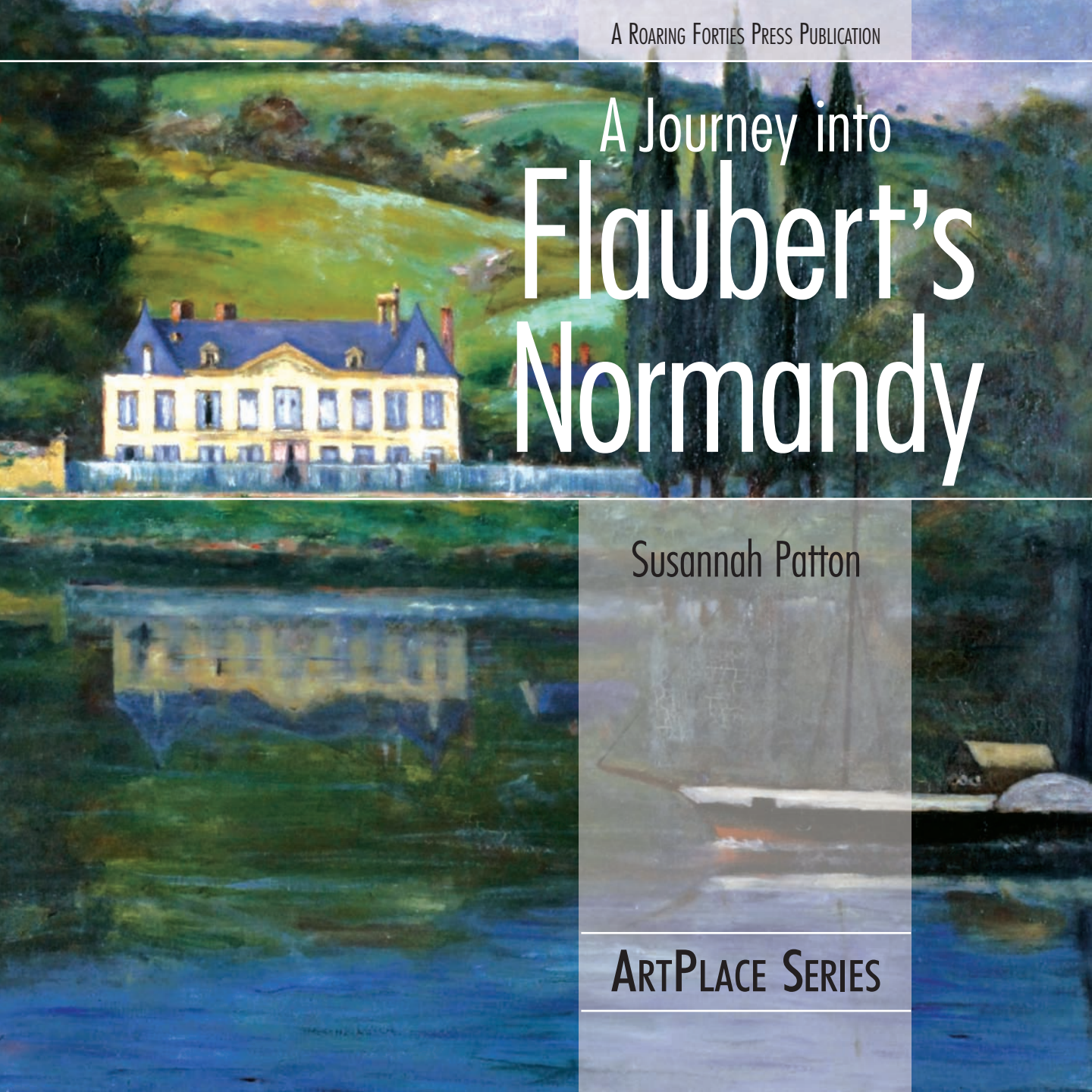


A ROARING FORTIES PRESS PUBLICATION

# A Journey into Flaubert's Normandy

Susannah Patton

ARTPLACE SERIES



Chapter 1

# Gustave Flaubert

## Normandy's Novelist



Flaubert refused for many years to have his picture taken or his portrait painted, but he yielded as he approached middle age.

*Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.*

— Gustave Flaubert

**O**n September 19, 1851, Gustave Flaubert started what many consider to be his masterpiece: *Madame Bovary*. Ensclosed in his family home on the banks of the Seine, just outside of the city of Rouen in the French region of Normandy, he worked on the manuscript for the next four and a half years, laboring in isolation to write and rewrite what would become one of the first modern novels.

