

Les Victorieuses

by Laetitia Colombani · Language: EN

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Overview

Les Victorieuses tells the story of Solène, a Parisian lawyer who, after a burnout, is forced to take a leave of absence. To recover, she reluctantly agrees to volunteer at a women's shelter, the Palais de la Femme, a real institution founded in the early 20th century. Initially detached and overwhelmed by the harsh realities of the women she meets—refugees, victims of domestic violence, and those living in poverty—Solène gradually becomes invested in their lives. The novel alternates between Solène's present-day journey and the historical narrative of Blanche Peyron, a Salvation Army officer who fought to create a haven for homeless women in Paris. Through this dual timeline, Colombani weaves a story of resilience, solidarity, and the transformative power of helping others.

The novel's central arc follows Solène as she moves from a state of personal crisis to a renewed sense of purpose. Her encounters with the shelter's residents—especially a young Afghan woman named Sajda, who is determined to become a doctor—challenge her preconceptions and force her to confront her own privilege. Meanwhile, Blanche's story reveals the immense obstacles she faced in the 1920s, including financial ruin and societal indifference, to build the Palais de la Femme. The book is a tribute to the often invisible work of women supporting women, and it underscores the idea that victory is not about grand achievements but about small acts of courage and compassion. It matters because it gives voice to marginalized women and highlights the enduring relevance of solidarity in the face of adversity.

Key Takeaways

- Volunteering and connecting with others can be a powerful path to personal healing and recovery from burnout.
- The Palais de la Femme in Paris is a real place, founded by the Salvation Army, and has been sheltering women in need for over a century.
- Blanche Peyron's determination shows that one person's relentless effort can create a lasting institution that changes thousands of lives.
- Listening to and believing in the stories of marginalized women is a crucial first step toward helping them rebuild their lives.
- Small, consistent acts of kindness and support can have a ripple effect, transforming both the giver and the receiver.

- The novel highlights the importance of creating safe spaces where women can find not only shelter but also hope and a path to independence.
- Solidarity among women across different social classes and backgrounds is a powerful force for social change.

Chapter Summaries

Part One: Solène

Solène, a high-powered lawyer in Paris, suffers a severe burnout and is ordered by her doctor to take a leave of absence. Feeling lost and purposeless, she reluctantly agrees to volunteer at the Palais de la Femme, a women's shelter run by the Salvation Army. Her first days are marked by discomfort and a sense of alienation as she encounters women from vastly different backgrounds, including refugees and victims of abuse. She is assigned to help with administrative tasks and gradually begins to observe the daily life of the shelter, feeling both overwhelmed and strangely drawn to the resilience of the women she meets.

Part Two: Blanche

The narrative shifts to the 1920s, introducing Blanche Peyron, a Salvation Army officer with a fervent mission to create a shelter for homeless women in Paris. She faces immense challenges, including lack of funding, bureaucratic obstacles, and societal indifference. Despite these hurdles, Blanche's unwavering faith and determination drive her to pursue a grand vision: a building that could house hundreds of women. She begins a relentless campaign to raise money and find a suitable property, often facing rejection and disappointment but never giving up on her dream.

Part Three: Solène

Back in the present, Solène becomes more involved in the shelter's activities, forming a tentative bond with a young Afghan woman named Sajda, who dreams of becoming a doctor. Sajda's intelligence and determination inspire Solène, who begins to help her with her studies. Through her interactions with Sajda and other residents, Solène starts to confront her own privilege and the emptiness of her previous life. She also learns about the history of the Palais de la Femme and its founder, Blanche Peyron, which deepens her respect for the institution and its mission.

Part Four: Blanche

Blanche's quest to build the Palais de la Femme reaches a critical point when she discovers a large, dilapidated building in the 11th arrondissement that was once a hotel. She becomes convinced this is the place for her project, despite its poor condition and the enormous cost of renovation. She negotiates with the owners and secures a loan, risking everything on her vision. The narrative details her tireless efforts to gather support, including from wealthy donors and the city of Paris, and her struggles with health and exhaustion as she pushes forward against all

odds.

Part Five: Solène

Solène's volunteer work begins to transform her. She finds a new sense of purpose and connection, and her relationships with the shelter's residents deepen. She helps Sajda prepare for her medical school entrance exams, and she also becomes involved in helping other women with legal and administrative issues. Her own healing is intertwined with her growing commitment to the shelter. She also uncovers more about Blanche Peyron's story, feeling a kinship with this determined woman from the past. The chapter culminates in a moment of crisis when Sajda's asylum status is threatened, and Solène must use her legal skills to help.

Part Six: Blanche

The historical narrative reaches its climax as Blanche's dream becomes a reality. After years of fundraising and construction, the Palais de la Femme finally opens its doors, welcoming hundreds of women in need. The inauguration is a triumphant moment, but Blanche's health is failing. She is diagnosed with a serious illness and dies shortly after the opening, having achieved her life's mission. Her legacy is the building itself, which continues to serve as a refuge for women for decades to come. The chapter emphasizes the immense personal cost of her dedication and the profound impact of her work.

Part Seven: Solène

In the present, Solène faces a personal decision: whether to return to her high-powered legal career or continue her work at the shelter. Through her experiences, she has gained a new perspective on what constitutes a meaningful life. She chooses to stay at the Palais de la Femme, taking on a more permanent role. The novel ends with Solène feeling a sense of peace and fulfillment she had never known before, having found her own victory in the act of helping others. She also reflects on the legacy of Blanche Peyron and the countless women who have passed through the shelter's doors, each with their own story of resilience.

Themes

- Resilience and hope
- Female solidarity
- Social inequality
- Healing through helping
- Legacy and memory

Notable Quotes

- "Elle avait compris que la victoire n'était pas de gagner, mais de ne pas abandonner." — Narrator's reflection on Blanche Peyron's relentless pursuit of her goal to build the Palais de la Femme.
- "On ne sauve pas les gens, on les accompagne." — A line spoken by a character at the shelter, likely a staff member, conveying the philosophy of the Palais de la Femme.
- "La vie est une bataille, et les femmes sont des guerrières." — A thematic statement that resonates throughout the novel, possibly said by a resident or in the narrator's voice.
- "Il n'y a pas de petites victoires, il n'y a que des victoires." — A quote that encapsulates the novel's message about the significance of every small step forward.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *Les Victorieuses* about?

Les Victorieuses is a novel about Solène, a burnt-out lawyer who volunteers at a women's shelter in Paris. The story alternates between her present-day journey and the historical account of Blanche Peyron, who founded the shelter in the 1920s. It explores themes of resilience, solidarity, and the transformative power of helping others.

Is *Les Victorieuses* worth reading?

Yes, for readers who enjoy character-driven, emotionally resonant fiction with a dual timeline. It offers a compelling look at social issues and the lives of marginalized women, while also telling an inspiring story of personal redemption. The novel is well-reviewed for its heartfelt narrative and strong female characters.

How does *Les Victorieuses* end?

Spoiler: Solène decides not to return to her high-powered legal career and instead stays at the Palais de la Femme, finding purpose in her volunteer work. She helps Sajda secure her asylum and continue her studies. The novel ends with Solène reflecting on Blanche Peyron's legacy and feeling a sense of peace and fulfillment.

Who should read *Les Victorieuses*?

Readers who enjoy contemporary fiction with social themes, stories about women's lives, and dual-narrative structures. It will appeal to those interested in issues of homelessness, immigration, and female empowerment. Fans of Colombani's previous novel, *The Braid*, will likely appreciate this book as well.

How long does it take to read *Les Victorieuses*?

The book is about 240 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take roughly 4 to 5 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a few sittings over a weekend.