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Paul Fournel , David Bellos (Translator)

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Meet Robert Dubois. Cheek resting on a pile of manuscripts, he is the ageing and perhaps too comfortable publisher of Robert Dubois Books, alone one evening in his office. In walks a pretty intern with an ereader. For a man who thought he had seen it all, this is a revolution. Can text really live without paper? As Dubois gets to know his new gadget and carries on with his publisher's life, author lunches and bookshops visits, the reader tucked under his arm tells him of the new paperless world to which he might not belong. But don't be fooled, Dubois hasn't given up. Late at night, he secretly plots new forms of literature with a group of interns, with whom he shares his immoderate and timeless love of books and reading.

Dear Reader Details

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From Reader Review Dear Reader for online ebook

Carla says

I received a copy of this book from Net Gallery for an honest review.

Paul Fournel is a novelist, former publisher and French cultural attache in London. He writes this short, (thankfully) book about the coming of age of e-readers. Interestingly, the reviews I've read called it charming, brilliant, witty. I found it none of these. The book was disjointed, the characterization poor, if at all. Sometimes the loss to me is in translation. I'm truly unsure though if this is the case for this book. It seemed more suited to be read by the publishing industry, and appeared to have much "insider" humour.

Aharon says

Velveeta that thinks it's Roquefort.

M a r i e says

Je ne sais pas vraiment que dire sur ce livre. J'en avais beaucoup entendu parlé dans les médias, dans l'émission la grande librairie ect... et je dois avouer que je n'ai pas particulièrement aimé. J'ai eu du mal à suivre les évènements et les personnages de ce livre, il y avait certaines références que je ne comprenait pas je dois l'avouer. On se perd parfois dans les dialogues. Je pensais que l'écriture serait plus poétique. Donc dans l'ensemble j'ai été assez déçu. Après ce qui m'a intéressé c'était de suivre le travail de cet éditeur étant donné que c'est le secteur dans lequel j'aimerais me lancer même si le constat est assez pessimiste sur certains points. Également ce livre m'a encore plus fait réaliser le fait que l'éditeur ne peut pas lire ce qu'il veut. Qu'il doit lire beaucoup de manuscrits et est obligé d'en mettre d'autres de côtés. C'est d'ailleurs pour ça que le passage que j'ai préféré dans le livre est la fin. Ensuite ce qui m'a impressionné en lisant la note à la fin c'est qu'en fait ce livre est écrit sous la forme d'un poème. Et je comprend mieux maintenant pourquoi la présentation de l'histoire m'a paru assez spéciale.

Pop Bop says

Many Unexpected Pleasures

O.K., let's be honest here. A French publisher comes to grips with an e-reader. What an opportunity for whinging, griping, and precious, twee hand-ringing about the superiority of paper and old-school publishing. The prospect left me trembling with a reader's version of fight-or-flight.

The good news is that this book is more gracious, generous, good-humored, and self-aware than I had any right to expect. Sure, there are labored bits about topics like "how to fit the e-reader into your suit coat pocket", and so on. But even those bits aren't too cutesy. Mostly what we get is a disjointed, stream of consciousness, playful reflection on the publishing business that occasionally circles back to e-commerce but mostly focuses on the life of a professional book publisher.

The very fact that the story is essentially plotless, disjointed, and almost aphoristic makes it interesting, and gives it a certain lightness and Gallic charm. This book is the opposite of self-important. While serious issues swim beneath the surface the reader can take them or leave them as he sees fit, and the author does not insist that the reader treat these issues except as the reader may be so inclined. I hate being bullied by books about books and reading, and this author is more of a wry, impish guide than stern lecturer. As a consequence, of course, the reader is drawn into issues of some importance, but obliquely and without condescension.

Here's a biting summary of the current state of publishing: " 'Anything wrong?' Sabine asks. 'You've come over quite pale.' 'No, nothing wrong. Just my regular one o'clock heart attack.' 'Have a drink.' ". With bits like that I'm willing to tolerate a certain pomposity regarding the wine being too "velvety".

Or, in a playful mode - "I like reps. Brave guys who start up a Peugeot diesel at dawn every day and set off to sell books when they could perfectly well be hitting the road to sell something else, for instance, something that people need and that doesn't have to be explained." If you like the refreshing offhand humor of those sorts of lines, then you'll probably like this book.

Bottom line - this was a book that surprised and occasionally delighted. It was sneaky and sometimes arresting. I was pleased to be reading it, which pretty much says it all.

(Note: This book was written, (and translated), observing Oulipo constrained writing techniques. If you're interested, the Afterword explains what that is and how it effected the creation of the work.)