Flaubert had just returned from a two-year voyage to the Middle East and southern Europe with a close friend, Maxime Du Camp—the longest and farthest he ever ventured from his native Normandy—and he was initially unsure what he would write next. But even after this exotic journey, which he hoped would influence his work, he found the subject for his novel in the small-town Normandy that he knew intimately.

While he had been away, the local community had been scandalized by the tale of a doctor's wife, Delphine Delamare, who—so the story goes—poisoned herself at the age of twenty-seven after boredom with small-town life and her husband's mediocrity drove her to adultery and extravagant spending that led to debt. Her husband, who had been blind to her behavior, soon died as well, leaving behind their young daughter in the small Normandy town of Ry. Louis Bouilhet, a close friend and literary confidant, urged Flaubert to turn this drama into a novel.

Flaubert later declared that *Madame Bovary* was pure fabrication. Its setting, however—rural Normandy,

Dawn near Pont-l'Évêque and the Geffosses farm, in the north of Normandy. Flaubert's family owned the farm, which he often visited as a child.

The west façade of the Cathédrale Notre-Dame, which dominates the center of Rouen. Much of the cathedral was built in the Norman gothic style in the thirteenth century.



revealed a love-hate relationship with the traditional and sometimes stifling mores of his slice of provincial northern France.

Growing up in Rouen, the onetime capital of Normandy, the writer developed a scorn for all that was “bourgeois,” a term that for him referred less to social class and more to a close-minded, bigoted view of the world. For him, Rouen represented bourgeois society in its purest form. “Oh how I’d rather live in Spain, Italy, or even Provence,” he wrote to a boyhood friend, Ernest Chevalier, upon returning to Rouen from a trip to the south of France in 1840.

Throughout his life, however, Flaubert was faithful to Normandy. He was born and died there, and apart from occasional trips to the exotic Orient and jaunts to Paris, he rarely left the verdant region. While he criticized the repressive bourgeois attitudes, he also took inspiration from the beauty of this region’s pastoral rolling hills, apple orchards, and seascapes.

Flaubert’s Normandy, which cuts a swath from Rouen westward and northward through the Calvados region into countryside known as the Pays d’Auge, and northward to the Pays de Caux and the Côte Fleurie (Flower Coast), is filled with well-known sites such as Rouen’s famous cathedral and the fabled Trouville beach. But it is also home to out-of-the-way villages, tightly knit farming communities, and hidden valleys. It is a region known for apple *cidre*, Calvados brandy, and aromatic Normandy cheeses, which small farmers still labor to produce. Indeed, two weeks before his death, Flaubert told his niece Caroline, “Sometimes I think I’m liquefying like an old Camembert.”

In addition to cheese, Normandy is known for its dampness, but travelers in this sometimes dreary climate are rewarded with the brilliant green of the

hills and explosions of spring wildflowers. Storms move quickly across the English Channel, bringing heavy downpours that alternate with bright sunshine in the space of an afternoon. Flaubert recognized that the wet climate had an effect on the psyche, as he worked on his books in his family’s damp house on the banks of the Seine. “If my book is any good it will tickle many a feminine wound,” he wrote just after *Madame Bovary* was published. “One or two will smile when they recognize themselves. I will have known your sufferings, poor obscure souls, damp from your stifled sorrow, like your provincial backyards, where the moss grows on the walls.”

## The “Novelist’s Novelist”

Flaubert was not a prolific writer, publishing only four novels, three short stories, and one play in his career.



Small farms dot the countryside near Ry.

Although he achieved some renown during his lifetime, he was recognized as great and influential only after his death in 1880. Since then, Normandy has claimed him as its most famous literary figure. Visitors to the area can track down his various homes, some of which are now museums, and trace his path through the small towns, farms, and coastline.

Flaubert’s influence, however, has spread far beyond his native province and his country. Henry James called Flaubert “the novelist’s novelist,” and writers from Marcel Proust to Mario Vargas Llosa have acknowledged their indebtedness to his literary style. These writers took inspiration from Flaubert’s continual search for *le mot juste* (the precise word) and his detailed observation of everyday life.

Unlike his predecessors, Flaubert declined to judge his characters and sought to remove the author from the narrative, leaving the reader to make up his or her own mind about the morality of his stories. In portraying scenes of daily life in small Norman towns and beyond, he sought to tell the truth, even if the harsh, realistic scenes were disturbing.

Although he is credited with laying the groundwork for the modern novel, Flaubert’s work also reflects his love of history and of the classics. Shakespeare and Cervantes were his literary heroes, and as a young man he devoured the works of Romantic writers, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Lord Byron, and Victor Hugo.



**Elisa Schlesinger, Gustave's first love and lifelong acquaintance, with her daughter, Marie.**

beachside resort town an important landmark throughout his life.

