



## Writers on readers

A summary of discussions held during the 2018 Passa Porta Seminar  
Brussels, 19-22 March

by Jack Mc Martin

As their subjects browse the stacks in the bookstore below, four writers settle into the well-appointed, second-storey rooms of Passa Porta, Brussels' International House of Literature. They are here for the third biannual Passa Porta Seminar. For the next four days, In Koli Jean Bofane (COD/BEL), Florence Noiville (FRA), Kees 't Hart (NED) and Christophe Van Gerrewey (BEL) will share their thoughts on the seminar's theme: *the reader*. Do they have a particular reader in mind when they write? How do they see the writer-reader relationship? What type of readers are they themselves?

### Day 1

#### **The professional reader | Reader encounters | First readers**

After words of welcome by organiser Piet Joostens and introductions by the four authors, moderator Matthijs de Ridder explains the seminar format: each writer has prepared an original text in advance – a 'keynote' essay responding to the seminar's theme – to share with the group and stimulate discussion. The most provocative lines of thought generated over the course of the seminar will be shared with the public at a closing evening and will serve as inspiration for the 2019 Passa Porta Festival, where 'the reader' will once again take centre stage.

#### **The professional reader**

In anticipation of the first keynote tomorrow, Matthijs opens the floor with an observation: save Jean, everyone at the table is a literary critic as well as a novelist. He is curious to hear how writer-critics conceive of their role as 'professional readers'.

Florence, who is the foreign fiction editor for *Le Monde*, is the first to respond: "I review exclusively foreign literature. I feel I am lucky because it is already filtered – often, it's the upper crust of what's

coming out abroad. Focusing on foreign literature allows me to avoid the ‘in-crowd’ mentality that is so pervasive in the French literary scene. If someone approaches me with a French book they want reviewed, I can simply say, ‘sorry, I don’t do that’. I like to be on the inside *and* outside of that world.”

“I try to use my voice as a critic to do one of two things,” says Christophe. “Either I write the reviews that don’t exist yet but should – so I review important but unnoticed books – or I write candid reviews of highly visible books that have been overhyped. In that sense, I try to put things back in balance as a reaction to the almost hysterical impulse to gather around certain writers and books.”

Kees, a long-time book reviewer for *De Groene Amsterdammer*, explains his approach to literary criticism. “My job as a critic is not just to evaluate a book’s literary merits but also to *situate* it for the reader. I try to put the novel I’m reviewing in a certain tradition according to what the author is trying to do. Does he try to change the tradition, or does he just perpetuate it? I rarely write the words ‘bad novel’. I write, ‘I don’t agree with this novel’. Or, ‘he’s turning down a road that leads nowhere’. Critiquing is also a way to keep sharp. Sometimes when I review certain books, I think ‘I will never write this kind of novel,’ but I can still think it’s great.”

Matthijs, who is himself a regular reviewer for various newspapers and websites, wonders out loud whether his editorial skin is thick enough to speak truth to bad books, especially because he regularly encounters their authors professionally in his role as the chairman of the Flemish Authors’ Association. “My naiveté fled a long time ago; I’ve had some issues with people not liking what I write about them. Which is uncomfortable and hard at times because if you’re a real critic it doesn’t bother you.”

“I’m the only person here who isn’t a critic,” injects Jean. “It’s not the confrontation that puts me off. It’s that I’d rather write about what I *like*. To be a critic you have to like writing about what you don’t like.”

“I’m lucky because I’m a staff writer and I coordinate a team of colleagues with different language specialities, so I review only the books I *really* like,” says Florence. The trouble is the genre’s formal constraints. Reviews are short and often foreground one-glance value markers like star ratings and catchy quotes. “The challenge is to convey a book’s atmosphere and idiosyncrasies without falling back on clichés,” says Florence. “I like to dig deep. Last week I was in Copenhagen to interview Jens Christian Grøndahl (*a former Passa Porta Seminar participant, ed.*). I read his new novel, loved it, asked to write a profile of him and a review of his book. It’s difficult to show the real colour of a book in 900 words, much less convey what it was that touched me as a reader. But it is exactly why this job remains interesting to me. No single quote can do that.”

Negative reviews are even trickier, says Matthijs. “I am actually milder in the newspaper than I would be somewhere else. That has to do with the impact of what you say and not having the luxury of argumentation – it suddenly becomes vindication rather than a literary exercise.”

“That’s one of the reasons I stopped doing reviews for newspapers,” responds Christophe. “The impact. It is so aggressive. I was told to assign the books I reviewed a number of stars. I realised only later that I had given nothing but four-star reviews precisely because anything less would be such a blow to the book. I find it frightening to participate in that.”

“At the same time,” says Matthijs, “if you’re not taking part in the debate you are vacating a spot in it. It is important to have people like you, and the others at this table, writing in newspapers because that is where the vast majority of readers turn for information on books.”

