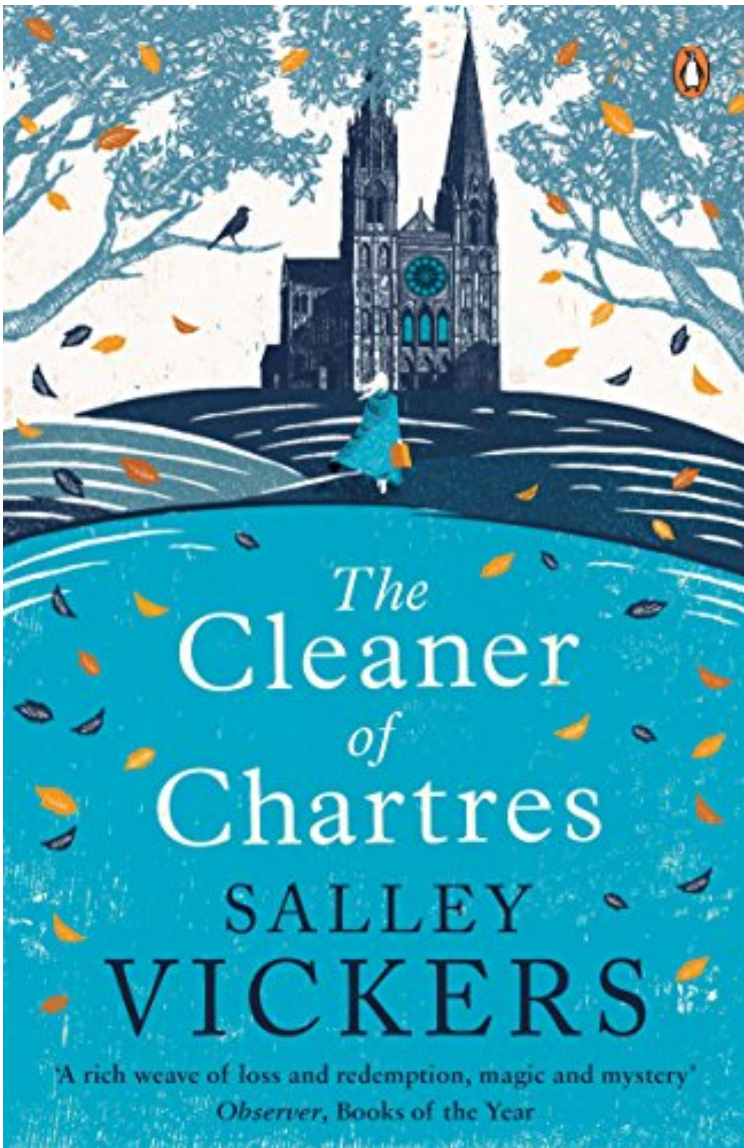


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# The Cleaner of Chartres



*Par Salley Vickers*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'A lovely book . . . wise at heart and filled with colourful characters' Joanne Harris, author of *Chocolat*A beautifully beguiling new novel from Salley Vickers, author of the bestselling *Miss Garnet's Angel* and winner of the 2007 IMPAC Dublin award. There is something special about the ancient cathedral in Chartres, with its mismatched spires and strange labyrinth. And there is something special too about Agns Morel, the mysterious woman who is to be found cleaning it each morning. No one quite knows where she came from - not the diffident Abb Paul, who discovered her one morning twenty years ago, sleeping in the north porch; nor lonely Professor Jones, who pays her to tidy his chaotic house; nor Philippe Nevers, whose baby nephew she cares for. And yet everyone she encounters would surely agree that she has

touched their lives in subtly transformative ways. But with a chance meeting in the cathedral one day, the spectre of Agns' past returns, provoking malicious speculation from the local gossips. As the rumours grow uglier daily, Agns is forced to confront her history and the mystery her origins finally unfolds. The Cleaner of Chartres is a compelling story of darkness and light; of traumatic loss and second chances. Told with a beguiling charm and wit, infused throughout with painful emotional truths, it speaks of the transformative power of love and mercy.

