To be as sincere as possible. Move yourself before you move your reader, and you’ll have won the battle.

Finally, although it’s each to their own: it can help to write in the first person. The “I” can help one to feel. But what’s good for me might be disastrous for others.

**Where do find your inspiration for writing?**

At work. In the words I hear, the scenes of everyday life I observe. In the landscapes and songs that really move me. In the novels that transport me. In the films and TV series I watch. In the eyes of those I love. Life in general is a source of permanent inspiration.

**And what’s next? Are you already writing another novel?**

My third novel, *Trois*, has recently come out in France. It took me more than two-and-a-half years to write—a so-called “doorstop” book. I worked very closely on it, chiselled it. I demanded ruthless precision of myself to deliver this book.

The story of three childhood friends, two boys and a girl, across thirty years. And a mysterious narrator who, moving from past to present, will reveal their three fates to us. From 1986 to today.



## IndieBound Interview

### An Indies Introduce Q&A With Valérie Perrin

Source: <https://www.bookweb.org/news/indies-introduce-qa-val%C3%A9rie-perrin-577796>

June 30, 2020

#### **Lindsay Bartlett**

Lindsey Bartlett: Valérie, what was your inspiration for writing this book?

Valérie Perrin: Several things inspired me. To begin with, one can have two visions of cemeteries: a sinister place or a garden of souls. Darkness or some form of poetry. It was the garden of souls that interested me: the words of love on the steles, the photos, the flowers, the mystery. I needed a vector to transmit all these emotions, and the idea of a woman, a guard, who lives in front of the gates of the cemetery seemed to me extraordinarily romantic. I needed a starting point: this woman, the narrator, has been alone for 19 years, since her husband left overnight without leaving an address. Why?

LB: This book takes place mostly in a cemetery. Do you have a connection to cemeteries like your main character, Violette, does?

VP: I have always walked in cemeteries. In the provinces, cemeteries tell many stories to imagine. In Paris, they are large parks bordered by hundred-year-old trees where many walk, sit on benches, exchange words with others, discover or seek the burial of famous men or women. I have probably been carrying this story for a very long time, but I didn't know it. Writing *Violette* for two years was an extraordinary experience. Every morning when I opened my computer, I had the feeling of finding her in her box and living with her, close to her and feeling what she felt. Exploring her past together.

LB: What kind of reader do you hope will see themselves in *Fresh Water for Flowers*?

VP: In France, my readers were first of all women. Then they said to their husbands, *you must read this novel!* And since then, I have received a lot of messages from them. I think my readers are between 16 and 110 years old. *Fresh Water for Flowers* mixes genres: love stories, police investigation, resilience, humor, drama, reconnection with nature, simplicity, and poetry. It's also a novel about appearances, how you can be wrong about people you

don't know, and even more about people you think you know. Finally, through the testimonials, I realize that *Fresh Water for Flowers* helps a large number of readers to "repair" themselves. In particular, for the people who were touched by mourning, this novel reconciles them with their disappeared, the cemeteries, and life. Of course, I didn't know that when I wrote it. The innocent with full hands write, and afterwards the words belong to those who read them.

LB: What are you currently working on?

VP: I have just finished writing my third novel, which will be called *Three*, the story of three childhood friends, a girl and two boys, who were born in 1976. We discover their fate, how they came to meet in the schoolyard, grew up side by side, loved each other, were torn apart, lost contact, were found. In the present we are in 2017 and little by little, we perceive their truths. It's a novel about our choices, our disappointments, our lies, the beautiful surprises that life has in store for us, and, above all, about the friendship and unwavering love that binds us to childhood. The common thread is the discovery of a car that has been at the bottom of a lake since 1994 in the small provincial town where the three of them grew up.

LB: And Hildegarde, what is your process for translating a book? In what ways was translating this book different from or the same as your usual process?

Hildegarde Serle: Once armed with coffee, I switch off any music so I can hear the rhythm of the words I'm first reading, and then writing, clearly. I dive in without having read the book first — like sight-reading music — so I'm always on the edge of my seat! I use my dictionaries constantly, for the most accurate, nuanced translation possible. At the end of a chapter, I do a printout, then carefully read and edit what I've written, fine-tuning where necessary. If there's a word I'm not happy with, I use my thesaurus. I then do my corrections on screen, and move on to the next chapter.

