The Paris Wife

To be an American during the 1920s in Paris? What could be more trendy and romantic? Especially, if you've just married the dashing young fiction writer, Ernest Hemingway. This absorbing novel introduces you to all the famous ex-pat writers of the time period: everyone from Gertrude Stein ("a rose is a rose is a rose") to Scott Fitzgerald with the wild Zelda on his arms to Ezra Pound and John Dos Passos.

But it's not primarily a biographical novel about Papa Hemingway; it's more the story of a marriage between two smart, witty people who each possess an incredible zest for life and adventure.

While visiting friends in Chicago, Hadley Richardson meets Ernest at an apartment full of young people. He asks her to critique one of his earliest pieces. By the time she returns home to St. Louis--where she lives with a married sister--a spark has ignited. For months they write each other almost daily and within a year Hemingway asks Hadley to marry him. After a few months struggling to get by in a seedy Chicago apartment, Hemingway decides to ditch his horrible job, and they board a ship for Paris.

Writing mostly from Hadley's point of view, Paula McLain shows how hard it is to live in a great person's shadow. She is a skilled pianist but even though her mother was a staunch suffragist, Hadley is content (most of the time) to raise their son Bumby and to support her husband in his work.

Not just Paris is vividly portrayed here, but also the Riviera and Pamplona, site of the enthralling bull fights that Hemingway used to create his novel The Sun Also Rises. The family also stays for weeks in the Alps where they are skilled skiers who thrive in the winter outdoors.

The novel often portrays Hemingway himself as selfish as and more concerned with his novels than with his family. Even when the baby has whooping cough and is quarantined, it takes Papa almost two weeks to finally come and check on him. But Hadley comes across as an intelligent, searching woman: one who is willing to make some concessions but must remain true to herself. While reading the book, I wanted to find out what happened to her later. Was life kind to her after Hemingway? Because, or course, there is a post-Hemingway life in her cards.

McLain said she was inspired to write this book after reading Hemingway's A Moveable Feast. What especially called to her were the lines near the end when he said, "I wished I had died before I ever loved anyone but her." Read this fine novel about the Lost Generation in Paris.
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Posted by Dory L. on Sep 8, 2011

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