### **Reader encounters**

Matthijs steers the conversation towards authors’ most memorable encounters with readers. He starts with a personal anecdote about an exchange he had with a young reader. “When I wrote my last book, I hadn’t expected young readers would like it. It turns out the best reaction I got was from an 11-year-old boy. He emailed, said he likes to write plays and musicals and that I had inspired him to write one on Charlie Chaplin. I encouraged him. A week later he sends me a cycle of poems. Two weeks later, there’s the play. It was a creative summary of my book, and it was wonderful to get.”

Florence’s encounters with readers tend to feel like therapy sessions, as she puts it ironically. “I write about the human condition seen through mental disorders, so I only hear from a certain type of people. They always say, ‘I liked your book,’ and then they go on to spill their disorders on me. After a few stories like this, I tend to get fed up. I’d be a terrible therapist.”

Kees found his most ardent reader at the body shop. “I’m a bit prejudiced about my readers. I always assume they read Nietzsche and Derrida, but that’s totally wrong. I had an accident with my car, got a dent, and the mechanic at the shop said, ‘you are Kees ‘t Hart, right? I’ve read all your books’. I was floored. He was ‘just’ a mechanic but it turns out he was also a very careful, thoughtful reader. I was thrilled. But that’s how I realised I was prejudiced about my own readers.”

“I’ve had the exact opposite,” says Matthijs. “I give my name, and people say, ‘Oh I know that name’. I say, ‘Well, I published a book.’ And then blank stares. ‘No, that’s not it.’ Laughs all around.

### **First readers**

Matthijs moves on. “Do you have readers who read your work before it goes to the publisher?”

For Florence and Christophe, the answer is ‘no’. For the others, first readers are carefully selected for their uncompromising honesty: a particularly harsh critic, a partner, a stranger walking home from the bars.

Jean: “For my first book, yes, I wanted a very critical reader so I gave it to Jean Pierre Jacquemin, the notorious Brussels critic and author, to get an idea of the level. Most of my friends can’t be trusted. They’re not critical enough.”

“I have a very severe reader and that’s my wife,” says Kees. “I work in circles. The first draft, nobody reads. Second draft. Third draft, I give to my wife. And I’m all agitated and pacing up and down. She’s able to read like an editor. She marks in red, can you imagine? And she will write things like ‘Here we go again’ and ‘Oh no...’. From the start of my career it has been like that. She’s the only one I trust with these kind of things. And when I ask her if she liked the book, she’s like ‘oh...well, yes’. It’s not her kind of thing to react in any exuberant way.”

“I share my works in progress with my girlfriend,” says Matthijs. “I like to be there when she is reading, looking over her shoulder, so to speak. I like to hear every snicker, every sigh. It must be very irritating for her.”

“Before I started writing, I was working as a bouncer,” says Jean. “To be sure that my writing kept the reader enraptured, I waited until six in the morning at the club where I worked. I took whoever came out – these were people who never read – and gave them a text I was working on. Of course, when you’re the bouncer, people read when you tell them to (*laughs*). But one man got hooked. And I did that a few more times with other passers-by and it worked. That’s when I knew I could be a writer. When you can get the reader stuck, you know you have written something. Identification, that’s the most important. If I can get a white, western reader thinking ‘you’re like me’, it’s my victory. I want people to see how I live. I want people to say, ‘that could be me’. I want the reader to have the feeling, ‘that is my brother’. Books are the only thing that can do that.”

Books and perhaps also a good conversation over food and drink. The first session comes to a close and the writers head to dinner together.

## **Day 2: Reading pathologies | The target reader | The writer-performer | Greedy readers | Writers learning to read**

The second day of the seminar opens with Florence reading her keynote, “Five or six things I know about him (my reader, that stranger)” for the group.

She writes: “I don’t claim to provide answers, rather to set out and broaden the field of enquiry. I feel like I’m extending my hand to my readers and looking with them. But what reader, what hand? Because what that means is that there is no standard profile for the reader of my books. I think that those who enjoy them can be male or female, young or old, but they must ask themselves the same questions I do about the ‘self’. About who we really are. About how we become who we are.”

Florence finds answers (and more questions) in the science of the brain: “When I write, I start out from an enigma, something that I don’t understand, that bothers me. Why was my mother bipolar? How did that mould her children’s personality? Why can this rich old lady, who lacks nothing, not stop herself from shoplifting? What do we mean when we say, ‘I just can’t help myself?’”

**Florence Noiville** (b. 1961) is a French journalist and writer who in her books tries to combine neuroscience and literature. After a brief career in the financial sector she turned to literature in 1994. She became a journalist and literary critic for *Le Monde*. Her first novel, *La donation*, was published by Stock (2007) and translated as *The Gift* (2012). In 2013 she collected personal portraits of her favourite British authors in *So British! 23 visages d’écrivains d’Outre-Manche* (Gallimard). *Literary Miniatures* (Seagull Books, 2013) is another collection of author portraits, featuring a broader range of authors. Two years after her residency at Passa Porta in 2013, she published the novel *L’illusion délirante d’être aimé* (Stock), translated as *A Cage in Search of a Bird* (2016).