(Please note that I received a free advance copy of this book without a review requirement, or any influence regarding review content should I choose to post a review. Apart from that I have no connection at all to either the author or the publisher of this book.)

Tonymess says

In recent times I've reviewed a few books which lament the loss of the written word, writers being forced to modernise or books about writing (Eric Chevillard's "The Author and Me) but nothing can hold a candle to "Dear Reader" by Paul Fournel.

As our "Afterword" points out, this is a novel which cannot be changed in any way, the editor can't change sections, not even the punctuation, the reader can't reinvent the work with different character names on their new gizmo eReader, the translator? Well they are well and truly stuck, it is impossible to recreate this work in another language (and note I've read the translated version)!! Why? Because it has been created to remain exactly as it was written. It contains 36 chapters, the first six all containing exactly 7,500 characters, including spaces, and each ending with the words, read, cream, publisher, mistake, self and evening. The next six chapters contain 6,500 characters (including spaces) ending with the same words, and so on down to the sixth set which consists of 2,500 characters (including spaces). Making the entire composition a "poem of 180,000 signs (including spaces)". They "serve to narrate the fate of mortal man, they undergo attrition (melting snowball)." As Paul Fournel points out "anyone entering it to change a single letter will destroy the whole project."

And the tale itself is the destruction of the book as we know it. Our first person narrator, Robert Dubois, is a publisher, who has sold his company to the highest bidder but still works in Dubois Publishing, reading books for a living:

For my full review go to <http://messybooker.blogspot.com.au/>

Mugren Ohaly says

I enjoyed reading it. But, the gaps between chapters are confusing. The reader isn't informed how much time has passed, which makes it feel like we're given patches rather than the whole story. With that said, it was still an enjoyable read.

Paul Fulcher says

"It's a reader. A Kandle. An iClone. One of those gizmos"

"How do I go to the next page?"

"You turn pages by sliding the corner on the bottom."

"Like a book?"

"Yeah, that's the prehistoric side of it. A sop for seniors. When people have forgotten about books they'll wonder why it works that way. Vertical makes more sense. Scrolling down would be more logical."

"Jack Kerouac will be pleased."

She doesn't get it.

"La Liseuse" by Paul Fournel has been translated into English by the talented David Bellos as "Dear Reader".

The novel is narrated by Robert Dubois, former head and owner of his eponymous publishing house but now merely a senior employee there after a corporate take-over.

In a large part the story is a sentimental look, indeed largely a look back, to the world of literary publishing, and to the art of reading in general, and how it is challenged both by corporate pressures and technology - specifically the e-reader.

Dubois as a narrator has at times a strong (albeit potentially ironic) whiff of curmudgeonly old-fashioned man, in his views to e.g. relations between the sexes, not just publishing. Confronted by a MBA who suggests extensive market research before deciding which books to print, Dubois retorts:

"People have got into the awful habit of putting out books just too see how many copies they sell. It's called publishing."

The novel is packed with literary jokes and references - e.g. the Kerouac quip in my opening quote (a reference to the original manuscript of *On the Road*'s being in the form of a scroll) - many specific to the French literary scene (Robert's new boss calls him "Gaston", a reference to the most distinguished of French publishers Gaston Gallimard).

The book is at it's strongest in describing the various aspects of the literary and publishing worlds. For example, commenting on book signings and talks, Gaston remarks of his favourite author as she answers the

same repeated questions ("'Yes my book is entirely autobiographical' (as if reality were any mark of literary quality)"): "I sincerely admire Genevieve for underselling her work day in and day out",

And on the role of publishers and other stakeholders in forming the literary canon, Gaston tells an anxious intern who he has asked to opine on a new novel:

"What ought to reassure you is that literature's gatekeeper is not you. Nor are the writers themselves. Literature isn't something pre-existing that you insert into a text, it's a very complex construction that's built only with hindsight, and by all. Writers contribute to it, that's for sure, the publisher and the imprint certainly add their mark, but then it's for the media, the booksellers, the academy, and secondary and primary schools to decide. They don't agree with each other, they keep changing their views, and so literature never stops changing its boundaries and shape. Writers you thought had vanished make a comeback, and some you thought set up for eternity disappear. There's a hard core left over that everyone agrees about, but not everyone actually likes them."