'Salley Vickers is a novelist whose imaginative journey always promises magic and mystery. The Cleaner of Chartres shows her on top form in a rich weave of loss and redemption spiked with Ms Vickers' irrepressible wit' Robert McCrum, Observer

'With its subtle combination of explorations of faith and love, The Cleaner of Chartres is something of a return to the terrain of Vickers's first novel, Miss Garnet's Angel. Certainly, it's another gem' Independent

'Salley Vickers sees with a clear eye and writes with a light hand and she knows how the world works. She's a presence worth cherishing' Philip Pullman

'Reveals itself as a surprising exploration of the mysteries of imagination and faith' Joanna Trollope, Book of the Year, Daily Telegraph

'Rich, complex and haunting' Sunday Times

'Subtle and utterly joyous...a contemporary moral and psychological drama every bit as absorbing as Miss Garnet's Angel' Sunday Times

'A magical and at times sinister story about love, loss, secrets and forgiveness...with Chocolat-type charm' Scotland on Sunday

'The Cleaner of Chartres is a return to form' Sunday Express

'Combining grace with gravity and wisdom with wit, this latest novel by Salley Vickers simply radiates soul' Red

'If you're looking for a book to take you by surprise, Salley Vickers' latest is the perfect choice' Psychologies

Salley Vickers is the author of the word-of-mouth bestseller Miss Garnet's Angel and several other bestselling novels including Mr Golightly's Holiday, The Other Side of You and Dancing Backwards as well as a collection of short stories Aphrodite's Hat. She has worked as a cleaner, a dancer, a university teacher of literature and a psychoanalyst. She is currently a RLF fellow at Newnham College Cambridge and she divides her time between Cambridge and London.

Extrait 1 Chartres

The old town of Chartres, around which the modern town unaesthetically sprawls, is built on a natural elevation that rises from a wide, wheat-growing plain in the region of Beauce in central France. Visitors and pilgrims, who since earliest times have made their ways to the ancient site, can see the cathedral of Notre-Dame from many miles off, the twin spires, like lofty beacons, encouraging them onwards. Five successive cathedrals have stood on this site; all were burned to rubble save the present cathedral, which grew, phoenix-like, from the embers of the last devastating fire. On June 10th, 1194, flames sped through Chartres, destroying many of the domestic dwellings, crowded cheek by jowl in the narrow medieval streets, and all of the former cathedral save the Western Front with its twin towers and the much more ancient crypt. As the fire took hold, the forest of roof timbers crashed burning to the ground amid frenzied clouds of burning cinders; the walls split, tumbled and collapsed while lead from the roof poured down in a molten stream, as if enacting a scene of eternal damnation in a Last Judgement. The reaction among the citizens of Chartres was one of uniform horror. According to contemporary reports, they lamented the loss of their beloved cathedral even more than the loss of their own homes. Perhaps this was in part because, as today, their livelihoods depended on the many parties of pilgrims visiting the town to pay reverence to its most venerated relic, the birthing gown of the Virgin Mary, a gift to the cathedral by the grandson of Charlemagne, Charles the Bald. Three days after the fire was finally quenched, some priests emerged from the crypt with the marvellous cloth still intact. As the fire took hold, they had apparently snatched it from its hallowed place and retreated for safety into the most ancient part of the cathedral, the lower crypt, the province of Our Lady Under the Earth, incarcerating themselves behind a metal door which had held firm while the fire raged destruction outside. The missing men had been presumed dead. The holy relic presumed lost. When it was seen to have been restored, and its rescuers returned to safety, it was agreed that this was a miracle, a sign from Our Lady that the town should build in her honour an edifice even finer than before. The new cathedral was completed within twenty-six years, thanks to the devotion and hard labour of the townspeople, who pulled together to create a building worthy of the Mother of God with whom their town had so fortunately found favour. The bishop and his canons agreed to donate the greater portion of their salaries to aid the cost of the building works. Sovereigns of the Western world were approached for funds, and many dug deep into their coffers to ensure that their names were attached to the noble enterprise, which would gain for them fitting rewards in the life to come. People from neighbouring dioceses brought cartloads of grain to feed the citizens of Chartres, who were giving their labours for nothing more than the love of God. The whole astonishing structure was conceived, designed and accomplished by a series of master builders, men of clear enterprise and shining genius. But of them and their companies the scores of talented sculptors, stonecutters, masons, carpenters, roofers, stained-