For Florence, novels are a medium through which to explore links between neurobiology and the human psyche. She writes: “Ever since antiquity, literature has been interested in human emotions: cunning in *Odysseus*, love in *Madame Bovary*, jealousy in *Othello*, madness in *Crime and Punishment*, etc. Neurology too is interested in all this. It attempts to explain the cerebral mechanisms underlying them. Scientists are still a long way away from having explained everything, but they know a lot about what is happening in us when we are love-struck or when we become prey to a destructive obsession, an overwhelming psychosis, an insurmountable addiction, etc.”

Florence is particularly interested in exploring the extraordinary ripple effects mental disorders have on the afflicted and those around them: “What continued to haunt me [...] were the terrible consequences of having had a bipolar mother on all our lives (hers and those of the people around her) by comparison with the problem itself, which is tiny, trivial. A minor dysfunction at the level of the neurotransmitters causing a shortage of serotonin. In short, the equivalent of a broken leg, up there in the brain, but it ruined our lives ... It is that first wound that made me write. Perhaps my readers too are secretly wounded individuals who are seeking to turn that buried wound into a force? In any case, that is often the impression I get when I meet some of them.”

### Reading pathologies

Kees is the first to respond: “You say your novel has a universality. And I wonder if that is even possible when you are dealing with characters that are mad and therefore so idiosyncratic. You relate the actions of man to neurology, but there must be other reasons.”

“Our brain chemistry is not the only thing guiding our actions, of course, but for centuries we’ve been ignoring it. Or it hasn’t been considered noble and worthy of literary exploration. I don’t agree with that,” responds Florence.

“In my paper, I look very much like a Freudian. I work with Oedipal situations and so forth. But I think in your work you disagree. Where does psychoanalysis fit for you?” asks Kees.

Florence: “I love psychoanalysis. I integrate it in other frameworks. But I want my novels to be a novel first and foremost. I do work with psychoanalysis. You find a lot of Winnicott in my writing, for instance. And still I insist on the fact that I’m not trying to give a science lesson – I could never provide that. My approach is to try to include more knowledges and mix them all together instead of being strictly philosophical. Let’s take another example. Erotomania. So I’m ill. The principle of that is, all of a sudden I decide that you’re madly in love with me. You’re going to look at me and every smile you give I take as a sign of developing love, and if you say no, I take it as denial of your love for me. It’s a good starting point for a novel but it inevitably descends into madness and paranoia – it’s a real psychosis. So what I’m going to do there is, I’m not only trying to grasp that with a literary point of view. I’m also trying to understand from deep down, why, and where in the brain it rests.”

“But the fact remains that this woman you are describing is crazy,” says Kees. “I try never to work with a crazy person. What’s the point, from a tragic point of view? Crazy people are driven by something they can’t control. I can work with neuroses, but not with madness.”

“That is where we differ,” says Florence. “I try to work only with crazy people. I think we all have the beginnings of psychological disorders in us. What I wanted to stress was that there is logic in madness, albeit another system of logic. You’re swept into another dimension, which is just as logical to the afflicted person but not to us. The interesting thing is trying to understand what that logic is and how it affects others.”

Christophe intervenes: “To bring it back to the reader, it seems to me the question is: can a character be too extreme to bring about identification in the reader? Is there a moment in your books when a character becomes too extreme?”

“Actually I get a lot of people who identify with the disorders I describe in my books. That’s one. Secondly: when their illnesses are not too extreme, these characters lead perfectly normal lives. They act normally on the surface, have a life. But they struggle to maintain a normal surface when really they are hurting. It’s this inner struggle I find interesting,” responds Florence.

“So you try to normalize the abnormal,” says Christophe. “That reminds me of Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*, *Saturday* – in the end you have the feeling that the main character is really sick and the reader shouldn’t *try* to identify.”

“Maybe ‘identify’ is the wrong word,” says Florence. “Understand. Understand the little voice in his head. The reader should identify with the *victim* and try to understand the afflicted. And this plays out on a whole spectrum; I get teachers who say they’ve been followed by students, or surgeons who have patients who follow them after a surgery. It turns out that there are a lot of people who have

experienced these types of situations. I wonder if a person exists who hasn't been obsessed about someone or something, or hasn't known someone who has been affected by obsession. Or who has lifted something in a shop. Or is a compulsive smoker, or whatever. The real subject here is not 'why did she do that?' but rather 'why can't she help it, even when she knows she shouldn't?'"

"And the most surprising thing, coming back to Kees' opening comment on the universal aspect in my books, is that the deeper I delve into my own emotions, the more I dissect basic feelings – fear, abandonment, jealousy, various urges, etc. – and the more what I believed to be personal and specific shows itself to be universal. Don't forget that love, like any kind of disease, is the same everywhere and creates the same kind of consequences."

### **The target reader**

Elsewhere in her keynote, Florence touches on how the 'target reader' so sought after by her publishers is so impossible for her to pin down, despite her training in business: "I sucked at marketing and I hated it. Not only on moral grounds (forcing people to consume products which they generally don't need) but also because, even if I had wanted to play that game, I simply *couldn't* do it. I was incapable of identifying or of defining the 'expectations' of a 'target'. It supposes a certain flair that I don't have. Feeling the zeitgeist. Dividing a population up into segments. Understanding from the inside what the general public 'wants'. Would I need to write if I knew how to do that?"

