

Mother Country

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A STORY OF LOVE AND LIES

Monique
Charlesworth



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To my big sister Lorie with love

PRAISE FOR MOTHER COUNTRY

'*Mother Country* is Charlesworth's moving attempt to come to terms with her own dysfunctional childhood: her obedient yet deeply ambivalent relationship with Inge, who was generous and loving yet unempathetic and self-centred'

Natasha Lehrer, *Times Literary Supplement*

'An affectionate, daughterly memoir that has as many twists and turns as a fast-paced thriller.'

Liz Hodgkinson, *The Lady*

'Charlesworth writes with witty self-deprecation and searing honesty about her own emotions, as she makes discovery after discovery about who her mother really was. This is a story which will draw you in and leave you a little wiser about your own family relationships.'

Camilla Cavendish, journalist and author of
Extra Time: 10 Lessons for Living Longer Better

'A daughter's furious love letter to her half-Jewish mother, wonderfully pious and unchecked.'

Julian Evans, author of *Semi-Invisible Man:*
The Life of Norman Lewis

PRAISE FOR MONIQUE CHARLESWORTH

For The Children's War

'It is one of the strengths of this novel that children are seen not only as victims of warring states, but of the emotional entanglements of their parents ... [in] the intensely moving story of Ilse's emotional awakening.'

Gerard Woodward, *The Telegraph*

'Richly satisfying and utterly absorbing ... Charlesworth tells the story so artfully that she brings an utterly fresh perspective to bear on familiar psychological territory.'

Robert MacNeil, *The Washington Post*

'[Charlesworth] has a keen eye for detail and wide sympathies. She tells it as it really was ... Sometimes you get the feeling that a certain novel is one that its author has been preparing for years to write. This is such a one, and it is really very good indeed.'

Allan Massie, *The Scotsman*

'Rich in local color and character detail ... powerful and poignant. With her cinematic eye for description and her story's propulsive narrative rhythm, Charlesworth thrusts us into the very heart of chaos.'

The Boston Globe

‘Breathlessly suspenseful ... Charlesworth uses two apparent opposites – a timid, sensitive Nazi boy, a bold, red-headed Jewish girl – as a way of exploring what good people have in common and how innocents learn to be decent in a world swarming with evil. She moves her story through fast, terrifying intricacies of plot: journeys, battles, smuggled papers, love affairs, carefully calculated loyalties, heroic sacrifices and endless duplicity ... Charlesworth’s greatest success is to show how these children grow into morally mature adults, learning about treachery not just by seeing it around them, but by making difficult and sometimes terrible choices themselves ... Engrossing.’

Polly Shulman, *New York Times Book Review*

‘*The Children’s War* breathes a well-earned authenticity, even as it recounts circumstances that test human character to belief-defying limits.’

Eva Hoffman, author of *Lost in Translation*

‘Ilse grows from a passive child, observing events, into an active participant, driven by the same mixed motives as everyone else. With Ilse as unblinking guide, Charlesworth travels the morally ambiguous alleyways of war to create a deeply satisfying read full of richly complicated characters.’

Kirkus Reviews (starred)

For *The Glass House*

‘There are, as the publishers suggest, hints of Heinrich Böll in the working-out of the novel’s themes, although the skilful blending of realism and allegory, the deft plotting, the characters that come dangerously close to caricature and yet live, and the sharp intelligence of the writing equally recall Muriel Spark. Ultimately, however, the author’s style is her own and so is her engagement with Germany, which she views as an informed outsider.’

TLS

‘An impressive debut. Monique Charlesworth combines a sharp wit with a rich sense of time and place in a very distinctive blend.’

Graham Swift

‘*The Glass House* introduces a writer of significant accomplishments, among them a gift for describing her characters as if they themselves had taught her how to place them perfectly in context.’

Jonathan Keates, *The Observer*

For *Life Class*

‘Somebody – God, perhaps – is grooming Monique Charlesworth as the next Muriel Spark. Improving on her strong debut in *The Glass House*, she shows herself unnervingly assured at the deft interweaving of comic and philosophical observations: the hallmark of Spark’s writing at its best ... Miss Charlesworth succeeds in reaching the heart while being brutally funny; no mean gift.’

Patrick Gale, *Daily Telegraph*

‘... here clearly is a writer to follow wherever she may go next, gifted with the urge and talent to explore, a high sense of style and spurts of grim humour. This is a book to read again and savour.’

Christopher Wordsworth, *The Guardian*

‘*Life Class* makes it clear that she is a novelist of very considerable talent. It has that rare quality: authority. Her mastery of structure is proof of her talent. The story ranges widely in space, time and mood, but it never loses coherence. It is a very good novel.’