glass artists and manual labourers who implemented their plans nothing is known. Nor was anything known of Agns Morel when she arrived in Chartres nearly eight hundred years after the building of the present cathedral commenced. Few, if asked, could have recalled when she first appeared. She must have seemed vaguely always to have been about. A tall, dark, slender woman a touch of the tar brush there, Madame Beck, who had more than a passing sympathy for the Front National, chose to comment with eyes that the local artist, Robert Clment, likened to washed topaz, though, as the same Madame Beck remarked to her friend Madame Picot, being an artist he was given to these fanciful notions. As far back as Philippe Nevers could remember Agns had been around. She had been an occasional babysitter for himself and his sister,

Brigitte. Brigitte had once crept up with a pair of scissors behind the sofa, where their babysitter sat watching TV, and hacked an ugly chunk out of her long black hair. Philippe had pinched Brigittes arm for this and they had got into a fight, in which Brigittes new nightgown was ripped by the scissors, and when their mother came home Brigitte had cried and shown her both the nightgown and the pinch marks.

Although their mother had punished Philippe, the boy had not explained why he had set about his sister. Agns was odd, with eyes, he might have suggested, had he overheard Robert Clment, more like those of the panther he had seen at the zoo, pacing up and down its cage in a manner the crowd found amusing. Philippe liked Agns in the way he had liked the panther and had hoped that it might escape and get a bit of its own back on the laughing crowd. With the sensitivity which, even at age six, was a hallmark of his character, he knew their mother would be quick to blame Agns for the episode with the scissors. So he bore the unfair punishment in silence. Professor Jones, had he been aware of it, would have been able to date Agns arrival quite precisely, since it was the same summer that his second wife left him. The weather had been uncharacteristically inclement, even for central France, which does not enjoy the dependable climate of the South. Professor Jones had taken a sabbatical year in order to embark on a long-cherished research project of documenting each of the supposedly four thousand, five hundred sculptures which embellish the nine great portals of Notre-Dame in Chartres. The work was to be definitive in the field and he had dared to hope that it would make his name. But the parochialism of the small town, the depressing steady drizzle and her husbands preoccupation with insensate figures of the long past had lowered Marion Jones spirits, the very spirits which her husband had hoped to raise by bringing her to the famed medieval town. This mismatch in taste and comprehension was only one of a long list of incompatibilities between Marion Jones and her husband. That summer, a renowned Japanese cellist visited from Paris to play Bachs Suites for unaccompanied cello at one of the cathedrals prestigious summer concerts. Marion, bored to tears by the life she was leading, wandered into the cathedral while the cellist was practising, and it was noted by Madame Beck that he was not unaccompanied when, a while later, he left the cathedral to return to his hotel. Not long after the concert, Marion took to making shopping trips to Paris, which is barely an hours train ride from Chartres. The trips became longer, and more frequent; one day she left with a larger than usual bag and never returned. Professor Jones waited mournfully, long after his sabbatical year had come to an end.

