

The Albertine Motif

Heather Neilson

Judith Armstrong
THE FRENCH TUTOR

Text, \$28pb, 301pp, 1 877008 47 8

THE PROTAGONIST OF Judith Armstrong's first novel, *Emily King*, is beautiful, blonde and bilingual, having spent several early years in Paris. As an undergraduate, she suffers disillusionment when her hopes for a burgeoning romantic relationship prove to be illusory. Thereafter, she determines to adopt a strictly utilitarian approach to sexual relations, at one point adroitly juggling three complementarily useful boyfriends. A recurring minatory motif is Emily's favourite flower, a rose of French origin called the Albertine. The brevity of its orange-pink blooming is symbolic in this narrative of the transitional nature of relationships — a warning that it is folly to trust a lover too much or too quickly, lest one is betrayed.

The novel opens with the narrator's speculation as to whether this rose may have been named for the elusive Albertine of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust's narrator's fear that Albertine is unfaithful — both with other men and with women — is alluded to frequently throughout *The French Tutor*. Despite her familiarity with Proust's novel, and contrary to her decision never to be duped by romantic desire, Emily is thus intertextually destined to become obsessed with a man who will resist all her attempts to possess him.

Prior to this, Emily has enrolled in a Masters degree in the French Department of the University of Melbourne. She is now thirty and, the only child of deceased parents, has inherited sufficient wealth to buy a nice house in a pleasant suburb. Initially, her supervisor is peculiarly obstructive. Later, she learns that his mistress, a colleague in another department, regularly and shrilly attempts to veto his supervision of pretty young women. (Armstrong's portrayal of the complex subterranean sexual mores of a large university department made me nostalgic for the time, long gone, when I myself was dewy enough perhaps to have been the unwitting focus of narrowed eyes in academic corridors. I was an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne when the author was still teaching in the Russian Department, and recall the shock in my first year when I was advised in the Babel building, then home of the language departments, not to accept an invitation to sherry in the office of Dr X and, in another building, never to go sailing with Mr Y.)

Once her initial difficulties are resolved, however, Emily has something of a dream run. She is asked to apply for the job of a non-residential tutor in a new hall of residence. At her first meeting with the head of the college, Emily is offered an office in the college, dinner there every night,

regular administrative work and the de facto deputy headship of the college. This I found rather implausible. In my day, one only got dinner on High Table on the night one came in to teach, on top of a sessional wage. I would be surprised if, in these cash-strapped times, there were now more largesse. However, that this story is on one level a cautionary fairy tale is possibly signalled by the first description of Emily's hair, as 'Alice-like'. The Wonderland she will have to escape is that of her own self-delusion.

It is through her employment at the College that she meets the older man who will destabilise her. Lewis Lincoln is a handsome and respected economist in his mid-forties, with a doctorate from Oxford and an array of eager acolytes. The most successful aspect of *The French Tutor* is arguably its representation of a particular kind of destructive relationship, the kind in which one partner is an immature narcissist, adept at getting people to serve them, and in which the other — against common sense and personal instinct — waits and hopes indefinitely that the former will change. One mentally applauds Emily's asexual friend Lesley, the marsupial expert, when, having met Lewis for the first time, she derisively asks: 'Where did you find that emotional cripple?'

Lewis abruptly initiates the sexual relationship, and then responds with dismayed reproach when Emily is spontaneously amorous. She does not heed the alarm bell. This episode betokens the pattern of the ensuing relationship. The very dependence that Lewis carefully solicits is met with a punitive withholding response and game-playing. Eventually, Emily is allowed to stay at the country retreat to which Lewis flees every weekend, and there discovers that anyone so honoured is obliged to work full-time in his gardens. Lewis is particularly fond of his camellias (Armstrong's pun on his chameleon nature?). Their time together is carefully demarcated, according to his schedule and preferences. Although Emily believes that she always knows where he is, certain discrepancies and contradictions become troubling.

Their interactions with two other couples become increasingly complicated and ambivalent. The book does not invite much sympathy for any of these six characters: the men are self-absorbed and secretive, and the women compliant in their yearning for all the accoutrements of traditional marriage. Emily, though, finally decides not to live with mystery any longer. Certain aspects of the climax do not quite gel, and I wonder why Armstrong chose to conclude the book with definitive 'closure' rather than teasing uncertainty. This is not a flawless novel — the early chapters could also have been better edited — but it was sufficiently entertaining to keep me turning the page, and I can recommend it.

ABR
AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

Subscribe Now!
Call 03 9429 6700