She continues: "The other day, my publisher said to me: 'You write about the brain, that's what's hot right now. Check out the magazine covers.' If that's right, I'm in tune with the zeitgeist without knowing it, like Monsieur Jourdain: it's involuntary. Unless the writer feels things that are in the zeitgeist without their knowing it?"

Florence's point prompts Kees to pose a question to the table: "Do you think about your reader when you're writing?"

Matthijs: "Isn't this reader Judaeo-Christian, white, middle class, female, etc.?"

"Yeah, exactly. And isn't that why Florence hated the marketing?" asks Kees.

"I think a lot of us have a completely romantic view of authorship: *I'm autonomous. I'm in the centre of the world and I'm writing universal things*. But that is a crazy point of view today," says Florence.

"I think there are many 'world literature' writers who are very aware of who they're writing to, even as they perpetuate this romantic image of the writer. And this is very much impacted and cultivated by publishers. Have any of you been told by your publishers that there is some demographic that should be served by your writing but isn't? I myself have received tips from my publisher on how to reach more readers. It usually takes the form of 'don't do this and don't do that'," says Matthijs.

“I recognise this,” responds Kees. “I wrote my first four novels to mixed reviews, but my publishers believed in me. And on the fifth novel my publisher said, ‘The fifth is like the fourth’. And it was a blow. He said, ‘You should add more story to your novel’. And I did, and my publisher was right: I got more readers. My authorship took another road, but I wasn’t insulted by that.”

“I agree to a certain degree,” says Christophe. “I see a general change from a romantic view of authorship – the writers’ writer – to one that takes economic considerations into account. This plays out in form as well. For instance, Lize Spit’s episodic, Netflix-like structure in *The Melting*. That kind of book encourages binge reading and has been very successful.”

“In the end,” he continues, “regardless of what kind of author you are and what audience you are trying to reach, it comes down to having a healthy number of readers. Thinking about ‘target readers’ is a necessary thing in this sense. It is important to have the feeling of a positive evolution, even if your readership is small. That is what keeps me going.”

### **The writer-performer**

In yet another part of her keynote, Florence questions how much information readers are entitled to demand about the writers they read. In her essay, she describes an encounter with an American journalist lamenting authors like Elena Ferrante and Clara Magnani, who write under a pseudonym. (“As a reader, I’d like to know more about these women. This business of anonymity, it’s not nice for the reader!”) A bit later in the conversation, the journalist has moved to the other end of the spectrum. (“Imposing on the reader the details of their sex life or their incest, as Catherine Millet and Christine Angot have done, is a bit much, don’t you think?’ Strangely, she added that same sentence: ‘It’s not nice for the reader!’”) These passages turn the discussion to our writers’ own public personas – how much of themselves and their creative process do they give away, and how genuine are they in doing so? Are the writers at the table willing to make things ‘nice’ for their readers?

Christophe: “For me, the question is, ‘what are readers allowed to want, and should you give it to them?’ For example, should we respond to the question, ‘did all these things in your novel really happen?’”

“I agree with Christophe. I think in theory a book should be read for itself; it’s enough as it is. But it seems that readers want to know more, to the extent that the extra-literary stuff seems to be more important than the actual work itself. This goes along with the idea – widespread in our times – that reality is more important than fiction. This is the exact opposite of what authors used to be praised for, which was creating worlds out of nothing.”

“So is the reader allowed to ask anything and expect an honest answer?” asks Matthijs. “Or are we in fact performers when we’re out promoting our books and speaking with readers?”

“That depends on your definition of performing,” says Christophe. “We are always more or less following certain codes. Why don’t we play the game completely? Sometimes when I see authors performing, there’s a kind of shame or embarrassment to it, a kind of protection of what reading is about. A kind of uncertainty as part of the reading process.”

“Yes, and some writers are better actors than others,” responds Kees. “This is what Hugo Claus did. He was famous for it. He created all kinds of versions of himself for the media and he constantly contradicted himself.”

“Of course we are putting on an act for our readers,” says Kees. “But I think good readers see through it. My mechanic does.”

And with that, the morning session comes to a close.

### **Greedy readers**

The seminar resumes in the afternoon with Kees’ keynote, ‘Looking at paper’. He prefaces his contribution with a reading of the title poem from his 1998 collection, *Kinderen die leren lezen*, which he has self-translated into English for the group as ‘Children Learning to Read’. The poem, he says, reflects the idea, expanded upon in his essay, that we all come into the world through language and that the experience of learning to read, which we do not ask for but which is forced upon us as children, is simultaneously our (rude) introduction to the world, and our first encounter with ‘the sleep of the coming night’.

**Kees ’t Hart** (b. 1944) is a novelist, poet, ‘addicted reader-patient’ and critic for *De Groene Amsterdammer*. Since his debut in 1988 with the story collection *Vitrines* (Querido), he has published novels, essays and poetry collections such as *De Revue* (1999, Multatuli Prize and nominated for the Libris Literature Prize), *Kinderen die leren lezen* (poems, 1998, ‘Children Learning to Read’), *Teatro Olimpico* (2014), *De ziekte van de bewondering* (2002, ‘The Admiration Disorder’), *De kunst van het schrijven* (2007, ‘The Art of Writing’) and *Het gelukkige schrijven* (2015, ‘Happy Writing’). His latest novel *Wederzijds* (‘Mutual’) made the longlist of the 2018 Libris Literature Prize.

