“Awakening” by Anna Mayer

A book reflection on *The Awakening of Miss Prim*

by Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera

*The Awakening of Miss Prim* is one of those rare novels that you can find yourself getting lost in; voraciously reading through it, yet dying to savor each delightful chapter. The protagonist, Miss Prudencia Prim finds herself in search of beauty, of truth, and of love. Dissatisfied with the hustle and bustle of city life, she decides to answer the newspaper advertisement for the post of librarian to a gentleman in a remote village.

The novel takes place in San Ireneo, a rural village in the French countryside unscathed by modernity. The villagers of San Ireneo strive to keep intact a culture that fosters the beauty found in the simple pleasures of life: afternoon tea is savored with good friends and lively conversation; the value of a good book is never underestimated and a classical education is highly prized. So, when the independent Miss Prim arrives in this quaint little town, she finds herself simultaneously enchanted and shocked by their way of life. Although the quiet life was what she thought she was seeking, when faced with it, Miss Prim is also faced with her own insecurities. There is a certain charm in the simplicity of life in San Ireneo. And yet, Miss Prim often finds herself at odds with her employer, known only as the Man in the Wing Chair, and the other villagers. After a time though, the generous natures of the Man and Wing Chair and several other residents permeate the walls of Miss Prim’s insecurities and she begins to learn the value of true friendship.

Miss Prim is a perfectionist; strong, independent, poised – even her name gives evidence of her character – but she is not “whole.” In her search for beauty and meaning she discovers that nothing can satiate that longing for her life to mean something. All
the culture that she valued abstractly was actually a reflection of the ultimate reality that she initially failed to see. A beautiful piece of artwork, the dynamic score of a symphony, a profound novel all point to something greater. There is beauty in them, undoubtedly. But as an old monk in the novel tells Miss Prim, “Don’t be surprised if, in the end, you find beauty to be not Something but Someone.”

And this is the reality that we all face – in each one of us there is a yearning for our lives to mean something. As author Isak Dineson once said, “through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart...give me leave to do my utmost!” And certainly, this cry is answered by what one of the characters in the novel aptly refers to with her child-like simplicity as the “only real fairytale”, the story of Redemption.

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Reflection Questions:

1. Throughout the novel, Miss Prim's employer is only ever referred to as the "Man in the Wing Chair", what do you think is the significance of not knowing his real name?

2. We hear three very different opinions on what makes a successful marriage - a marriage of "equals", and marriage of "unequals" and a marriage of "three, not two, with God as their center." What are your thoughts on each of these? What truly makes a successful marriage?

3. The Man in the Wing Chair's mother presents to Miss Prim a succinct view of education that is embodied in San Ireneo. "Because, in actual fact, they don't need anyone to teach the children anything. Because it's they who educate their children themselves, who teach them to recite poems by Ariosto before they can read; explain Euclidian geometry using the *Elements* as a textbook; play fragments of a Palestrina motet for them to guess which one it is...{the teacher} is to safeguard all that work, to preserve and protect it." (pg. 93). What are your thoughts on the argument?

4. Lulu's parting advice with Miss Prim upsets her greatly: "You say you're looking for beauty, but this isn't the way to achieve it, my dear friend. You won't find it while you look to yourself, as if everything revolved around you. Don't you see? It's exactly the other way around, precisely the other way around...unless you allow the beauty you seek to hurt you, to break you and knock you down, you'll never find it." (pg. 231). What do you think Lulu meant by that? Why was it so unsettling to Miss Prim?

5. How do you think Miss Prim changes throughout the novel? Is there one thing in particular that is the impetus for these changes?