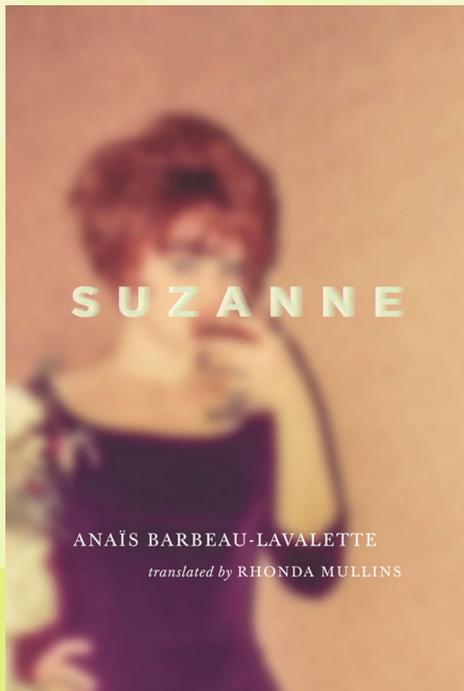


Book Background: SUZANNE by ANAÏS BARBEAU-LAVALLETTE



Suzanne is the English translation of Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's celebrated 2015 novel *La femme qui fuit*. The novel is an imagined account of the life of her estranged grandmother. Blurring the lines between fact and fiction, *Suzanne* tells the story of more than eight decades of art and political history through its portrait of a conflicted woman. The book was translated by Rhonda Mullins.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from **Suzanne** and watch Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette discuss her book.

Book Backgrounder: SUZANNE by ANAÏS BARBEAU-LAVALETTE

LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



Book Description

Suzanne is a fictionalized account of author Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's actual grandmother — Quebecois poet and painter, Suzanne Meloche. A member of Quebec's Automatiste movement (a group of young and innovative Montreal artists who revolutionized painting in the 1940s), Suzanne was a hugely unconventional woman for her time. As a young

woman leaving her childhood home of Ottawa in 1946, she was eager for the faster life Montreal could offer. And not long after, she made the decision to abandon her two young children, including Anaïs's mother, in pursuit of travel, adventure and multiple love affairs. By the time she died in 2009 at the age of 83, Suzanne had been to New York City, Brussels, London and the American South — where she took part in the Freedom Riders movement for civil rights.

Growing up, Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette says she deeply resented, even hated, her grandmother for having hurt and abandoned her children, including Anaïs's mother. It was only after Suzanne Meloche's death that Anaïs became curious about this ghost-like woman. Upon visiting Suzanne's apartment with her mother, Anaïs

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began to ask questions about the kind of life her grandmother lived... questions that inspired her to hire a private investigator, and ultimately led to the novel, *Suzanne*.

Originally published in French as *La femme qui fuit* (“the woman who flees”) and translated into English by Rhonda Mullins, *Suzanne* is divided into six sections:

- The first (1930-1946) chronicles Suzanne Meloche’s childhood growing up as one of many children in a French Catholic home in Ottawa during the Great Depression.
- The second (1946-1952) follows Suzanne after her move to Montreal as a young woman, through a period of artistic, political and sexual

awakening, and culminates with her abandonment of her two children: Anaïs’s mother, “Mousse” and her brother, François.

- The third (1952-1956) tells the story of Suzanne’s flight to the Gaspé Peninsula, then to Brussels and then England, where she has an abortion and decides to return home to Montreal before moving onto New York City.
- The fourth (1956-1965) is an account of her time in Harlem, where she falls in love with a woman named Selena and becomes involved in the civil rights movement before taking another lover named Gary who is a deeply troubled war veteran.

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- The fifth (1965-1974) describes Suzanne's return, once more, to Montreal, where she learns that her abandoned son, François has been institutionalized, and where Gary commits suicide.
- The sixth (1874-1981) chronicles a brief period during which Suzanne, herself, is institutionalized.
- The seventh and final section (1981-2009) follows Suzanne back to her birthplace, Ottawa, where she dies and where Anaïs truly encounters her grandmother for the first time.

