

Impressions of Claude Monet's life

LIGHT

By Eva Figes. Pantheon Books. 91 pages. \$10.95.

By Hunter Drohojowska

Throughout this slim novel a strange beauty is woven with the intricacy and strength of handmade lace. The subject is one day late in the life of Claude Monet. It is written as an impressionist study with the passing hours from dawn to dusk rendered as splashes and snatches of literary color. This may sound a dreadful and sugary conceit but Figes has allowed herself no such indulgence.

The book is a layered portrait of Monet's family, and a fertile detailing of the French countryside. Figes' descriptions are faithful to Monet's vision. She regularly lingers in the beauty of her own prose, as a painter might in decorating one area of a picture.

Consider this image of the pond where Monet grew his famous waterlilies: "Each waterlily had become a curved cup of glowing colour resting on a flat saucer of indigo shadow. And at the far end of the pool, catching the full afternoon sun, the willow trees stood in a blaze of shimmering light, long leaves trembling,

falling in a cascade of palest greens and gold. Halfway across the pond fell the slanting edge between sun and shadow, dividing the world . . . Yet even now the clear cool shadows of the water reflected patches of the summer sky, deep as it was distant, as though high noon gleamed through the dark glass of dusk in a wondrous duplicity of hours."

Such carefully drawn passages coalesce in a picture which is profound as well as pretty. The family life is innuendo. Shadowy vignettes fleetingly reveal the changing political climate of the late 19th century. Figes — author of "Patriarchal Attitudes" which was an important work in the women's movement — has extended the feminist sensibility to the female characters in Monet's life: his wife and daughters with their suppressed and confused malaise. The encroaching industrial age creeps into discussions at lunch so the whole idyllic scene barely conceals a pentimento of tension: the coming war, the aftermath of a family death, departure of a young son to school. It is a day like any other, rife with myriad change, yet also suspended from time, a breath held eternally. There, Figes comes very close to the sensations sought by Monet himself. ■

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