Fevers of a young French heart

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"The Lover" is a small, odd gem of a novel: It glistens from the heat of its subtropic setting, and flashes with violence. It is unsentimental and sparely written, and its unusual narrative structure makes it a standout among recent novels.

The book, written by the renowned French novelist and screenwriter Marguerite Duras, is set in prewar Indochina, where the author grew up. It is about a teen-age French girl and her decadent family. The girl has a lover — a young, wealthy man. It is a doomed relationship, not so much because of her youth, but because he is Chinese.

". . . It's taken for granted I don't love him, that I'm with him for the money, that I can't love him, it's impossible, that he could take any sort of treatment from me and still go on loving me," she says. "This because he's a Chinese, he's not a white man. The way my elder brother treats my lover, not speaking to him, ignoring him, stems from such absolute conviction it acts as a model. We all treat my lover as he does."

The reader quickly accepts the odd girl and her equally strange family: The loutish older brother gambles himself into the poor house, moving from a chateau into smaller and smaller homes until he has only a tiny room, where he dies. He is the favorite of the mother, a proud woman from a provincial French town who doesn't have enough money to feed the family, but keeps on a staff of house servants.

"The Lover," by Marguerite Duras. Pantheon. $11.95. 117 pp.

"We were white children, we were ashamed, we sold our furniture, but we weren't hungry, we had a houseboy and we ate. Sometimes, admittedly, we ate garbage — storks, baby crocodiles — but the garbage was cooked and served by a houseboy, and sometimes we refused it, too, we indulged in the luxury of declining to eat."

The girl looks back on her days in the colony with love and longing, but recounts the violent family life, and the affair, in a detached yet haunting voice.

Sometimes the narrator is the young girl; at other times she is the same person, only older, "with a face laid waste," looking back on Indochina's oppressive social structure and heat (sun so hot it is said to stunt children's growth and make them brood), the family, and the affair.

Marguerite Duras at 15: a passionate but remote affair in Indochina.

Names aren't given for the lover, the girl, or some of the members of her family, and physical descriptions are kept to a minimum. Despite these distancing effects, the reader feels the intense, often brutal, relationships within the family, as well as the lovers' impelling attraction.

The love affair is at once passionate and remote. It's as though the narrator is hovering over the bed — both a participant in the lovemaking and removed from it.

"I used to watch what he did with me, how he used me, and I'd never thought anyone could act like that, he acted beyond my hope and in accordance with my body's destiny."

Although the thin volume is mostly concerned with the affair, Duras also provides a lush and exotic landscape, always tempered by a Western eye. The French family may be in a foreign land, but they can't — or won't — shake their rules. The mother insists on wearing stockings, for example, even in the outrageous heat.

Even before the affair begins, the girl knows she will be ostracized in Saigon's French society. "You know it's all over, don't you? That you'll never be able, now, to get married here in the colony?" the mother asks the girl. "I shrug my shoulders, smile. I say, I can get married anywhere, when I want to. My mother shakes her head. No. She says, Here everything gets known."

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A French girl's affair

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It's no easier on the lover. He travels to his father's estate repeatedly, to ask permission to marry the girl. "He asked him, implored him to let him keep me with him, close to him, he'd told him he must understand, must have known a passion like this himself at least once in his long life, it couldn't be otherwise, he'd begged him to let him have his turn at living, just once, this passion, this madness, this infatuation with the little white girl. . . . The father said he'd sooner see him dead."

Duras's narrative structure is strikingly unusual: The story is advanced each paragraph, but not in a linear progression. Rather, the events are presented in an intricate weave, where for every stitch that goes forward, two or three loop backward, gathering fragments and images that eventually push the story ahead.

The novel is something of a memoir, too: It jumps about in time in a seemingly disorganized fashion, and offers thoughts on aging, writing, and the process of remembering. But despite its odd structure, the book is a well-crafted, and often disturbing, picture of Westerners in colonial Indochina. ■