The Scotsman

For *Foreign Exchange*

‘Monique Charlesworth’s sharply observed novel ... hovers tantalisingly between farce and tragedy.’

Daily Express

‘A charmingly droll drama of sex, food and ethics ... beneath a soufflé-light storyline, Monique Charlesworth tucks away great wisdom on the subject of marital boredom and fantasy.’

She

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Seizing the day: Inge in her eighties in the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris

CHAPTER I



Madame la Marquise

In provincial France, a person can live well and hide their secrets. My mother has chosen to spend the last decades of her tumultuous life combining these activities in Tours, in the centre of the Loire Valley. This rich merchants' town with a medieval heart is beautifully situated on the Loire and Cher rivers. Romans planted vines and made wine here. Skilled metalworkers forged Jeanne d'Arc's armour, yards from the Rue Bernard Palissy where my mother lives. The kings of France built fabulous chateaux where they could disport with their mistresses in this lush countryside. For thirty years, my German-born mother has been known as a charming English eccentric. She pushes her empty wheelchair along the boulevards, using it as a Zimmer frame and shopping trolley. Everybody recognises her. Her secret life brought her here and her great gift for misdirection sustains her. How scathingly she dismisses people who make things up: 'so-and-so is just a

fabulator'. But it turns out that she is a fabulator too, possibly the best. I studied her carefully for sixty-seven years. I thought I was her confidante, but I was fooled. This woman means everything to me, yet I don't know her at all.

When I visit, I mustn't be late. I hurry past the Chien Jaune bistro, the Charcuterie Hardouin, prize-winning maker of succulent pork rillons and rillettes, the father-to-son photography studio and the ubiquitous boulangerie. An inner monologue strikes with each footstep: be generous, be kind. But I am not sure that I can be relied on. Let's not forget my mistakes and errors of omission. How many times have I been told to greet everyone politely? Bonjour Madame! Bonjour Messieurs, Mesdames! But let's not start with the ways daughters and mothers find to frustrate and irritate each other. Let's start as each visit surely does, in a spirit of daughterly and motherly love. And wild excitement – that's always in the mix. For days before I arrive, she is in some kind of altered state. I'm not calm either. I love my mother deeply and unquestionably, but I often don't like her.

I ring the bell. She buzzes me in and up I go in the lift. She's breathless, waiting in trembling, overwhelmed anticipation. Her face is ancient, lined yet still attractive; she is forever and unchangingly herself. She is ninety-two and looks it. Me in twenty-five years' time – a weird thought. But my life has been so happy! As if a happy life didn't produce wrinkles. People often say that I look like her – now, what daughter appreciates that? This strong face, quivering with emotion, inspires a mixture of affection and repulsion, strangeness transmuting into familiarity.

'Hello, Mummy! You look great!' I say, because at this early stage of the visit I can still be free with compliments. I can see how she is and it's not good: an old frail person in great pain, held

up by willpower. The word 'Mummy' is irritating, but I am not permitted to call her by any other name. I once referred to her as Inge in her presence – that was a disaster. 'I am the mother, and you are the children' – how often have I heard that? Inge is short for Ingeburg. For years I spelt it wrongly, Ingeborg with an o, as she herself did in some kind of Freudian memory slip. But perhaps it was deliberate, and she was hoping that people might assume that she was Swedish. I lean forward. A tentative embrace – she is too fragile to be touched. I fear the oohs and aahs, the evident pain, the false bright I'm-OK smile. The physical turmoil echoes the emotional; she yearns for my embrace, but if I touch her without warning, she will jump like a startled deer. It's not altogether clear whether my inability to put my arms around her is psychological, or physical, or both. Put it this way: I have already failed.

'You look marvellous, darling!' she says. 'I love the lipstick.'

She is a skinny, tiny and bent figure smartly dressed in sweater and black trousers, wearing one of the Hermès scarves I've given her, pinned with her gold brooch. She always smells of Chanel No. 5. Her chignon is immaculate. She's carefully made up. I tell her she is very chic (she is wearing the striped favourite sweater I particularly dislike) and she sways from side to side and clicks her fingers, doing a look-at-me this-is-the-life mini twirl. Why do I hate it when she's in her happy mode? I want to tell her that she is unchanged, which is true, but I can't quite bring myself to utter a second compliment this soon. *Be kind, be generous.* She wheels her chair away and I follow.

She's given to excesses of emotion – excesses of all kinds really – always justified by the cry of 'It's my day!' That means that she must be indulged because she's feeling marvellous. She has no truck

with Mother's Day because children should be marvellous to their mothers every single day, not once a year under duress. Depending on her mood, most days of the year can be claimed as 'hers'.

