

Follow Your Heart

By Susanna Tamaro
Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf

In an ultimate bequest for understanding, forgiveness and, above all, compassion, an elderly Italian woman decides to write to her granddaughter in America, revealing in the simplest and most touching words the intricacies of mother-daughter relationships, sewn against a canvas of dramatic events. Three generations of women, each struggling with or against the paradigms of her time, and separated from each other by the "distance that leads from intransigence to compassion" (p.162). Three women whose destinies were shaped by one lie, or rather, one omission to say the truth. "Follow Your Heart" is a poignant testimonial and confession, beautifully written by Susanna Tamaro, a one-way correspondence, and point of no return, leading straight to the 'heart' of a lifetime of choices, decisions, love and pain.

All along those intimate letters, this woman is recounting scenes of her life with her daughter, Ilaria, (killed in a car accident), and with her granddaughter who has emigrated to the United States, in an attempt to explain the origin and reason for their respective lack of communication, or miscommunication. With words of wisdom, which extend far beyond her individual experience to reach universal relevance, she uses strong imagery to explain her vision of events. For example, when describing her complicity with her granddaughter in the early years of her life, she sees it as stemming from the similarity between childhood and old age: "In both cases, for different reasons, there is an element of defenselessness; we are either not yet, or we have ceased to be part of the active world, and our responses can be spontaneous, open.

During adolescence an invisible shell begins to harden around our bodies, and gets thicker and thicker throughout our adult life. Lessons about love, and the failure of maintaining that love, take on the underlying rhythm of the letters. "Had I understood at the time that the first requirement of love is strength, events would most likely have taken a different turn. But to be strong you must have self-respect, and to have self-respect you must have self-knowledge, must know yourself inside out, even the most hidden things, those most difficult to



accept. How can we achieve this when life with all its noise and bustle is always dragging forward?"

Within a romantic perspective, the confession and explanation goes on, interwoven with details of her everyday life, and against a backdrop of nature's upheavals. The letters are written during the last couple of months of the year, November and December, when nature is most tormented, reflecting the woman's inner state, and also illustrating the approaching end to her life.

Susanna Tamaro has succeeded in creating a novel powerful in its tenderness, charm and wisdom, which compels the reader to pause and reflect about the core of life... with the last advice to "be still and listen in silence to your heart. When it has spoken to you, rise up and follow it".