His essay asks two central questions of the writers at the table: When did you become a reader, and why must you read?

For Kees, it’s a Freudian thing. His experience of learning to read – and subsequently becoming a ‘greedy reader’ – is deeply intertwined with his social and sexual awakening. He writes: “Learning to read, like the learning of sexual acts and rituals, belongs to the most important initiation rituals of the young: you have to learn it and once you know how it works, you fully belong. [...] I once described this greedy reading of mine as a disease I contracted and never got rid of. Because you never get over reading and you can’t unlearn it. Just like sex. Once you know how to do it, you’d rather not be doing anything else.”

The disease is both physical and psychological – a neurosis that has the power to possess one’s mind completely. Kees turns to a description of the young Dutch poet Albert Verweij (1865-1937) reading:

“What is particularly striking is the staggering image that Verweij constructs of himself as a greedy little reader. Whoever has read descriptions of the seriously mentally disturbed in institutions knows at once what I mean. Verweij uses images that are borrowed from those descriptions. He talks about stiffness, about a striking desire to want to sleep with a dead object, a book, about ‘grogginess’, a ‘vague’ stare and even about ‘mechanization’. There’s nothing more I need to add, Verweij clearly sees the start of his reading career in a pathological context.”

In typical Freudian form, reading is also a site for Oedipal confrontation, writes Kees: “In the Verweij household, reading was something the father did. He later composed the following lines about his parents:

*Mijn vader was graag dichter,  
Graag priesteres mijn moeder,  
Hij in het leven lichter  
Zij in 't geloof verwoeder.*

(My father liked being a poet,  
My mother a priestess,  
He – lighter in life,  
She – fiercer in her belief.)

Did Verweij become a poet because he wanted to outdo his father in this regard? Is that why he read endlessly? And later wrote?”

These questions, of course, Kees is implicitly asking of himself. In the final lines of his essay, he confronts them outright, and his conclusion is surprising: “Why did I even become a greedy reader? According to the Freudian essayist Adam Phillips, it has to do with the possibility of being able to withdraw completely from the world: no one bothers you when you’re reading. I myself sometimes think that reading offers me the chance to be able to have better, more ornate dreams. I don’t read to become a better or more empathic person, that isn’t going to work, but to be able to produce better dreams. Nicer illusions.”

And so we arrive at one of the more contentious statements of the seminar: *reading does not make you a better person*. There is much to discuss on that point, but first the writers share their experiences as young people learning to read.

### **Writers learning to read**

“In the beginning,” says Christophe, “reading for me was associated not with books but with things on the street. It was a way to discover the world, to ask my parents what things were, a way to learn.”

“One of my earliest memories of reading was seeing the logo of the Delhaize supermarket. For the

longest time, I thought ‘Delhaize’ was another word for ‘lion’ because there was big lion on its logo,” says Piet.

“Speaking of lions,” says Florence, “one of the first books I fell in love with was *Le Lion* by Joseph Kessel. It was part of Gallimard’s *Collection 1000 Soleils*, a series of wonderful books from around the world, many of which are now classics. It was my mother who gave me these books, and in a way they were her surrogates in her absence. I was a solitary little girl on a family estate in the Loire Valley that was quite big, with a river and fields and forests and horses. And here in these books was a universe that was very much centred on nature and wildlife. They were telling exactly the emotion I felt as a little girl alone in the fields. So it became almost an addiction. I became convinced that these books were written for no one but me. And when I later realised it was not the case, I was extremely disappointed.”

“For me, books weren’t a solitary thing, but a way to create power,” says Kees. “At some point, I realised that people were looking up to me for reading. I think it grew when I was in high school, but it started younger. I created power by reading, just like sexuality. The two overlapped in fact. I dressed up like a poet. I used my status to get girls.”

“I don’t recognise the power – or the girls – but I do recognise some kind of an awakening and I like that you liken it to a sexual awakening,” says Matthijs. “There was not much credit given to people who read in my milieu growing up. At a certain time, I even had to hide the fact that I read from my contemporaries.”

“Hide, maybe,” interjects Christophe, “but I wasn’t the only one who read in my family and it wasn’t something I was discriminated against for. I think there must be more to reading than just creating status or getting girls. Maybe it has to do with a different power, internal to the reading experience – the creating of a kind of intelligence. I think I started reading out of fear. Fear of the things around me in the world. Reading helps you understand. It diminishes the fear a bit. It’s a personal thing for me. We all find our own explanations for reading. So that is its own kind of personal power, too.”

And that brings us to the question of the hour: Does reading make you a better person? Christophe is not ready to concede Kees’ point and engages: “Reading might not make you a better person but it does make you more intelligent.”

To that, Kees responds, “I read a lot but I am far from intelligent”.