Today is one of her special days. I can read the curve of her back, the way it expresses enthusiasm and delight and recognition, alongside some kind of pre-disappointment. But maybe these are emotions I am projecting. This once upright, energetic woman has scoliosis. 'You see?' she said in her eighties, indicating the hip that had begun visibly to jut out. 'I never could get the hem of my skirts to sit straight and now I know why.' She was an excellent seamstress and still has a wooden box full of bobbins and cotton reels, thimbles and a darning egg. It turns out that you can spend a life looking at yourself and not see what's there. Just as a daughter can spend a lifetime looking at her mother and still know nothing.

The white ring around the iris of her blue eyes is cholesterol; I have it too. Her good strong nails are different from my soft useless ones. Her skin is thin, literally and metaphorically, as is mine. We have everything and nothing in common. Here is the angry red patch on one hand that has been there for years, a burn mark that never faded. Her inner self is the same: injustice has been burning through her for decades. Writing this at home in London, I wonder whether the emotion she terms wild excitement, the sort that makes her want to throw up, is another name for anxiety and dread. What are we so afraid of? Each other. '*Man erzieht seine eigenen Feinde*': you bring up your own worst enemies, as my grandmother Tilly used to say. She had an aphorism to suit every occasion. Not all Germans recognise the sayings knitted into me that date back to the 1930s. Some, like 'fish and guests stink after three days', are well known. For years now, my

mother and I have agreed that three days are just perfect: code for the fact that neither of us can stand a minute longer.

But this is the mother I worshipped, the centre of my universe. Though heading for my seventh decade, inside I feel perhaps thirteen – the age at which consciousness of self arrived. I remember rocking on a swing, watching the sky, thinking this: *I am me, separate from the others, and this is the world, and these things will never change.* At what age did her internal clock stop? Inside this old lady is the nineteen-year-old who adored babies and small children and flaunted her youth in halter-neck tops on the beach. We're trapped behind the façades and the decades; we've lost each other.

Inge sits in her special chair with her back to the window and the balcony, the view of the gardens below always ignored, and I take my usual place on the far sofa under the Tree of Life rug that hangs on the wall. Every inch of floor is covered with Persian carpets. A cup of tea – a glass of wine? Coffee. She is beaming, enjoying these early moments of joy and excitement. She's also looking tired. 'I'm not the woman I was a year ago,' she says. She sips her coffee; it doesn't taste the same without a cigarette. She gave up smoking two years ago after seventy-six years and still misses it. Now and then she tells me she's going to have a cigarette, enjoying the look of horror on my face. She loves catching me out being pious.

'You've changed your hair,' she says. 'I liked it better how you had it before.'

My mother – pale-blue eyes alert behind her huge South Park spectacles – sees very well, better than me. She is familiar with every wrinkle and furrow on my face, just as I know hers, but I subscribe to the fallacy that she can't know me as I know her. I am occluded, hidden, so much cleverer. She can't guess at these cruel

thoughts, which circle and recur to land, unforgivably, on this page. I can't imagine that sons inspect their fathers with quite the same visceral dislike and fascination – just as they don't talk about their emotions. What dark currents swirl through mothers and daughters in their mutual criticism, their intense lifelong study of each other, entwined with deep and helpless love. How to be. And, especially, how not to be.

We've always been in touch, and we've never spent time with each other. She adores my children but wasn't there to babysit or advise on childcare. I'm not here to look after her in her old age, were she to allow it. Inge gleefully refuses every offer of help. 'I shall be "autonome" to the end,' she says. 'I am Madame la Générale.' The pecking order is clear: Inge believes that she dominates, and I know that she doesn't. Protestations of love are always made; the relationship has always needed a bit of buttressing. Each highly anticipated meeting generates stories both absurd and sad. My telling of these has created the Inge myths our family knows well. Our relationship has been a succession of encounters – high drama all the way. Other mothers and daughters seem to get on without such peaks and troughs.

When I sit to eat (she's not hungry – she's never hungry), Inge pushes her wheelchair over and stands nearby in what purports to be a spirit of companionable interest, urging me to try each of the cheeses while assessing how many calories I ingest with each bite. Eventually, she releases the observation that's burning through her.

'You know, darling, if you lost five kilos, you would be just perfect.'

How do I respond? Not always well. After all, there's no monopoly on pettiness. Telling my friends that she's 'the world's

oldest anorexic', for instance. Although I agree with her about my weight, I am not going to admit it.

Food is just one of the many contradictions that link and separate us. She adores me but she can't really stand having me around. We have much in common, not least the fact that we never openly admit to these complex and negative emotions. There must be a very particular tension between her relief at being herself at last – with a daughter who knows all about her troubled, sad past – and her simultaneous need to be somebody completely different. How many days can a person put up with this kind of stress? Three, until the fish stink.