I used exactly this process for translating the wonderful *Changer l'eau des fleurs*. Because Valérie writes so lyrically, so engagingly, it was a joy to translate. There was an additional process, due to the quotations heading each chapter. I soon realized that although some were anonymous gravestone inscriptions, others were from French songs or poems, so I checked each one first online, out of interest and to get the tone right. And there was also the irreverent schoolboy version of the Lord's Prayer — certainly not something I'd tackled before!



## Read Her Like An Open Book - Book Review

### Fresh Water for Flowers: the bittersweet, life-affirming story of a cemetery caretaker in rural France

Source: <https://readherlikeanopenbook.com/2023/01/20/fresh-water-for-flowers-the-bittersweet-life-affirming-story-of-a-cemetery-caretaker-in-rural-france/>

August, 2020

#### **Bill Wolfe**

It might seem surprising that a book whose protagonist is a cemetery caretaker would contain everything life offers, but that's the case with *Fresh Water for Flowers*, the second novel by French writer Valerie Perrin and the first to be translated into English. On first impression, this 474-page novel appears to be a charming and quirky story with a distinctly French sensibility.

It's the story of Violette, a former foster youth working as a bartender who is swept off her feet by the older and magnetically appealing Philippe Toussaint. Before long, they are working for the railroad as level-crossing keepers; they live in a small house next to the tracks in rural France and only have to lower the barriers every few hours when a train passes by. Violette does the work while Philippe plays video games or goes on long rides on his motorcycle.

The passion soon drains from their relationship as a result of Philippe's emotional and physical distance and his compulsive philandering. The birth of their daughter Leonine revives Violette, but Philippe continues to be self-absorbed and hands-off in all things except his girlfriends. But Violette craves stability above all, and the job is easy, pays sufficiently, and provides the predictable rhythm she craves.

*Fresh Water for Flowers* initially moves back and forth in time among life in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the railroad crossing, the couple's move to a new job at a small country cemetery in 1997, and the present (2017), as a 50-year-old Violette looks back on her complex and bittersweet life.

The core of the story concerns the shocking events in 1993-1996 that led Violette to the cemetery caretaker position, which she maintains for the next 20 years. Along the way we meet Sasha, the older gentleman who held the caretaker position before Violette and who serves as something of a surrogate father figure;

the small group of men who work at the cemetery and often gather in Violette's small house on the grounds for coffee and the desserts she bakes for them; and Julien Seul, a detective from Marseilles who comes to the cemetery to place his mother's ashes, befriends Violette, and ends up revealing a mystery concerning a lawyer who is buried there. There is far more to everyone than meets the eye.

The story is heartbreakingly dark in one subplot in which Perrin displays great skill as a writer of mystery and suspense. Another subplot concerns the reasons behind the request of Seul's mother that her ashes be placed on the grave of a man Seul has never heard of. Perrin keeps the reader off-balance as she weaves these seemingly unconnected strands together into a life-encompassing whole. And all the while we root for Violette to build the life she deserves and experience the love she has been so long denied.

So this novel mostly set in a cemetery is in fact entirely concerned with life. Yes, there is loss, but there is also love and longing, passion and pain, heartbreak and healing. *Fresh Water for Flowers* was a completely engrossing reading experience. I feel as though I spent the last 30 years in central and southern France with these characters. And I miss them already. Now I'm just hoping her first novel, *Les Oublies du Dimanche (Things We Forget on Sundays)*, which won several prizes in 2016, will be published in English sometime soon.

## Kirkus Review

### Fresh Water for Flowers

By Valérie Perrin

Release Date: Jun. 2, 2020

Source: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/valerie-perrin/fresh-water-for-flowers/>

French bestseller Perrin makes her English-language debut in an atmospheric novel rife with adulterous romances, bad marriages, mysterious deaths, and lots of burials.

