

European literature | *Book Review*

Against storytelling

The scrupulous objectivity of the 2022 Nobel laureate, Annie Ernaux

By **Lauren Elkin**



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Annie Ernaux, 2008 | © Ulf Andersen/Getty Images

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hen I first spotted Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple* (1991) in a Paris bookshop, I was entranced - that title! - but sceptical.

How could something this short - barely 100 pages - be a book? And then there was the subject matter: the author's obsession with this *guy*. "From September of last year", Ernaux writes early on, "I did nothing else but wait for a man: for him to call me and come round to my place." I too had had infatuations, but I'd never before considered them worthy of Literature.

I took the book home, read it in one night, then read it again. Then I put it on the desk and just stared at it for a while. I didn't know what to do with it: I wanted to write a book like it, but I told myself I couldn't, or would never be allowed to. Ernaux was obviously a famous and important writer to be able to publish books like this.

Time went on, I read more of her work, catching up with her backlist and keeping pace with new books as they came out: *Les Années* (*The Years*) blew my mind on a long flight in 2008; I ran out to buy Gallimard's omnibus volume *Écrire la vie* the day it was published in 2011; I read *Mémoire de fille* (*A Girl's Story*) over a plate of pasta, gloriously alone in Rome in 2016.

I have been struck, again and again, by Ernaux's bracing disregard for literary convention. She came from a working-class family in Normandy; her parents owned a shop, part grocery store and part café. She studied her way out of her milieu, eventually passing the competitive *agrégation* exam and embarking on a career as a literature professor. Then she began publishing books, starting with *Les Armoires vides* (1974; *Cleaned Out*) and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977; *Do What They Say or Else*) - but she soon gave up on the form. She needed a word other than "novel" to describe what she was doing. In November 1983 in her writer's journal, published as *L'Atelier noir* (2011), she describes it as follows:

THE EVERYDAY (though this takes different forms) - the objective gaze (I'm thinking of Chekhov), that which is most direct, far removed from mockery or lyricism, or dramatization. A sort of behaviorism, which I call objective writing (my translation).

The different forms of the everyday, it could be said, more or less summarizes what Ernaux's work is about. She approaches momentous occasions such as her illegal abortion, her mother's Alzheimer's and her parents' deaths by breaking them down into smaller, non-dramatic units of time; she also makes room in her work for the banal everyday, diaries of time spent commuting and in supermarkets, as well as the accounts of her love affairs found in *Passion simple*, but also in *Se Perdre* (2001; *Getting Lost*), *Mémoire de fille* or her most recent book, *Le Jeune Homme* (2022). They are not novels, but they are also not memoirs. They are exercises in style, and in memory.

In *La Place* (1983; *A Man's Place*), which concerns her father's death, Ernaux writes about striving for a "flat writing" (*écriture plate*), similar to the kind she used to write letters home to her parents; one that wouldn't betray them, but would speak directly to them. She was determined not to write something "moving" or "gripping", but to make an ethnographic study of her father: his gestures, his way of speaking, his choices, "all the external evidence of his existence, an existence which I too shared" (Tanya Leslie's translation). This was the only ethical way, she says in that book, to write about a life "governed by necessity". She would go so far as to call storytelling "trashy" (*tarte*) not long after *La Place* came out: "Structure alone makes what I'm doing interesting. The best passages in *La place* are those which cut, slice, the fragment is very important".

Passion simple is composed of this kind of fragmented, flat writing, and this approach helps Ernaux to bring off what, in the hands of a lesser writer, might indeed seem "trashy". It begins with a preamble about watching porn through static on a cable TV channel to which she hasn't subscribed, a section that

concludes with the assertion that writing should “tend towards the impressions provoked by watching the sexual act, this anguish and stupefaction, an absence of moral judgement” (my translation). This opening salvo prepares us for a book that will be exacting, frank and even, at times, crude. The rest of the narrative works up the links between “love, writing, sex”, as Ernaux dissects the experience of her compulsive infatuation with a married Russian man. It is an ethnography of obsession, bringing the tools of objective analysis to bear on the most intimate of experiences.

Throughout the book, Ernaux meditates subtly on the ways in which love, writing and sex are held and shaped by time, but it’s only many years after I first picked it up that I could hear in the title, *Passion simple*, the near-homonym, *passé simple*, the verb tense conventionally used for fiction. I think of it as the “once upon a time” tense: when you hear it in French it transports you to a self-consciously literary, and novelistic, plane.

In *Passion simple* Ernaux writes into and against the French literary tradition, as a form of both class resistance and gender resistance, in order to inscribe her experience as a woman in the heart of French literature. “Pas de *passé simple*”, she writes in her journal in 1989. Instead, she wrote the book in the imperfect, the “*I used to*” tense, the “*I would*” tense, of wistfulness and longing. To refuse the *passé simple* is to refuse a kind of facile storytelling with which Ernaux, in her writing diaries, expresses impatience again and again. In the book itself, she observes that even when she feels the urge to tell someone else what’s been going on, it feels “futile”, the story “removed from the reality of my own passion”. Her narrative doesn’t psychologize or plead; it assesses and reports. It is as impossible to have an objective gaze on oneself as on one’s father or mother, but part of the interest of her work is its attempt to be as scrupulously honest as possible. An “objective”, in its nominal form, can also refer to a lens, as in that of a camera: as we read *Passion simple*, we are watching Ernaux watch herself live out her passion through wavy, blurry lines, working to distil what she sees into the clearest possible language.

In the days since she won the Nobel prize in literature, when people have asked me where to start with Ernaux, I have said *Les Années*, which is objectively her masterpiece in its technical skill and attention to the layered quality of memory, in the way it condenses collective memory in an attempt to, as she writes in the book's self-deconstructive conclusion, "capture the lived dimension of History". The Nobel committee praised "the courage and clinical acuity with which [Ernaux] uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory", and while I know the prize is awarded for all of a writer's work, not for one book in particular, it is most certainly *Les Années* that confirmed her importance. But I'd like to think there was someone on the committee who also, especially, wanted to commend her for *Passion simple*, a book in which she describes how she used to avoid bathing after sex "until the next day, to keep his sperm inside me". In all of Nobel prize history, I doubt that a laureate's oeuvre has included such a sentence. If it has, I'm quite sure it will have been from the point of view of the sperm's owner, not its recipient.

Annie Ernaux's Nobel prize is not only a great validation of her work, but an encouragement for those of us who work in her wake, those of us embracing the body and its priorities, making space for desire in the text, refusing conventional forms of storytelling, taking the everyday as a unit of resistance and allowing writing to become a sphere for the radical renunciation of moral judgement.

Lauren Elkin is the author, most recently, of No. 91/92: Notes on a Parisian commute, 2021, and Flâneuse: Women walk the city, 2016. Her next book, Art Monsters, will be published next year

Nobel Prize

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