

The  
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Prize

# Reading Guide



## The Book of Mother

### Violaine Huisman

Translated by Leslie Camhi

Virago

[thebookerprizes.com](https://thebookerprizes.com)

## What the judges said

‘Violaine Huisman’s *The Book of Mother* brings alive the high-drama world of Violaine and her mother, Catherine. This stark, no-holds-barred depiction of a mother-daughter relationship feels incredibly immediate, a beautiful, bold novel translated with a deceptively elegant simplicity by Leslie Camhi.’

## About the book

With spectacular ferocity of language, a streak of dark humour and stunning emotional bravery, *The Book of Mother* is an exquisitely wrought story of a mother’s dizzying heights and devastating lows, and a daughter who must hold her memory close in order to let go.

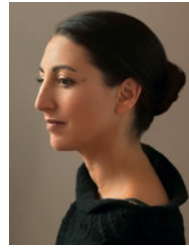
A prize-winning tour de force when it came out in France, Violaine Huisman’s remarkable debut novel is about a daughter’s inextinguishable love for her magnetic, mercurial mother. Beautiful and charismatic, Catherine, aka ‘Maman’, smokes too much, drives too fast, laughs too hard and loves too extravagantly. During a joyful and chaotic childhood in Paris, her daughter Violaine wouldn’t have it any other way. But when Maman is hospitalised after a third divorce and breakdown, everything changes. As the story of Catherine’s own traumatic childhood and coming of age unfolds, the pieces come together to form an indelible portrait of a mother as irresistible as she is impossible, as triumphant as she is transgressive.

## About the author

Violaine Huisman was born in Paris in 1979 and has lived and worked in New York for twenty years, where she ran the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s literary series and also organised multidisciplinary arts festivals across the city. Originally published by Gallimard under the title *Fugitive parce que reine*, her debut novel *The Book of Mother* was awarded multiple literary prizes including the Prix Françoise Sagan and the Prix Marie Claire.

## About the translator

Leslie Camhi is a New York-based essayist and cultural journalist who writes for the *New York Times*, *Vogue* and other publications. She is a frequent contributor to artists’ monographs and museum catalogues. *The Book of Mother* is her first book-length translation.



## The author says...

‘The book is composed around a poem I wrote to my mother as a child. That part of the novel isn’t fiction—the poem is a genuine relic from my childhood.’

Leslie Camhi agreed from the start that we would have to work on the poem together: it was such a sensitive, intimate, complicated piece of writing to render in English. The poem has an authentic child’s voice because I wrote it as a child. And it felt phoney and somewhat crass to fake its voice as an adult. When it came time to work on it, we were on lockdown from Covid in the spring of 2020. I was, like many parents around the world, home-schooling my children. It occurred to me to ask my eight-year-old daughter, who was born and raised in New York, and is perfectly bilingual, if she could try to translate the poem. She completed the task with impressive confidence. Her poem was gorgeous, poignant and perfectly poised. And so the book in English holds within it a poem I wrote to my mother, and a poem my daughter wrote to me.’



## The translator says...

‘*The Book of Mother* deals with a number of challenging subjects, including mental illness and the betrayal of the pact between mother and child, a betrayal which places the child in the role of caregiver.’

Yet it is illuminated by the love and clear-eyed commitment that animates the narrator, who excavates the ruins of her childhood and her mother’s life without bitterness, seeking only to establish their true dimensions. The book is also at times extremely funny. I enjoyed the swagger and occasional erudition of its larger-than-life characters, and all the contradictions that give the book its vital force in French.’

## Further reading

Marcel Proust *In Search of Lost Time*  
Marguerite Duras *The Lover*  
Alison Bechdel *Are You My Mother?*  
Deborah Levy *The Cost of Living*  
Annie Ernaux *The Years*  
Elena Ferrante *The Lost Daughter*

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