The frequent burials are because narrator Violette Toussaint is a cemetery keeper at the Brancion-en-Chalon cemetery in Burgundy. She arrived there some 20 years ago with no-good husband Philippe, a philanderer and spoiled mama's boy who did her a favor by disappearing shortly after they took up the post. Except Philippe turns out to be living 100 kilometers away with another woman, she learns from Julien Seul, a handsome detective who came to the cemetery because his recently deceased mother, Irène, had inexplicably decreed that her ashes be placed on the grave of a man buried there who was, needless to say, not her husband. At first, Perrin unspools her plot in a leisurely manner, intertwining Violette's recollections of her trying marriage, the records she keeps of what was done and said at individual gravesides (touching testimonies to the infinite varieties of loss and grief), and amusing portraits of the eccentric cemetery staff. Once Julien enters to disrupt Violette's neatly ordered world, the author augments an already busy narrative with plot strands concerning Irène's decades long affair, the growing attraction between her son and the cemetery keeper, the tragic story of the Toussaints' daughter, and a chorus of new voices that soften our view of the not-quite-as-rotten-as-he-seemed Philippe. It's a lot for one book, and the novel does sometimes falter under its own weight, but Perrin's eye is so compassionate, her characters so many-faceted, and the various mysteries she poses so intriguing that most readers will happily go along for the long ride toward a pleasingly romantic conclusion tempered by one last funeral.

Overstuffed, at times rambling, but colorful and highly enjoyable and pulled together by an engaging narrator.

## Discussion Questions

From the publisher:

- 1) One critic called *Fresh Water for Flowers* “A tender and poignant exploration of love, loss, and redemption.” How do these themes weave together in the narrative? Given the multiple characters and storylines, how do such feelings transcend the characters’ stories in the novel and reflect back on to the readers?
- 2) The novel recounts Violette’s life over the course of many years, but not always in order. How does this inter-changing chronological structure add to the narrative? Does it take away from it? How does it further underscore the novel’s theme of life’s unpredictability and Violette’s (and, ultimately, ours) resilience?
- 3) Violette spends most of the novel telling her story as the cemetery keeper in Brancion-en Chalet, but the novel also recounts her life as a level crossing keeper. Discuss the differences in Violette’s life in these two places. How do both locations subvert readers’ expectations and how do they imprint themselves on Violette’s life?
- 4) Each chapter begins with an epitaph as a preamble for what’s to come. Do you find these epitaphs informed the contents of each chapter? What role do the epitaph’s play in the story?
- 5) By following the lives of multiple characters other than Violette (Philippe, Gabriel, Irène, Julien, etc.), the novel opens onto the impossibilities and contradictions that make up a person. To wholly care for someone, but to be distant. To be in love, but still unfaithful. In doing so, what commentary does the novel make on how a single life can hold a multitude of lives within it? Do you feel as though each character has redeemed themselves by the end of the novel? Is Violette’s capacity for forgiveness, then, ultimately, a weakness or a strength? Is there anyone who did not fully redeem themselves by the end and, if so, do you at least understand them better?
- 6) Chapter 75 ends with Violette wondering of Julien, “How will our encounters end?” (346). Meanwhile, Chapter 76 begins with the epitaph “The family isn’t destroyed, it changes. A part of it merely becomes invisible”

(347). How do Violette's encounters with the prominent people in her life—Phillipe, Leonine, Sasha, Celia, Julien, Irene, etc.—guide her to the end of the novel? How does her family change over the course of the novel? Is a family merely one made up of a bloodline?

- 7) After Leonine's death, both Philippe and Violette grieve in their own ways, all the way having to deal with the scrutiny from friends and family around them. Discuss how this novel the different ways this novel portrays grief and the avenues with which each character takes to heal. Does any character grieve in a similar way as you? If so, what did you learn from it?
- 8) This novel portrays different kinds of love: the love friends share; your first love; the love between a mother and a daughter, and between a father and a son; the complicated loves; the loves lost; the misunderstood loves, and more. Do you find love to be enough of a driving force for redemption with some of these characters? Do you believe Violette to be incapable or unworthy of love, as she continuously claims?
- 9) One critic calls *Fresh Water for Flowers* "a triumphant celebration of life and love." Discuss the ways in which this novel reproduces the cycle of life and the ways in which it celebrates it, with all the good and the bad that come along with living? Did you learn anything along the way?

Source – Reading Group Guide:

<https://www.europaeditions.com/book/9781609455958/fresh-water-for-flowers>