

# Black Inc. Book Club Notes

**TITLE:** The Godmother

**AUTHOR:** Hannelore Cayre

**ISBN:** 9781760641610

**PRICE:** \$27.99

**SUBJECT:** Popular Fiction

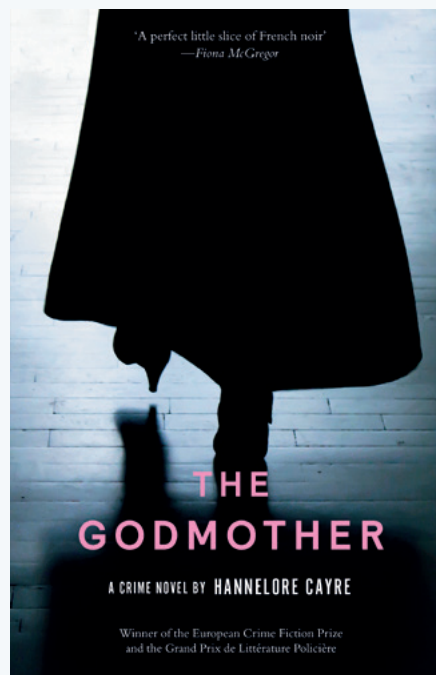
## Book description

This translated novel about a French-Arabic translator raises questions of interpretation and inheritance, money and morals, belonging and being.

A widow who spent her childhood living in the 'no man's land between a motorway and a forest', Patience Portefeux is familiar with the margins. She is a woman whose mother was Jewish and whose father was a pied-noir – both having lost their homelands – and who was raised by a Tunisian domestic worker. Her job as a judicial interpreter gives her a window into the lives of others on the margins and gives the reader a glimpse into the drug trade in France.

Patience she loves her daughters but has little to say to them, her unloving mother is in the last stages of her life, and she keeps her boyfriend at a distance. Feeling herself ageing and desperately lonely, she stops waiting for something to happen. Quoting from a French poem (one of the novel's many literary references), she says: 'I'm done with hoping; now I want!' And so, Patience takes advantage of information gleaned through her work to play the part of a Moroccan businesswoman and becomes the Godmother, a hard-dealing, tough-talking drug dealer.

Relating her story from Muscat after she has brought in millions and successfully laundered the money, Patience – or the Godmother – gives us insights into her motives, her dissatisfactions and her firm opinions on everything from capitalism to justice, race to religion. We discover her origin stories, and especially the importance of her parents, as she poses the question of how we become who we are.



The best crime novels are often said to be as much about the human condition as about the particular crime they feature. This is certainly true of *The Godmother*. Hannelore Cayre has created an absolutely authentic character who fully inhabits the narrative voice.

## About the author

Hannelore Cayre is an award-winning French novelist, screenwriter and director, and a practising criminal lawyer. Her works include *Legal Aid*, *Masterpieces* and *Like It Is in the Movies*. She has directed several short films and the adaptation of *Commis d'office* (*Legal Aid*) was her first feature-length film. She lives in Paris.



# Black Inc. Book Club Notes

## Quotes

‘Devourable in a sitting and tastes deliciously like one of the narrator’s beloved Rothkos – dark at its centre, pulsing outward through all the more complex flavours.’ —**SARAH KRASNOSTEIN**

‘A perfect little slice of French noir, written in crisp, astringent prose from which unfurls a story much more complex than its 170 pages suggest. Expertly plotted, *The Godmother* is the most compelling crime novel I’ve read in years, rich with the sort of idiosyncratic detail only a criminal lawyer like Cayre could know. It eschews the moral reductionism of most drug narratives, laying bare the hypocrisies of the system itself. Patience Portefeux is a wonderful combination of wit, courage and sly subversion, surprising us all the way to the end.’ —**FIONA MCGREGOR**

‘Patience Portefeux is a woman you won’t easily forget: tough, fearless and flawed, a modern-day heroine you’ll find yourself rooting for from beginning to end.’ —**ANNA JAQUIERY**

‘Rigorous, superbly plotted by an author who clearly knows the territory. Vivid, smoky dialogue and a sly ending that ticks all the boxes ... Masterly.’ —**LE FIGARO**

‘The Paris of Cayre’s *The Godmother* is a spicy mix of cultures and classes so deftly evoked you can smell the cigarettes, coffee and Moroccan hash, taste the kebabs and Chamonix Orange cakes, feel the summer sweat trickle down your back and the hot asphalt stick to your feet. Reading this novel is a visceral delight.’ —**ANGELA SAVAGE**

‘Readers will be anxious about the fate of the forthright, sympathetic Patience up to the final page. It’s no surprise that this novel won France’s most prestigious award for crime fiction.’ —**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY STARRED REVIEW**

‘A fabulous noir – more Balzac or Joyce Carol Oates than Simenon’ —**LE POINT**

## Discussion Points

1. Patience says of her parents’ relationship with money that ‘they loved it as a living, intelligent being’. What does it mean to love money in this way?
2. What is Patience’s relationship with money?
3. Talk about the connection between capitalism and crime that Cayre exposes in her novel. Why are the drug dealers ‘paragons of capitalism’?
4. How is class explored in *The Godmother*?
5. Patience has played so many different parts: the daughter of parents who have been exiled from their homeland; a denizen of luxury hotels; a single mother struggling financially for many years, and desperate for her daughters not to drop in social status; a respectable middle-class white widow; a drug dealer. In light of this, can we define Patience’s place in French society?
6. What forms a person? Discuss how the concept of inheritance, both abstract and material – especially what one gets (or takes) from one’s parents – is explored in this novel.
7. When she is lugging the bricks of hash, Patience feels in her body ‘the generations of indefatigable women who had dragged their kids and swedes along from shtetl to shtetl.’ Does Patience really become the ‘intrepid Jewish woman’ her mother read about obsessively?
8. Why does Jewishness play such a big part in this story? Patience sees a belief in God ‘as some form of mental disorder’ – talk about the difference between Judaism as a religion and Jewishness as a cultural identity.
9. Who is on the margins of society in *The Godmother*? Who has a choice of whether to inhabit those margins, and who has no choice?
10. Does Australia have a similar myth to the ‘Great French Lie’ that promises opportunity to all based on educational merit?

# Black Inc. Book Club Notes

11. What are the ethics of Patience's drug dealing? Is her choice to do this justified?
12. What are the ethics of her attitude towards translation? After initially putting her heart into her work, she soon realises that 'the interpreter is just a tool to accelerate the act of repression'. Does Patience participate in or rebel against this repression?
13. Why has Cayre chosen to give her character synaesthesia? Why this particular abnormality, where Patience tastes and feels colour?
14. The photograph of Patience with Audrey Hepburn 'captures the promise of [her] former life', and her desire to be a fireworks collector. Why is Patience so determined to buy the copy at auction? Is the promise it captures ever fulfilled? Does Patience eventually become a fireworks collector?
15. Is it inevitable that the promise of a life, or one's expectations of it, will not be fulfilled? What can influence whether one's expectations will be met?
16. There are many references in *The Godmother* to the dreadfulness and pointlessness of life, the horrors dwelling at the base of the human condition. Is this ultimately a pessimistic novel? Or is there some redemption possible?
17. What do you think Patience will do after her time in Muscat, 'lying fallow'? Which of the lives opening up before her will she take up? Or will she not take any of them?
18. What is the meaning of the story told briefly at the very end of the novel?