Having started from a place of deep resentment, Anaïs concludes the book by writing, "We are together and we salute you, Suze. I will remember you. We will remember you."



Primary Characters

Suzanne Meloche – The author's estranged grandmother and the focus of the novel. The book is written entirely in the second person and the "you" the author addresses is Suzanne. Beautiful, rebellious, selfish, deviant and fierce, she is a woman who refuses to be bound by the limits of women's roles in her era. She often suffers as a result of her unconventional decisions.

Marcel Barbeau – Suzanne's one-time husband, the father of her children, "Mousse" and François, and also Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's real-life grandfather. Marcel is depicted as a mostly loving man and caring father, but also as a bit hapless and insensitive at times — for

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example in valuing his own creative expression over Suzanne's, and in essentially agreeing to her demand that they leave their children to the care of others.

“Mousse”– Author Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's mother and Suzanne's abandoned daughter. Mousse is strong, loyal and kind despite the hardship of being abandoned at a young age. At the same time, however, she remains afraid of further abandonment into adulthood. As Anaïs writes, “Even though a mother is not someone who can be abandoned, we have to be careful, because it's not all that clear to her.”

François – Mousse's brother and Suzanne's son. Younger than Mousse when the two are left in the care of relatives, his life takes a turn for the worse and he

ends up institutionalized and isolated from all his family members, including Mousse (who manages to track him down in their young adulthood).

Claire – One of Suzanne's sisters, and the relative with whom she remains in touch the longest after leaving Ottawa. Claire becomes a nun, and seems to see through some of Suzanne's more dubious claims about her well-being.

Paul-Émile Borduas – A celebrated Quebec painter and leader of the avant-garde Automatiste movement. A key figure in Suzanne's artistic and political awakening upon moving to Montreal.

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Peter, Selena, Gary – Some of Suzanne’s many lovers after she leaves Marcel and her children. With Peter, she travels to the Gaspé Peninsula and Europe. With Selena, she discovers Harlem, the American South and the civil rights movement. And with Gary, she returns to Montreal and descends, for a time, into a kind of madness.

Achilles and Claudia – Suzanne’s French Catholic parents, whom she leaves behind in Montreal. Although Suzanne is fond of Achilles, growing up, his relationship with Claudia — who seems deeply unhappy and unfulfilled — is a kind of cautionary tale, and arguably part of what drives Suzanne to seek out a less conventional life for herself.

Key Themes



GENDER/FEMINISM – Suzanne is, in many ways, a book about what it means to be a woman when society has very strict expectations of women, and mothers especially. Even before making the radical decision to abandon her children, Suzanne’s approach to womanhood is rebellious and unconventional. In an early scene from the book, a young Suzanne is described as running her tongue over the grate separating her from a priest in a confessional booth — an act some might find very offensive. Later she deals with sexist attitudes even among the free spirits in her artistic community. In one scene, for instance, her husband and fellow artist Marcel carelessly paints over

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one of her illustrations. It seems likely that he has assumed the canvas is too valuable to waste on a woman's work.

 **INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM** – According to Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, the core issue in the book is deciding between the pursuit of one's own dreams and the need to deepen the bond with loved ones. As Anaïs puts it: "I think we all share this paradox between our roots and our liberty. We need to be connected to others and to be faithful. But at the same time, we need to be free and fulfil our dreams."

 **PARENTHOOD** – The nature of parenthood, and motherhood especially, is a central theme in the book. Early on, when Suzanne Meloche is a young woman,

being a mother is at times empowering for her. But it becomes a suffocating experience that she decides to flee. She makes the choice to avoid having another child by having an illegal abortion in London, England. In the end, Suzanne's abandonment of her children also raises interesting questions about what it means to be a mother when one has rejected the responsibilities of the role.

 **CIVIL RIGHTS** – In the fourth section of the novel (1956-1965), Suzanne lives in Harlem, New York, where she forms a romantic relationship with a black woman named Selena and becomes involved in fighting for racial justice. In one disturbing passage, she also learns that Selena lost her own premature twin babies because the hospital used its incubators for "Whites only."