“There must be something reading does to control this fear you express in your essay. In that sense you must have developed in some way through your reading,” Christophe says. “You are more intelligent for it, even if you don’t recognise it as such.”

Florence interjects: “My question would be, ‘Can reading make us worse off?’”

“Yes,” responds Matthijs. “You can read the wrong things. Take Madame Bovary. Her expectations from literature were too high and they couldn’t be met in reality so she killed herself.”

Kees: “I’m aware that reading creates illusions about the world. I don’t think it’s possible to change the world, but it’s possible to create *illusions* and to make better dreams. But you won’t find my books on the list that changed the world. Some do. Take Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Mine don’t, and nor do I.”

“Still, reading makes you smarter because it gives you an awareness that things are more complex than they seem,” says Christophe. “Reading prevents voting for Trump.”

“I’m not so sure about that...” says Matthijs.

“That’s my problem,” responds Kees. “Why do I read so much? I don’t agree that I’ve become smarter or better or more empathic through reading.”

“Maybe that doubt is the best you got out of reading,” says Matthijs.

As the second day of discussion ends, that’s as settled as the matter will get.

### Day 3: Readers’ readers? | The ghost reader

The final full day of discussions opens with Christophe reading his essay, ‘Readers’ readers?’, a meditation on what writers can reasonably expect of their readers.

He opens his essay with a question: “Is there such a thing as a *writers’ reader*? A reader who is the writers’ favourite because he or she reads (and reports on his/her reading) not only with an adventurousness founded on some knowledge of the writing process but also with the sort of exemplarity and versatility that can ideally be expected from a reader? Just as *writers’ writers* – the term says so already – are writers who are admired by other writers, so too a *writers’ reader* can be called a *readers’ reader* – a reader who can serve as an example for each reader, simply because he or she is so good at it.”

**Christophe Van Gerrewey** (b. 1982) addresses a wealth of themes in his essays and novels. His surprising debut *Op de hoogte* (2012) was awarded the Debut Prize in 2013 and was followed in that same year by his second novel, *Trein met vertraging* (‘Train with Delay’). The daily rat race is the main theme of *Werk Werk Werk* (Polis, 2017, ‘Work Work Work’), in which he also evokes his own job as a lecturer in architecture theory in Switzerland. In his collection *Over alles en voor iedereen. 50 essays* (De Bezige Bij Antwerpen, ‘About everything and for everybody’) he writes ‘as subjectively as possible’ about literature, art and culture in a broad sense.

Christophe’s example of a quintessential reader’s reader (alongside Roland Barthes and Italo Calvino) is George Sand, who, in one of the more famous epistolary back-and-forths between two writers,

faulted Gustave Flaubert for his hard-to-follow prose. She took issue particularly with his *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869), “a difficult, frustratingly unresolved and virtually plotless novel, in which the characters bear history’s tumultuous consequences without in any way influencing that history.” The absence of any authorial voice, argued Sand, made it too difficult for anyone but the most thoughtful readers to make something of the story.

For his part, Flaubert was deeply disappointed by the lack of response to *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Christophe sets the scene: “Standing among the ruins of Paris in the summer of 1871, after the violent murder of the Communards and of the egalitarian hope they represented, Flaubert went so far as to claim that if the French had understood his novel, such death and destruction could have been avoided. Not only did he feel misunderstood, he also avenged himself retroactively by suggesting that his readers, precisely because of their faulty reading, had brought such misery upon themselves!”

It is a remarkable assertion and one which betrays not only a spiteful resentment for his absent readers but also a tremendous faith in their collective potential, since blaming them for a failed revolution suggests it could have been won in the first place (if only they would have done their reading!). According to Sand, however – and here is the tough love of the writers’ reader – Flaubert had simply overestimated his readers and so had no grounds to be upset about their silence.

Negotiating a balance between opaque and transparent modes, continues Christophe, means rejecting any clear opposition between modernism and postmodernism: “It is often said that the spiteful challenging of the reader – precisely by ‘postponing’ identifiability and understanding and by ‘withholding’ clear reading signposts – is a postmodern strategy that belongs to the last decades of the twentieth century. [...] Flaubert and the reception of *L'Éducation sentimentale* disprove this. The continued offering of reading as a confusing adventure – together with the assumption that the reader is not an *imbécile* who will take to his heels at the drop of a hat – is a *modern* concern *par excellence*, while always wanting to avoid misunderstanding or obscurity can be called *post-modern* in the literal sense of the word – beyond the modern, and beyond the hope, the illusion or neuroses of Flaubert.”

What we are left with, it seems, is a mashup of modern and postmodern modes, where the ‘initial condition’ is ‘incomprehensibility’ and where meaning derives first and foremost from one’s own uses for and appreciations of a text at hand. Christophe paraphrasing Jürgen Habermas: “This is an aesthetic experience – of painting, of music, of literature – that is and remains essentially modern, one that emancipates readers because they themselves have to find their own way in a text that is strange and *different*, and out of which, precisely for that reason, bits can be appropriated and applied to their own life situation.”

