‘Perestroika In Paris’ Is A Cozy, Fairy-Tale Trot   
Through The City Of Lights

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It’s such a joy when an author whose work you’ve been reading for decades surprises you with something unexpected. The title character of Jane Smiley’s new novel, *Perestroika in Paris —* her first since she completed her massive *The Last Hundred Years* trilogy in 2015 — is a talking horse! Of course, horses have trotted through the pages of plenty of Smiley’s books, including *Horse Heaven* and most of her Young Adult novels. Nor is this the first time that the author, best known for *A Thousand Acres,* her Pulitzer Prize-winning homage to *King Lear,* has gone light: *Moo* and *Ten Days in the Hills* are both satires.

But this delightful, heartwarming tale about creatures living in the rough in Paris’s Champs de Mars is something new for Smiley, and it’s an appealing balm for harsh times. The animals — her titular racehorse, who converses with an elegant shorthaired German pointer, a haughty raven, a squabbling pair of mallards, and a rat pining for a mate — share their hardships, fears, needs, and dreams. They also overcome their differences and prejudices to band together to lend a paw, claw, wing, or hoof to each other and, eventually, a lonely, orphaned 8-year-old boy.

Perestroika is the thoroughbred’s official name, born of Moscow Ballet. But of course the Russian moniker is also Smiley’s heads-up that this is a book about a sort of reformation, or restructuring. Smiley’s sensitive racehorse, called Paras for short, is a fleet filly who, propelled by curiosity and the lure of freedom and adventure, wanders from the track one November night when her trainer accidentally leaves her stall door ajar. With her trainer’s purse — stuffed with her latest winnings — clenched between her teeth like a bit, Paras encounters a whole new world.

She ends up in Paris, where Frida, an elegant, sophisticated street dog, attracted by the money she smells in the purse, becomes Paras’ protector. Frida, on her own since the death of her beloved owner, a street busker, knows plenty about living in the rough, and about avoiding capture as a stray. Their conversation is equal parts charming and hilarious. The savvy pooch is amazed by the horse’s naivety: Paras knows nothing about the power of money, or even what she’s chasing when she races. “She was so big and dumb,” Frida thinks. “Well, ‘innocent’ was a better word. Obviously, she had been taken care of her entire life and had no idea how the world worked.”

Paras has second (and third) thoughts about her unplanned escape, which was spurred by curiosity rather than a yearning for freedom. On a cold wet day, it occurs to her that “there’s much to be said for a stall.” Raoul, the lecturing and sometimes hectoring philosophical raven whose nest is nearby Paras’ hideout in the Champs, comments, “You have enjoyed a very circumscribed life.”

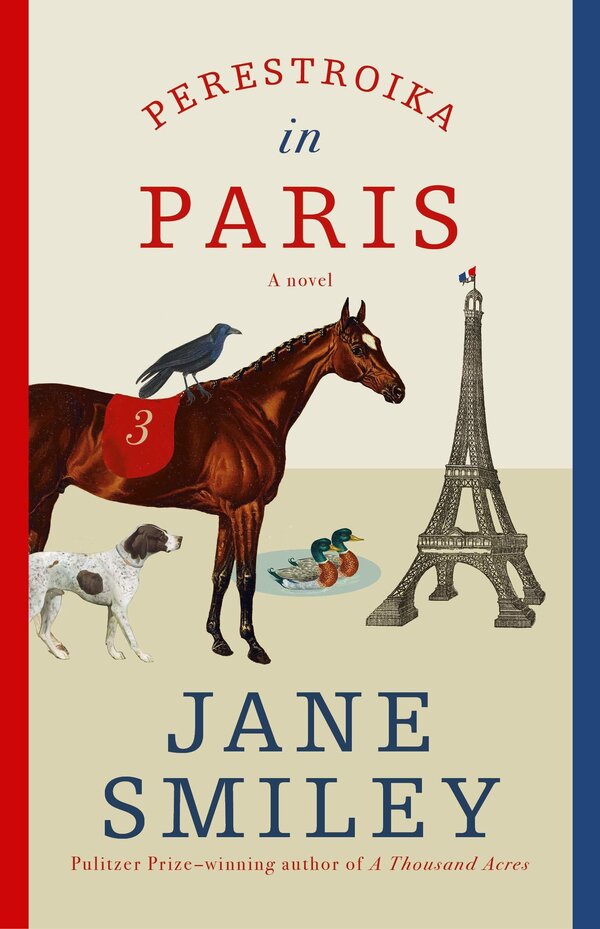
Anthropomorphized animals have of course been a staple of literature since Aesop and Jean La Fontaine. Smiley’s whimsical fable brings to mind David Sedaris’ ribald [*Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130143871) (2010), in which he skewered human foibles like selfishness, bigotry, and loneliness. But *Perestroika* is far more PG than R-rated, and might appeal to young readers as well as adults. There are echoes of a lonely Cinderella consoled by friendly mice, and of the pets’ brave homeward trek in *The Incredible Journey.* Another happy association is Mo Willems’ *The Story of Diva and Flea,* a lovely illustrated chapter book about an unexpected friendship between a curious streetwise French cat — a flaneur named Flea — and a small, sheltered dog. Like *Perestroika,* Willems’ story extols both the advantages of domesticity and the freedom to explore.

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Smiley nimbly channels her various critters’ world views as they discuss pithy subjects like ownership and freedom. Raven Raoul declaims, “Ask yourself, do not Aves live free and clear of such things as possessions? What is a nest but a temporary assemblage of bits and pieces ... Most Aves live to see the world, not to claim it.”

The same bird delivers a rambling disquisition on the meaning of Paras’ formal name: “something about either always making plans or letting things turn out as they would and making the best of that,” is the horse’s takeaway. It occurs to her, “If that wasn’t horseracing ... then what was?”

There are no villains in this novel, but Smiley infuses her tale with pathos aplenty in the person of a smart, stalwart 8-year-old boy bravely living alone in a shuttered grand manse with his only surviving relative, his loving but increasingly infirm, blind and deaf 97-year-old great-grandmother. Aside from the threat of authorities intervening to break up these unconventional menageries — by sending the boy to school, his great-grandmother to a nursing home, the dog to a pound, and the horse to the slaughterhouse — the novel evokes a benign, gentle world. Although set in 2008, this is a cozy, fairy tale take on the City of Light.

[](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/563305/perestroika-in-paris-by-jane-smiley/)Even so, “Life is always a chancy business.” So quoth the raven, giving voice to a recurrent theme that runs through much of Smiley’s work: Lives are a series of improvisations and a mixture of good luck and bad. “You’re telling a mallard this?” Smiley’s duck retorts. Clearly, it’s a lesson worth repeating, and one that, like this book, is an especially welcome reminder of the bright spots even in dark times.