

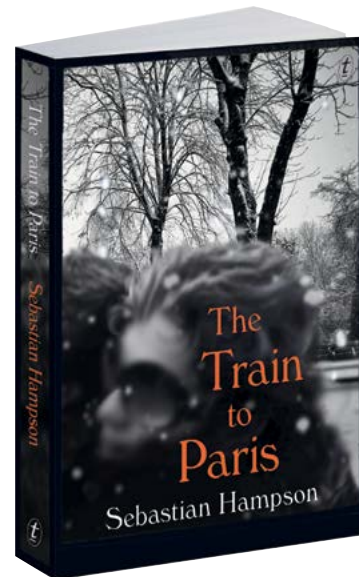
# THE TRAIN TO PARIS

SEBASTIAN HAMPSON

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Fiction, Trade Paperback



## Praise for *The Train to Paris*

'Sebastian Hampson is that rare thing: a writer of ideas who is also compulsively readable.' Nicholas Edlin, author of *The Widow's Daughter*

'This book will charm and engage.' *Books + Publishing*

'Hampson's prose superbly renders the atmosphere of summer in Biarritz and winter in Paris. His self-absorbed Lawrence is very believable, and some of the ancillary characters are also well-portrayed. This is a remarkable debut novel, and it will be interesting to see what Hampson comes up with next.' *BookMooch*

## About Sebastian Hampson

Sebastian Hampson was born in 1992 in Auckland, New Zealand. He grew up in Wellington, has lived in Europe, and is currently studying art history and literature at Victoria University. *The Train to Paris* is his first novel.

## A reader's introduction to *The Train to Paris*

Twenty-year-old Lawrence studies art history at the Sorbonne. He is returning from an unsatisfactory holiday in Madrid with his girlfriend during which they discussed art and love but left their relationship unconsummated. He finds himself stuck without a ticket for the train to Paris in a picturesque but dull border town.

Suddenly an older woman, Élodie, appears — sexy clothes, long legs and shimmering hair. Lawrence notices her, but leaves the train station and she follows him. Élodie adopts Lawrence, perhaps as a project, perhaps as a diversion, perhaps as a cruel game.

They spend a night in a luxurious hotel in the resort town of Biarritz where Élodie sees her old friend Ed Selvin, and treats Lawrence with condescension, curiosity and tenderness depending on her whim. They make love but Lawrence wakes in the morning to find her gone.

Using money she has left him to catch the train back to Paris, Lawrence resolves to forget Élodie. But he is 'haunted' by their encounter, nostalgic for it. When she

rings him after months of silence he resolves not to meet her as she commands. But he goes, as she knew he would. Has she called him to play games with Ed Selvin? Does she have some genuine feeling for Lawrence? Is she in control?

Lawrence is in Paris having left behind his family, his country, and his girlfriend. A virgin both sexually and in a worldly sense at the start of the novel, he is an inexperienced young man who finds himself in a situation he is not equipped to fully navigate. But as his relationship with Élodie progresses, he starts to map a sense of himself and the world.

## Questions for discussion

1. What is the basis of Lawrence's attraction to Élodie? Is it purely physical? And vice versa – what is the basis of Élodie's attraction to Lawrence? Does their relationship change through the novel? Do they love each other?
2. How even is the power balance in their relationship? Does it shift?
3. What does Lawrence discover about himself through his encounter with Élodie? What does he discover about the world?
4. Élodie is forever instructing Lawrence — on how to treat women, how to order in a restaurant, how to dress, lovemaking and so on. Does Lawrence teach Élodie anything?
5. At the end of the novel, Lawrence catches sight of Élodie, without make-up: 'She was herself. Her natural, unembellished self.' (291) He realises the woman he sees is not 'my Élodie'. Who is Lawrence's Élodie? Who is the real Élodie?
6. When Lawrence tells Ethan about his experience with Élodie, Ethan comments: 'If it wasn't you telling me I'd be certain this is just some fantasy.' (289) Does Élodie work as an authentic character? Or is she a young man's fantasy?
7. At one point, frustrated with Élodie's game playing, Lawrence tells her, 'You never change, do you?' (167) Does she?

8. 'You may be many things, Lawrence, but you are not much fun,' (84) Élodie tells him. But she also tells him he is too 'interesting' (26) for Sophie's family. What do you make of Lawrence as a character? What about Élodie?

9. How far is Lawrence in control of what happens to him?

10. This is a coming of age novel. So how does Lawrence mature?

11. Within the first few pages, Lawrence describes himself as a twenty-year-old who could have been a Parisian financier. (6) His relationship with his girlfriend is theoretical rather than physical. Does Élodie 'bring him to life' or mature him?

12. *The Train to Paris* reverses the genders of Pygmalion-type stories in which an older male educates and refines a naïve young woman. Discuss the gender politics of the novel. You might also discuss Élodie's claims about how women really want men to behave — is it, for example, 'human nature' for women to 'want their men to be little princes?' (83)

13. Élodie often delivers judgments about Lawrence and the world in general. How far are we to take them as true?

14. The novel begins at the border between Spain and France, a symbol of the threshold between Lawrence's boyhood and manhood. What are the other symbols in the novel?

15. Lawrence is a student of art history and as narrator often describes scenes as different painters would have depicted them. Is this a painterly book? Is it impressionistic? (Remember that Lawrence is studying the 'Impressionists, focusing particularly on the transition from Realism heralded by Manet.' (14)