The value of a readers’ reader, then, is that she offers candid clarity to writers’ writers and average readers alike – in the first place by confronting writers for their obtuseness and in the second by making it comprehensible to readers nonetheless. Christophe sees great value in this role and draws a surprising conclusion from it: “It is more difficult and even more absurd than ever to keep working

like Flaubert, to keep writing as if all readers were *readers' readers*, while over and over again it has been proven that they are almost obliged unfortunately to be and to remain *imbéciles*. Perhaps [...] there is only one conclusion to draw from all these considerations. Just as Roland Barthes dreamed of becoming a novelist, perhaps there is also a dream reserved for novelists: no longer to write novels, but only to *read* novels – and to write about that kind of reading. Rendering intelligible all those brilliant, existing, initially incomprehensible novels from the history of literature – to become a *writers' reader*, or, who knows, ultimately a *readers' reader*.”

The room is quiet as the writers ponder Christophe's proposition.

Kees is the first to break the silence. “Often writers' writers – and I think most of us here consider ourselves that – reflect a lot on what it means to be a writer. I wonder if that is a good route to go? What kind of a debate am I taking part in when I do that? I have stepped away from the idea that a writer has to flaunt his intelligence. Now, I take the role of a naïve person, an *imbécile* – for every new book that is my starting point.”

“You have to ask yourself if that label of the writers' writer is sufficient,” says Christophe. “You always make concessions based on your implied public. What do readers have to gain from your discussion of a writer's book from the perspective of another writer? What can normal readers, who aren't writers, do with that? That is a type of pulling apart of different types of readerships that can be dangerous when we speak of the 'writer's writer' label.”

Matthijs interjects: “Aren't you describing the role of a writer-critic? Most of us here have embraced that role.”

Jean: “The readers' reader. I like those guys. They are cold blooded, they are good. We need them. I need critics. We writers lose ourselves in our fantasies. We need readers to bring us back.”

“I keep thinking of Charlie Chaplin,” says Kees. “Where one guy prepares the joke and the other performs it. The joke is always that the reader doesn't understand the guy who makes the joke, or he misinterprets the serious clown and he goes along with it. And then you get this comical situation. And that's good. So do we really want the kind of reader who reads as if he wrote the novel? No. I want somebody who's laughing about things that I didn't intend to be funny.”

“But your text has intentions,” responds Christophe. “When I read your book, *Teatro Olimpico*, I more or less saw what the text expected of me. That's not because I have the feeling I understand you but because I more or less have an idea of how the book should be read.”

“You are a very intelligent reader, a readers' reader,” says Kees. “Most people read that book as a story about a guy who fails – they take it as tragic, not funny. And there's nothing wrong with that. To me, there's no such thing as a bad reader.”

“So do we quit writing altogether, as you suggest at the end of your essay?” asks Matthijs. “Or do we just need to become better readers?”

“I think the line of thought that follows is that we have to create an audience first and then give them the books they need. But there is more preparatory work that needs to be done. The question is *how*,” responds Christophe.

Florence: “*A school for readers*, interesting. I wonder if we really can teach readers to be more open to innovation and experimentation. My intuition is that it’s not only a question of teaching, it’s also a market thing: when you drop a ‘different’ book, it’s drowned in the market. It’s simply not seen. In the best case, it will be on a bookshop table for two months and then it disappears.”

“In the postmodern context,” says Matthijs, “this non-understanding and disappearance was part of the thing. It was part of the comment of literature as fashion. Is that where we are now? Is the literature we regard highly just out of fashion?”

“Some of it is: we always make a problem out of this,” responds Christophe. “You could say that the fact that a book fails is exactly its success. We are still using Flaubert as a model of failure. Maybe we should give up on that fixation. Maybe we should be writing for other reasons – for posterity.”

“I’m afraid most writers are already doomed to,” says Florence.

### **The ghost reader**

On that polyphonic note, the discussion gives way to the final keynote of the seminar, Jean’s ‘The Ghost Reader’. In it, he describes the extraordinary significance books hold in his home of Congo and his elevation – spurred by the mystique of his father’s library and the trauma of war – to the ‘High Priesthood of reading’. (“When you become a High Priest of reading, your life no longer belongs to you. It is to the written word that you will devote yourself.”) He also introduces the group to his ‘ghost reader’, a creative presence by the name of Basile who guides his hand as he writes.

In a rich bass-baritone, Jean reads the opening lines of his essay: “No doubt that if I had not been born at the intersection of the Congo river and the equator, reading would never have taken on such a sacred character as I always perceived it to have. Because one must realize that in that country, and especially in the small towns around the equator where I lived, right after independence, books were rare, written materials were not very common.

The French-speaking Belgian writer **In Koli Jean Bofane** (b. 1954) was born in the Congo and lives in Belgium. He is the author of a children’s book about dictatorship *Pourquoi le lion n’est plus le roi des animaux* (1996) and the novel *Mathématiques congolaises*, winner of several literary awards. In 2015 his novel *Congo Inc. Le testament de Bismarck* (2014; translated as *Congo Inc.: Bismarck’s Testament*) won the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie. He visited Passa Porta on the occasion of this prize and for a debate around the perception of Belgian-French literature abroad.

