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TEV GUEST REVIEW: JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT'S MONSIEUR

Monsieur

By Jean-Philippe Toussaint

Translated by John Lambert

102 pp

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GUEST REVIEW BY JIM RULAND

Although June 16 is called Bloomsday after the chief protagonist of James Joyce's modernist masterpiece, you could be forgiven for forgetting about poor old Leopold.

After all, *Ulysses'* first hundred pages or so are dominated by Stephen Dedalus, a stretch so stylistically baroque many readers skip ahead to Molly Bloom's saucy monologue at the end of the book, which most regard as the novel's most accessible chapter. Then there are those who will tell you that the true central figure of *Ulysses* is none other than Dublin herself.

Joyce's chief objective in *Ulysses* was to create the most complete character in all of literature. Part of the reason why there are so many parallels with Homer's *The Odyssey* is because Joyce viewed Odysseus as the man Bloom must surpass if he was to stand the test of time—an Everyman for the ages.

In *Monsieur*, which was published in French in 1986 and has been brought back into print in English by Dalkey Archive Press, Belgian author Jean-Philippe Toussaint has created an Everyman who is every bit as quirky and compelling as Leopold Bloom—only we know a considerably less about Monsieur than we do about Bloom. Indeed, we don't even know his name.

Monsieur, we are told, is one of the top Commercial Directors for Fiat France.

What that means is irrelevant for what Monsieur does best is escape notice, avoid attention, and work as little as humanly possible. “Monsieur displayed in all things a listless drive.” Ergo Everyman—at least from nine to five.

If Monsieur is invisible at work, he has a knack for getting into trouble once he leaves the office. Scrupulously polite and honest to a fault, Monsieur gets pulled into scenarios he’d rather avoid. He detests confrontations but is blind to the ways he provokes them and Toussaint is remarkably adroit at mining this territory for its comic possibilities.

For instance, when Monsieur moves into a new apartment, he is shanghaied by his neighbor into taking dictation for a treatise on, of all things, mineralogy. Initially, Monsieur throws himself into the work so as to be done with it as quickly as possible and the narrative is peppered with the occasional, if not inscrutable, paragraph about geological specimens; but as the project drags on and on, Monsieur’s dictation becomes both stilted and literal:

The interpretation of Greek terms employed to identify the exterior forms of crystals—yoo-hoo are you listening—is in point of fact easy, if not immediate, and presents no difficulty, even for the layman.

No, no difficulty at all for Monsieur but, like *Bartleby* before him, he’d prefer not to. For Monsieur the only thing worse than working on the book is the prospect of telling his collaborator that he doesn’t want to do it anymore. So he does the only logical thing: he moves.

Like Monsieur, Toussaint’s prose is confounded with contradictions. The writing is stark but dense, elegant yet strangely choppy. It’s almost as if Toussaint doesn’t want to provide the reader with an unobstructed view of his subject. Even though Monsieur comes off as hapless, he’s imbued with a weirdly magnetic charm the reader is powerless to resist. We never know what Monsieur wants, but we hope he gets it.

One reason for this is Toussaint’s predilection for quandaries of the quotidian. In the afterward to *Television*, a book that explores the implications of a writer’s decision to stop watching television, originally published in 1997 and re-released in English (again by Dalkey) in 2004, Warren Mott writes:

The fictional worlds that Jean-Philippe Toussaint creates are pleasantly quirky ones, worlds where hopelessly benighted humans struggle with the small vexations of everyday life and where those struggles, described in lavish (and indeed obsessive) detail, gradually assume the proportions of an epic.

As for the accusation that Toussaint traffics in slow motion slapstick and literary situational comedy, he stands guilty as charged; however, he pulls it off with an economy of language one wouldn’t think possible given the unrelenting banality of his subjects and his stories never fail to surprise. Indeed, after Toussaint the work of other so-called stylists seems predictable, labored, and bare.

Joyce would have bristled at such a comparison, but Bloom would have found in Monsieur a fellow practitioner of the art of avoiding conflict.

Posted by Lazy Mick at 12:33 AM