Finally, giving in to despair, he resigned his university position and made a permanent home in Chartres, but not before a small parcel containing a wedding ring had arrived with a note telling him where he could stick his bloody sculptures. The current dean, the Abb Paul, might have remembered Agns arrival since he too, at that far date, had only lately come from his seminary to serve as a curate at the cathedral. He had found Agns under a mans coat, asleep in a convenient niche in the North Porch. Although the dean at the time, Monsignor Andr, a stern administrator, had let it be known that tramps should not misconstrue the nature of Christian charity by taking the cathedral for a doss house, the young priest found himself turning a blind eye to the intruder. Pauls father was a Highland Scot who could trace his family line directly back to Lord George Murray, the general who had led the ill-fated Jacobite rebellion against the English in the rising of 1745. The generals descendant had met his future wife when she had gone with a friend to visit the festival at Edinburgh, where he had held a research fellowship at the university. The marriage was a successful one: but Charles Murray had succumbed, after a short fight, to his French wifes pressure to return to her native land in search of the light she bitterly missed in the long Scottish winters. The strain of rebellion in him succumbed to his greater fondness for his wife and concern for her happiness. He gave up his study of Ovids metaphors and became a respected Classics master at a school in Toulon. But a measure of his fathers dissident heritage salted the young Pauls character. The sleeper in the cathedral porch was a young woman; she looked peaceful. For all Dean Andrs strictures the young Paul could not bear to awaken her to what he guessed was a grim reality. Quite how Agns had managed since those days was a subject of nobodys speculation. She had made herself useful in the small ways that help to oil the wheels of daily life. She was

an accomplished ironer, a reliable babysitter and was known to sit naked for Robert Clment (the last activity making her less desirable to some in the first two capacities). She made a reputation as a conscientious cleaner, and Professor Jones, after a more than usually bad attack of moth had made lace of his slender wardrobe, discovered that she could also darn. Agns no longer had need of the shelter of the cathedral when the subject of her cleaning it came up. The weather, which twenty years ago had witnessed her arrival, was repeating itself. Streams of sodden visitors in coach parties, families and couples, as well as those travelling by choice or necessity alone, not to mention the troupes of those seeking enlightenment, historical or spiritual were playing havoc with the cathedral floor. The once pale paving stones, quarried from nearby Berchres-les-Pierres, after hundreds of years of footfalls had darkened and pitted, which made them, as the current cleaner Bernadette often remarked, hell to keep clean. Agns was weeding the flower-beds before the Royal Portal when the Abb Paul encountered her. A summer of steady rain had brought on both the weeds and Thomas the gardeners rheumatism. His wife had put her foot down and insisted he go to a spa for a cure. And, as was often the case when a temporary replacement was needed, it was Agns who had come to mind. Enclosed in wicker borders, which gave the impression of large square florists panniers, the flowers, mainly white, had been chosen to enhance the summer evenings. Had Robert Clment been there, he might have observed that they also enhanced Agns dark skin as she bent to root out the weeds. But the Abb Paul was a man of the cloth and no doubt it was simply friendly courtesy that made him stop to greet her. Good day, Agns. I must say we are most grateful for your help. Agns straightened a back blessedly free of Thomass rheumatism. Although she was unaware that the Abb had let her sleep undisturbed that first night she had come to Chartres, she nevertheless felt safe with him. I like them best at night. The Abb Paul agreed. The scent is stronger then. Yes, Father. The weather has brought on the weeds, though? Yes, Father. It was one of Agns virtues that she didnt say much. It made the Abb Paul more inclined to be chatty himself though as a rule he was not a talkative man. Im afraid its making a filthy mess of the cathedral floor. All those wet muddy feet. And now, God help us, we seem to have lost our cleaner as well as our gardener. Its too much for Bernadettes knees, she says. Agns stood, a trowel in one hand, an earthy-rooted dandelion, which she planned to add to her evening salad, dangling from the other. The green leaves against her long red skirt and her impassive brown oval face gave an impression, the Abb Paul fleetingly thought, of a figure from a parable portrayed in one of the cathedrals stained-glass windows. A labourer in a vineyard, perhaps. It seemed Agns was pondering, for as Paul was about to utter further pleasantries and move on, she spoke. I will clean it if you like. Oh, but I didnt mean . . . Now he was concerned that she might imagine that he was approaching her as a skivvy rather than for the pleasure of conversation. I would like to, Father, Agns said. The Abb Paul paused. It would certainly help. The bishop was exercised about the state of the cathedral, which meant that he was being harassed too. And Agns was known to be reliable. I would like to, she repeated, with emphasis. Well, if you felt you could . . . I do, Agns said. So it was agreed she should start that same week.