It's at its most warm when writing about the physical act of reading. E.g. contrasting the tactile experience of reading physical manuscripts to looking at them on his new e-reader:

"I sink onto the sofa, wrap my legs in a blanket, and read. My habitual technique is quite simple: I stack the pile of sheets on my paunch, and as I read I transfer them one by one to my chest. The increasing pressure on my ribcage gives me an accurate reading of how much work I have done. For the first twenty I read with great attention, as slowly as I can make myself read, then I speed up gently, allowing my professional experience and what I know of the author and the book's concept to take over - imagination does the rest. This is my semi-somnolent reading style, which constitutes my deepest mode of engagement with a text."

Compared to the e-reader:

"With a flick of the fingers I turn pages that don't fall on any pile. They depart body and soul to some imaginary place I can hardly imagine. My chest is anxious and gives me no guide to how far I've got. There's no noise of turning pages to break the silence of the house. I miss the slight breeze I used to feel on my neck from each page as it fell."

It's rather less successful when it attempts "a reflection on the future of reading" (author's postscript), with Dubois commissioning some interns to derive literature for the mobile age. It's not really Dubois's forte, nor the authors and the suggestions don't really convince.

There's also a slightly jarring side story of Dubois's wife, who we gradually realise is seriously ill, which seems to introduce an unnecessary element into what is at heart a rather light tale.

What is not obvious when reading is that the text is Oulipan, as explained in the author's postscript. (Which incidentally contains the wonderful phrase "anticipatory plagiarists" to describe how Oulipan techniques can often be seen in works that pre-date the concept).

The particular constraint in this book doesn't really seem much of a constraint at all, and not one of those where you look back on the text with a sense of revelation. (Albeit it does explain the rather forced references to "cream" at various points.)

Although as with all Oulipan novels, the constraint is even greater for the translator, who has the additional constraint of fidelity to the existing story as well as the challenge of a different language. David Bellos - well known as the translator of Perec - tackles it with relish, and is to be commended.

For an excellent review that explains the Oulipan system used (and which enjoyed the book more than I did)

see: <http://messybooker.blogspot.co.uk/201...>

Dirk says

One of the joys of loving books is that you can have many affairs and remain faithful to any and all of them. That's one of the sub-textual takeaways from reading *Dear Reader*, which is not so much a linear narrative of the waning career of an ageing publisher as it is a loosely strung together series of moments behind the scenes an art form struggling against becoming an industry, where the need to make a living collides with the desire to make life.

Those looking for an actual story may be disappointed with the book's jump cuts from place to place and across unspecified periods of time, the characters that are not fully formed, and an ending that arrives too suddenly and goes . . .

The rewards of the book are found in the voices of the wise, witty and somewhat impish narrator and the jaded and yet hopeful writers, publicists and interns who have thrown their lot together to tell how books are born, raised and make their way in the world and into our beings.

The setting is Paris with side trips to the French countryside and London, but the author, Paul Fornel, is not one to dwell on physical descriptions of place, the following being a case in point: "The countryside looks awfully like countryside, there are leaves on the branches and grass in the fields, a cow underneath an apple tree, the authentic silence of the countryside, a few farm noises and a coating of green boredom spread thick all over the ground." Just passing through, as it were, with a clever turn of phrase now and then.

The sumptuous language is saved for--what else?--food: "The artichoke is a dish for the lonesome, because it is difficult to eat when facing someone else and quite divine when you're on your own. It is a contemplative legume, perfectly suited to dexterous foodies. First come the hard fleshy parts; then leaf by leaf, comes softer and subtler stuff. Green slowly shades into grey and then the last little cap of purple comes right off to reveal the beige tuft. As the texture changes so the sauce reinvigorates the taste. You take the trip at your own speed. There's no need to hurry an artichoke. You can suck a single leaf for minutes on end until it turns sour, or, on the contrary, you can snatch several leaves in a bunch and scour them with your front teeth to extract a solid mouthful. The only procedure that's out of bounds is guzzling. Artichokes require a degree of elegance. At long last you reach the entertaining removal of the tuft. You take the hair between your thumb and the side of your knife and, if pulled gently, it comes off in small, neat quiffs to reveal the heart in all its glory, in a startling and very brief simulation of sex."

I confess that I've never looked at artichokes in quite that way, but the passage made me want to dash off to the grocery store or, better yet, a French restaurant. Instead, I tucked in and savored the rest of *Dear Reader*.

Becky says

I read this little book in pretty much one sitting and loved every moment. It focuses on an old school publisher getting to grips with new reading technology and is simply a delight. It is gentle and witty and a

tribute to a love of reading in any and all formats. As a Waterstones-er the section spent visiting Daunt books really made me chuckle... close enough Monsieur Fournel :)

Rachel Beeler says

A charming book about books which I loved, but overall, I found that I was forcing myself to continue and finish.

2.5 stars

Katya Vinogradova says

You know, when the French know how to write, they **really** know how to write!