Prior to independence, individuals who could read would wear a white shirt, a tie and often a hat. The white man would rank them as ‘evolved’: a status in its own right that one could only obtain if one could decipher a basic alphabet. So, perhaps it is not surprising that, from time to time, the old uncle, at the time of day when the sun reddened the sky, after a day’s hard work, with a beer before him, would put on his glasses and act like those fluent readers, even if he would stare for minutes on end at the newspaper he had picked up at work – three months ago, at least. Around him, no one ever committed the sacrilege of asking whether the uncle could in fact read or whether he was only decoding each character on the paper in an attempt to understand a word. That wasn’t important. What mattered was the act of posing a solemn gesture for all to see, of carrying out the performance that consists in embodying those who possess a mysterious wisdom.”

Jean goes on to describe his own first encounter with ‘the mysterious wisdom’, standing in his father’s library and choosing a book: “Remember also that I was born during the colonial era. The white man had taken over everything at the time, especially the shelves of the family library. Among those writers and thinkers, one of them had immediately attracted my attention. It was Émile Zola. The word ‘zola’ in Lingala means ‘love’ and since the title of the novel was *Nana* – a typically Congolese first name – I was convinced that a fellow countryman had disregarded the concepts of slavery and colonialism so as to pull himself up, by who knows what miracle, beyond the third shelf of the library – like some of those who had just granted me a brand-new independence. After a page and a half, I had to resign myself to accept the fact that, once again, a devil of a Frenchman, saddled with a fake name and having chosen a catchy title, had pulled a fast one on me: *Nana* had nothing to do with the Congo. The swindle was like a challenge and I swallowed the work without even catching my breath, enjoying *Nana*’s luscious curves, taking the place of one of her lovers when he kissed her hand, trembling when a lock of her red hair blew in the light breeze, on Rue de la Chaussée-d’Antin.”

Jean would face the swindle-turned-challenge with the help of his ‘ghost reader’, he writes: “He appeared unexpectedly, as soon as I wrote the first lines of my first novel. I was ready for anything but the presence of a shadow sitting in the chair to my right. A friend had let me stay in his castle in a forest in the province of Luxembourg. The wooden floors and the woodwork on the walls squeaked constantly and the family portraits stared at me in the dusk. I had thought that I was totally alone, and it was at this moment that he appeared. Motionless most of the time, he never spoke to me, forcing me to try and guess what he was thinking. By his somewhat awkward air, I sensed that he wasn’t seeking my sympathy, but I understood that he was indispensable, somehow, to the creation of my future oeuvre. It was with him that I discussed the problems that I encountered. He and I, we treated ourselves to intellectual jousts that lasted through the night. Sometimes, in order to try to throw him off, I didn’t write everything out, leaving him with the task of trying to figure out what I was thinking. He was brilliant, he remained silent, but during gatherings it always seemed to me that his thoughts came out of the mouths of the best readers and critics.”

“The ghost reader is also a cynical entity. A word could escape me for months, and during that time I sensed that he was mocking me. Finally, to increase my frustration in the face of my shortcomings, he

sneeringly whispered the word into my ear. These were, as it happens, the only sounds he uttered: sneers. [...] It was important not to show my weaknesses. I was suspicious of him and to be totally honest, I still can't love him as perhaps I should. In any case, I will never be able to get rid of him. [...] Literature had created me, and subconsciously I knew that literature could not create this kind of ghost. Even Shakespeare, by creating the ghost of Hamlet's father, would have thought twice about creating one like my ghost reader."

Even before Jean finishes his final sentence, Kees is starting his: "*I recognise this ghost!* – I have one too. It may sound very irrational, but it isn't. I work with just such a reader. Sometimes it takes the form of St. Francis of Assisi, sometimes of the White Goddess. They belong to the starting point of my writing – I write my early drafts with them."

Florence: "That's incredible, because up to ten minutes ago, I thought it was a nice metaphor, but now I understand that you both really have this physical feeling of someone next to you who isn't you. We are reaching the core of the creative process for you two."

"I find it endlessly fascinating," says Matthijs. "I'm trying to find the equivalence of this in myself. I don't write to answer or invoke an outside being. I would describe it as an inner urge. It has never manifested outside of me and it has never taken on another form or shape. It was always there. But I never thought of it as magical."

"For me, writing calms me down. I get the opposite of calm when I haven't done it for a few weeks. I like the feeling of having written at the end of the day. I don't know if that's magical. It has more to do with a neurotic way of keeping a lid on things," says Christophe.

"I hate the idea that I *have* to write," says Florence. "But it's always there on my head, maturing. I don't want to write, I don't even like it, but then it happens all of a sudden. In that sense, it's magical. And another thing: when I finish a novel there is a clear feeling of having rid myself of something, as if I was cured."

"Or exorcised," shoots Jean. "If only I could get rid of my ghost."

And with that, the discussion comes to a close. Spectres of the reader in all its forms hover in the room as the writers gather their things and prepare to depart.

Jack McMartin is a Dutch-to-English translator and a doctoral candidate at the University of Leuven, campus Brussels. His research focuses on how books by Flemish authors travel internationally.