*The Good Mother of Marseille,* by Christopher X. Shade reviewed by Cassidy Adams

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Christopher X. Shade is the co-founder and co-editor of a poetry and prose journal, *Cagibi.* He currently resides in New York City, where he teaches fiction and poetry at The Writer Studio. While Shade has won awards for his stories in the past, he is able to show off his talent in this, *The Good Mother of Marseille,* his debut novel. In *The Good Mother of Marseille,* Shade brings the audience on a journey through the French city of Marseille, where he focuses on five main characters making their way through life. While each character is essentially going through their own personal problems, Shade is able to view each of them as a piece to a greater puzzle. Unknowingly, each character crosses each other’s path without quite knowing what any of the other people are going through. This novel is beautifully layered, allowing the audience to be able to piece all the names and bits of information together as they go along, to see just how everything falls together. Shade captures these humanistic and trying moments through character structure, and language.

*The Good Mother of Marseille* is a vibrant and dark novel that touches on social issues of neglected crime, domestic abuse, and secrets within a foreign country, all while facing issues that hit more personally, such as disease, heartbreak, and trying to survive. As the story unfolds, the characters come to life. The character array varies: two American students trying to understand their life choices, a homeless girl making decisions on the whim, a man with a disease trying to see the last of things while losing his eyesight, his wife, a lone man stuck in the past and facing cancer, and finally a writer trying to understand the complexity of Marseille. There is not an outrageous story line for the audience to follow, but rather moments in time with characters in the city: “Hard seemed to be the way for everyone she knew in Marseille. Hard was simply the way of Marseille, in every way, big and small. But it was worth it…She had made Marseille her place now.” Shade is able to capture the humanistic quality of each one of his characters by exposing their vulnerabilities to the audience. Through this, the audience grows to care about the characters: “He was glad to know this in advance, to know that a monster of illness was about to pounce on him. Illness was a monster that out of nowhere jumped on you with its claws out.” Each one of these characters have come to Marseille as a way to escape, whether that be the doom of an impending disease or a secret place for them to piece their lives back together though it is really falling apart. The structure works well to highlight the story because it spends moments with each of the five main characters and what they are facing, along with the different people they encounter. While we may not know those names or how these minor details will fit into the story, they always come back, giving the audience this sense of comfort, knowing what is going on. There is an instance in the story where two men are talking about seemingly different situations that sit heavily on their minds—all while the reader observes the heartbreaking moment, knowing that they are talking about the same person without ever realizing it.

The emotional impact stems from the language. Shade allows each moment and feeling to come to life through metaphors and vivid diction:

“Things had changed much more than expected. It felt like betrayal but it wasn't betrayal. The port had not made promises to him. The port had not made a vow. It wasn't betrayal. It was simply what was to be expected because this was Marseille, a city not like any other city. Marseille could be like the wind out on the sea. It could whip like the wind. It could fall quiet. Wind was wind and so it was not accurate to suggest that wind could change into something other than itself, but certainly wind could behave differently when least expected, which is why one must always watch the wind.”

This choice of diction is almost poetic, which allows the audience to become enchanted and immersed in the story, and the idea of wind itself comes back to haunt each character. Shade even incorporates the French language with words such as “quartier” or “rue” in the sentences, almost like the audience was one of the American students who sometimes translated French. This story is completely immersive, as if the audience had also booked a vacation to Marseille, with each piece in this story coming back to play in important role, it’s easy for the audience to feel that they are there, walking the streets with the tourists and admiring “*la bonne mere.”* The setting of Marseille plays an important role in the story; it’s the underlying aspect all the characters have in common. As we see the city through each of their eyes, it becomes easier to place all the pieces together, especially when the characters pass the various landmarks and places; this allows the audience it follow in their footsteps. This helps immerse the audience as the city comes to life on each page.

All the characters are haunted by Marseille, yet in a way they are in love with this place. The story ends with a step away from the city and the people the audience have come to know, taking in a different point of view of the city from afar. Mixed in with the negatives and struggles are moments of inspiration, leaving the audience with hope, even in the worst of situations. It’s a city where love hurts and the unexpected is bound to happen. Shade is able to tell the story of how the stranger sitting across from you may have a completely different life than one might assume. Everyone in this story has skeletons in their closet, yet as they cross each other’s path, they are each viewed differently, getting across the idea that everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Christopher Shade’s debut novel proves to be a unique piece. With this being his debut novel, it’s important to make note of his name to see what comes next.