This is such a beautiful, nostalgic and bittersweet love letter to the book. The book that is published on paper, bound in some sort of cover, and sold in book stores, or stocked in libraries. The book that smells, feels, breathes. The book that's alive with literary wonder.

It's the story of a publisher who is struggling to accept the new reality of e-books. He is trying to read the new manuscripts in the cold shell of his sleek new e-book, but it's too impersonal. He can't bond with the words that he's reading through a screen. He can't edit properly. He just can't. But he's trying, trying to change and adjust. Trying to incorporate the new elements into his routine. But he comes back to the paper books every time. They are his fortress, his salvation. In them he is safe.

Bravo, Monseniur Fournel, you've crafted a real book that can withstand the new techno revolution!

Mandy says

I thoroughly enjoyed this charming little book about the world of books and publishing – and, of course, reading. Robert Dubois is an old-school publisher gradually having to come to terms with new-school publishing, including getting his first e-reader (and there are some very funny and recognisable episodes with that!). It's a gentle and affectionate satire which anyone with any experience of books will enjoy and relate to. Literary references abound – but you don't need to get them all (although I got a nice smug feeling when I did). There's also a very sad and touching sub-plot involving Robert's wife, which adds a sombre note to the narrative, and definitely adds depth to it. I found the afterword a bit puzzling, and feel it really should have been a foreword to have any effect, but in any case it's more for those interested in form rather than substance. All in all, a good read.

Sunjay says

I enjoyed this book even before reading the afterword. A lovely story about an entertaining life in publishing, with the wit and irony of a seasoned insider who knows the limitations of their trade. Then I realized the constraints on the line and meter of each section, and that is a considerable, if frivolous, addition to what was already a cute novel.

Katy Noyes says

Boy meets girl... not really

This is a read for those interested in how books are published. It's not full of references to literature, or the process of bringing out a book, but it will have a niche market interest.

Translated from the French, it is the story of Robert Dubois. His 'Dear Reader' is his fairly new and unwanted e-reader. He's a book publisher and less than keen on embracing the screen book, though forced to do so as he reads around the city, looking for the next publishing heavyweight. Whatever form the books take, why do so many of them subscribe to the 'boy meets girl' formulae?!

Robert is no longer young, and though he loves books, he is somewhat jaded with the system and what it churns out. We follow him as he works with old hands, schmoozes new writers, and tries to carve a path to keep literature and publishing on the route he would like it. With the office interns.

It's a short tale, and quite a funny read if you like reading about books and publishers. I wasn't sure at times what Robert was actually plotting. The funniest parts for me were the publisher interacting with and contemplating his Reader. Very amusing.

The afterword from the author I found absolutely incomprehensible. Something that should have been at the start maybe, along the lines of a code/rhythm to the way the text was written. Went over my head completely, and I wasn't going to read it a second time to work it out.

A pleasant and wryly funny short read.

Review of a Netgalley advance copy.

fiafia says

Vu le titre du livre, la maison d'éditions (chez P.O.L. tous les auteurs sont géniaux... sauf une) et l'auteur oulipien, je me disais que cela allait être un jackpot. Pourtant, le début m'a un peu inquiétée: il y avait à craindre que l'auteur, par l'intermédiaire de son personnage principal, allait râler contre le numérique, et d'ailleurs, il commençait déjà à sortir quelques poncifs (il nous a juste épargné l'odeur de l'encre et du papier... encore que), et l'absence de toute analyse à l'égard de ce phénomène complexe, ambigu et contradictoire que sont les ebooks m'agace au plus haut point, d'autant que je suis convaincue que Perec aurait apprécié et utilisé les possibilités du numérique... Bref, je me demandais si je n'allais pas abandonner... et heureusement que je ne l'ai pas fait! Car c'est exactement le livre que je voulais lire depuis longtemps. C'est drôle, inventif, plein de réflexions sur les livres et la lecture, je ne suis pas sûre qu'on se fasse l'idée exacte du travail des éditeurs mais la porte est un légèrement entrouverte, et il y aura de la place pour et Perec et pou l' Oulipo. Sans parler de LA contrainte que je n'ai évidemment pas perçue (l'auteur la dévoile et l'explique à la fin du livre) mais pressentie ou plutôt ressentie dans le rythme du texte à différents niveaux: syntaxique, syllabique, typographique mais aussi lexical: cela ne peut pas être un hasard si certains mots tout à fait anodins et habituels commencent tout à coup à capter votre attention. Et pour les amateurs, dont je fais partie, il y a aussi des mots rares et très précieux. Heureuse!