Because she's very old now, I fear for her. In bleak moments she sits, head hanging, in a miasma of pain, before she recovers herself. What if Inge cannot uphold the effort of being this person she has invented – might there be a total collapse one day from sheer exhaustion? God forbid that she should develop dementia: what if a German word were to slip out? To be found out is her deepest fear. She used to count in German; that was a bit of a giveaway. She's long since trained herself out of that.

The next morning, a couple of the loyal friends she's made through her English conversation classes come to visit. Her friends love her *joie de vivre*, her ageless good spirits and the sound advice she dispenses. At 11 a.m., a large 'petit kir' or the lethal 'red cardinal' (*crème de cassis plus red wine*) is produced, always accompanied by little *Vache qui Rit* cheese squares and cocktail biscuits. A second drink soon follows. Talk is carefully orchestrated. Inge holds forth in a way I find false and tooth-gratingly strange, yet it is a performance to marvel at. The sprightliness of this charming lady of a certain age! The elegant scarf and outfit, which must be admired! The vivacious gestures – the eruptions

into song! For years she has suffered from a terrible condition called *polynévríte*, which attacks the entire body in unexpected and excruciating ways anywhere from the sole of the foot to the roof of the mouth. It's agonising to see and hear, and there are times when her entire body hurts. If a friend ventures to say 'Are you all right, Inge?', she bursts into a version of 'Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise!' in a voice rising from deep baritone to shrill, complete with flamboyant arm gestures. This comic song – iconic in France – features the Marquise telephoning home to be told by her various servants that her grey mare has died – but not to worry, all is well. Verse by verse it transpires that her husband discovered he was ruined and committed suicide, the candles he overturned set fire to the chateau and the flames spread to the stables – each incident the result of a far graver one. Insouciance in the face of total disaster: that's my mother. Insane, and yet admirable. She cannot bear any sympathy whatsoever. 'Ooh – ah – *je fais la comédie!*' and once again she bursts into song. The act never varies. Everyone else finds this absolutely marvellous.

Everything is about her. No matter where we start – politics, the weather, the gilets jaunes, books – any topic whatsoever – she forcibly inserts herself, demanding attention and admiration. Presenting herself as the sympathetic, wonderful host, Inge is consciously setting herself up as the reverse of her mother, Tilly, whom she found callous and flawed. Tilly's oft-repeated sayings drove her mad. One of her favourites was *Selbstlob ist das schönste*: 'self-praise is the best of all'. In Tours, I'm vividly reminded of this.

Inge demands recognition for her elegance, her wit, her popularity and kindness. 'Et modeste avec ça ha ha!' – and modest too! – is her running joke. An impossible tiresome gaiety and sustained self-praise under a thin veneer of self-deprecation – these

are the hallmarks of marvellous English Inge, so idiosyncratic and ageless. Nobody else seems to notice or mind. No matter how much admiration is showered on her, she always needs mine. But I can only squeeze out the most miserly amounts. Why? I love her. Why can't I be a better person? Why can't I rise above it, be charming and compliment her, like my kind husband? I am as stubborn as she is. When I play my part in this masquerade, I resent it, and her. To need – to crave – so much praise, a person has to be terribly damaged inside. But it's hard to have sympathy, because this charade drives me bonkers.

When the audience departs, she rolls her wheelchair into the kitchen, ingests her many medicines and visibly flags. By one o'clock, the two-kir euphoria has abated and she's irritable. She is also hungry because she normally eats at noon; she hasn't eaten a thing since three o'clock the previous day. She has had a tiring morning being wonderful. She's thrown her considerable intelligence and energy into these efforts. And now she is exhausted and needs lunch and a sleep.

In the afternoon she wakes, sadder and smaller. As the day wanes, the mood darkens. Because the present is so awkward, the past is where we connect best. We drift into talk of her sad childhood and the never-to-be-forgotten awfulness of her mother. The rehashing of events decades old is as far as I ever venture in the blame game. The past feels like the honest place where we meet as equals – yet there is always something more I need to know, something she holds back. By contrast, everything in the present feels false, and not just because of the deception we collude in. We are always out of joint; I can never quite articulate why. Soon, she's had enough. I've exhausted her, and vice versa. When it's time for me to leave for the B&B she chose for me,

she can't bear to see me go, yet can't wait for me to be gone. She needs to be back inside the safe bubble she has made for herself. She is a veteran of self-invention; this French idyll must be her fifth or sixth life.

I'm simultaneously fascinated and exhausted, longing to get away yet racked with guilt. When, after three days, I board the TGV for Lille and home with my iPad charged up, I burn to record the latest incident. My voluminous notes go back years. Like her, they return again and again to the past she cannot forget but has never dealt with. I worry away at the mystery: who is she really, and what exactly is she hiding?