



Passa Porta Seminar 2018 'The Reader'

Five or six things I know about him (my reader, that stranger)

Florence Noiville

It struck me recently. I was being interviewed by an American journalist. She was asking me about the 'case' of authors writing under a pseudonym. Elena Ferrante, for instance, but also that wonderful Belgian writer, Clara Magnani, who, in *Joie*, celebrates the beauty of love at a mature age.

'The "case"? What "case"?', I asked the interviewer. 'These novelists want to remain anonymous and they're perfectly entitled to do so. What's more, if it gives them more freedom in their thinking and writing, all the better. I don't see what the issue is.'

'But still', the interviewer insisted, 'as a reader, I'd like to know more about these women. This business of anonymity, it's not nice for the reader!'

Later, the conversation turned to autofiction and French authors. 'A lot of French authors, who are obsessed with themselves, indulge in navel-gazing in their novels', she remarked. '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!'

This exchange perplexed me. On the one hand, when the reader knew nothing about the author, he was frustrated, it was unbearable. But if the reader knew too much, if the author revealed his life too intimately, that wasn't alright either. From this I concluded that the reader – let's call him that, we'll find out later who he is – had specific expectations as regards the author. That it was necessary to respect a kind of balance in what he 'knew' about the author, neither too much nor too little.

But on the other hand, what also struck me is that if the reader demands to be informed about the author, what does the author, for his part, know about his reader(s)? Does he too need to know the person or people he is addressing? And besides, is he certain that he is addressing someone?

It strikes me that, while the question of the author's identity is often raised, that of the reader's identity is brought up a lot less frequently. It also strikes me that when we write, the reader is always there without ever being there. Always there because we write to be read. There is always someone there, somewhere between the lines ... But never there because, for me, that someone is impossible to identify or even to imagine. And when I meet readers in the flesh, I sometimes get surprises ...

Today, if I think about this question, these are the five or six things I think I know about my readers.

1. An elusive target or, in my business school, I sucked at marketing

I studied at HEC, a business school where I learned the basics of marketing: do your market research, identify the consumers' expectations (or create them if they don't exist), then make a product that meets those expectations and market it, i.e. make them know that it exists. More and more books today are launched in this way.

But when I was at HEC, 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?

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?

2. Neuroscience and literature: my two passions

What interests me in my books is the human brain. I try to cross neuroscience with literature. Why? Because ever since antiquity, literature has been interested in human emotions: cunning in Odysseus, love in Emma Bovary, jealousy in Iago, madness in Raskolnikov, etc. Neurology too is interested in emotions. 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.

Yet what has always struck me is that these two fields of knowledge are interested in the same object of research but don't talk to one another. That is why I try to get them to engage in dialogue in my novels. I first turned my interest towards bipolar disorder (*The Gift*), then towards love at first sight (*Attachment*) and erotomania (*A Cage in Search of a Bird*). Today I am working on a very specific addiction, kleptomania.

I try to approach humanity through its psychic disorders. The underlying questions are the following: who are we? What makes us act the way we act? Free will, resolve, the determination of my characters (who in general believe themselves to be quite rational) and of all of us in general: does this free will exist? Up to what point? The readers must also ask themselves these questions to appreciate my work.

3. Seeking to understand rather than to satisfy a need

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'?

But these are always things that *I* find strange or mysterious. I never start out from any alleged expectation of my readers. Having said that, it's obvious that if I can't explain these things to myself, then my readers perhaps can't either and that they ask themselves roughly the same questions. So I invite them to join me for a moment to try and shed some light on bipolarity or erotomania through a story. 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.

4. My reader, *c'est moi*

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. I think that this quest of mine comes from a traumatism in my youth. My mother was bipolar and stayed on several occasions in a psychiatric hospital. In the bourgeois family that I belong to, we never talked about these things. But a terrible prejudice weighed on those that were mentally ill, unpredictable, out of control, crazy perhaps, different in any case. What continued to haunt me later 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.

5. Hitchcock and Oliver Sacks

Given the presence of neuroscience in my work, one could believe that my novels are aimed in the first place at a public that is familiar with this field already, but not at all. I write for a lay audience. And that is where literature is an irreplaceable tool. It enables us to explain or approach science through images, metaphors. I do my research and I work with specialists to check that my research holds up scientifically, but I try to take a different approach, an approach underlined by a plot. For my novel about erotomania, I chose the form of a thriller. A critic said: 'It's as though Hitchcock had read Oliver Sacks.' I should be so lucky if that were the case, but that is exactly what I *would like* to be able to do.

6. Writing for oneself means writing about others

What is most surprising is my discovery that the deeper I delve into my own emotions, the more I dissect basic feelings – fear, a feeling of abandonment, jealousy, various urges, etc. – the more what I believed to be personal and specific becomes universal.

One day at a book festival in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I was presenting one of my novels, *Attachment*, which had been translated into Bengali. I told this Lolita-like story of a very young woman trying to dissect the attraction she feels despite herself for a much older man, her philosophy professor. A man who is very different from her and whom she should never reasonably have got close to. What happens when our body's chemistry decides for us?

At the end of the presentation, a woman from Dhaka, a Bangladeshi, came up to me and said: 'You thought you were telling your story in that novel, but it's my story you told, my very story. How did you manage to expose my own story in such detail?' I thought of Montaigne's saying that each individual contains the whole of humanity. So must she, since she concluded: 'At bottom, perhaps it's not that surprising ... We all cry for the same things, whether in Paris or in Dhaka ...'

© Florence Noiville, February 2018

English translation by Patrick Lennon

Text commissioned by Passa Porta, International House of Literature,
for the Passa Porta Seminar 2018 'The Reader'.