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*** ARTISTIC EXPRESSION** – When she moves to Montreal and joins a rebellious creative community, Suzanne has an artistic awakening. She tries her hand at a variety of art forms, from poetry to painting. The book explores both the intense desire to express oneself creatively, as well as what happens when a person ignores this desire. This is shown in the life of Suzanne’s mother Claudia, a one-time piano player who becomes depressed, strict and unhappy.



About the Author

Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette is a Montreal-based novelist, screenwriter and director. Her films have won numerous awards at home and abroad.

About the Translator

Rhonda Mullin’s translation work has been shortlisted four times for the Governor General's Literary Award for translation. She won the prize in 2015 for the book *Twenty-One Cardinals*. Another previous translation, *And the Birds Rained Down*, was a finalist in Canada Reads 2015.

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Awards & Accolades

For the original French-language version of *Suzanne, La femme qui fuit*, Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette received these awards and recognition:

- France-Quebec Prize (2015)
- City of Montreal's Grand Prix du livre (2016)
- Shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award for French-language fiction (2016)

“” Notable Quotes from Reviews

“Some novels — let’s be honest here — leave you thinking that the author must have had a contract to fulfill. But there are others that convince you this is the book the author was waiting all her life to write.”
– The Montreal Gazette

“Her struggle to balance family life with her own artistic awakening leads her to a choice that is not unheard of in itself — but for a woman, and at the time, it’s a shocking one. This novel is perhaps Barbeau-Lavalette’s attempt to understand that choice, to explore the dynamics of family obligation, feminism, art, and individuality that shaped Suzanne’s life, and thus the lives of her descendants.” – Montreal Review of Books

“What makes the book so poignant and beautiful is her style. It's so passionate. It's harsh. It's sensitive. It's full of powerful images. She has a way of making the reader feel physical sensations that the characters are experiencing. It's amazing. I don't know how she did it.” – Catherine Leroux on The Next Chapter

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CBC Links

- Book page: www.cbc.ca/1.4470018
- Author page: www.cbc.ca/1.4761826
- Translator page: www.cbc.ca/1.4971134
- Why Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette wrote a novel inspired by the grandmother who abandoned her family: www.cbc.ca/1.4981954
- Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette on the question she's tired of answering: www.cbc.ca/1.4505369



Watch Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette discuss her book: www.curio.ca/canadareads



Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *Suzanne* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's novel is written using the very uncommon second person point-of-view where the title character, Suzanne, is referred to as "you." Read the excerpt from *Suzanne*. What is the impact of this point-of-view on you, as a reader?
2. The Canada Reads panel will not be debating Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's original novel, but rather Rhonda Mullins's translation of the text. What might change about a novel when it is translated by another person?

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3. Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's novel was originally published in French with the title *La femme qui fuit*, which translates as "The woman who flees." Which is the more effective title for the book?
4. Suzanne is not a biography, but rather a fictionalized biography — a book that is partly based in fact but also partly based on the imagination of the author. Is reading this book an effective way to understand the truth of its subject, Suzanne Meloche?
5. How do standards for parenting differ for mothers and fathers? Does society treat a woman who leaves her family the same way that it does a man who leaves his family?
6. Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette says "I think we all share this paradox between our roots and our liberty. We need to be connected to others and to be faithful. But at the same time, we need to be free and fulfil our dreams." What is the right balance to strike between your commitment to those you love with the need to pursue your own interests?
7. In many respects, Suzanne Meloche could be viewed as a trailblazer: She was an accomplished visual artist and poet, was sexually liberated, actively worked to support civil rights for African Americans, and fought against mental illness. How might the novel change if it were written by an author whose principal interest in Suzanne Meloche rested in one of these areas?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students can research the Automatiste movement. Video and audio clips can be found on websites such as www.cbc.ca and www.nfb.ca. They can organize their ideas and learning about what they are seeing according to a Think-Pair-Share.
2. Students can create a KWL (i.e. Know, Want to Know, Will Look/Learn) chart about the work done by translators of literary works.
3. Students can use a T-Chart to compare and contrast the Wikipedia entries for Suzanne Meloche and Marcel Barbeau.