Elisa Schlesinger was born Elisa Foucault on September 23, 1810, in Vernon, a Norman town thirty-five miles upstream along the Seine from Rouen. She had been married at the age of nineteen to a junior military officer, but later separated from him before he left for duty in Africa. She soon met Maurice Schlesinger and had a child, although it is not clear whether they were legally married during the summer of 1836. Flaubert, unaware of these details, was taken with the seductive older woman, even though he realized that a romantic relationship with her was pure fantasy. He described her beauty in his autobiographical novella:

*She was tall, dark, with magnificent black hair that fell in tresses on her shoulders; her nose was Greek, her eyes burning, her eyebrows high and admirably arched, her skin was ardent and seemed coated with gold; she was slender and delicate, and there were blue veins climbing her brown and crimson neck.*

Even after the family beach holidays ceased, Flaubert remained nostalgic about Trouville, which he equated with youth and his first passion. He returned to the beach resort years later in 1853, and wrote to his lover, Louise Colet, "I cannot take a step without running upon some youthful memory. Each wave as it breaks

The Trouville meeting and Flaubert's fierce but unrequited love would have an influence that carried on well after the summer vacation. Elisa would be the model for several of his fictional characters, starting with Maria in *Memoirs of a Madman*, and ultimately also for the older Madame Arnoux in his coming-of-age novel *Sentimental Education*. The memory of his first meeting with Elisa, with whom he kept in touch until her death in a German mental hospital, made the

## Flaubert's Affairs

Even though he idealized his early love, Elisa Schlesinger, for much of his life, Flaubert had an active love life that he described in detail in letters to friends. His sexual initiation started soon after his Trouville passion for Elisa. With coaxing from his older friend Alfred Le Poittevin, Flaubert began to visit Rouen prostitutes. (Brothels proliferated in France during the nineteenth century, in part because large numbers of rural women migrated to cities to find low-wage work in factories and were easily lured into prostitution. What's more, the decade following the July Revolution of 1830 saw a relaxation of the censorious mores that had prevailed under the Bourbon rulers, and young men were more open about visiting brothels.)

Just as they shunned the bourgeois convention of marriage, Flaubert and his male friends considered their interest in prostitutes a rebellion against middle-class society. "I love prostitution for itself, independently of what it offers," Flaubert wrote to Louise Colet in



June 1853. "In the very notion of prostitution there is such a complex convergence of lust and bitterness, such a frenzy of muscle and sound of gold. . . . Yes, he who has never woken up in a nameless bed, who has never seen sleeping on his pillow a face he will never see again, is missing a great deal."

Fascination with prostitutes also had its downside. Like many of his friends, Flaubert suffered from the symptoms of (and treatment for) syphilis for much of his life. In his *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, he defines the illness as a common malady: "Syphilis: Everybody has it, more or less." The standard treatment at the time was mercury, which often produced uncomfortable side effects, including excessive salivation, intestinal problems, rashes, and discoloration of the teeth.

Despite his periodic health problems, Flaubert carried on numerous affairs. As a young man he was tall, blond, and described as an Adonis. (He avoided having his portrait painted at all costs, however, so there are no images of him from the era to verify this description.) Even as he lost his hair and put on weight, he remained attractive to women. He remained firm in his resolve never to marry, however, as he was sure marriage would stifle his creativity.

Friends continued to remind him, though, that the solitary life came with costs. Writing to Flaubert in 1872, George Sand suggested that he marry to alleviate his loneliness and gloomy mood. "Living for oneself is a bad thing," Sand wrote. By that time, Flaubert replied, he felt himself too poor and too old to make such a radical change. "The feminine existence has never fitted in with mine," he wrote.

**Degas' Party at the Brothel (1878-79).**

A Journey into  
**Flaubert's  
Normandy**



Steeped in history and beguilingly beautiful, but also stiflingly close-minded, nineteenth-century Normandy both inspired and appalled the French novelist Gustave Flaubert. This fascinating, richly illustrated volume explores the writer's love-hate relationship with the region that featured so prominently in his controversial work and colorful private life.

Susannah Patton takes the reader to Flaubert's hometown of Rouen, with its stunning cathedral; to the windswept beaches of Trouville, where Flaubert first fell in love; to Croisset and the riverside refuge he shared with his mother; and to the bucolic towns of Ry and Lyons-la-Forêt, where the real Madame Bovary lived and died.

Susannah Patton has worked as a journalist in France and the United States.

ISBN 0-9766706-8-2



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\$21.95 U.S. / \$27.95 Canada  
ISBN 09766706-8-2

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