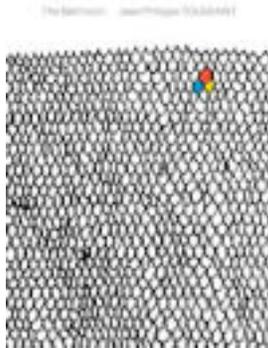


# NewPages Book Reviews

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## **The Bathroom**

Novel by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

Translated from the French by Nancy Amphoux  
and Paul De Angelis

[Dalkey Archive](#), November 2008

ISBN-10: 1564785181

ISBN-13: 978-1564785183

Paperback: 102pp; \$12.95

Review by Josh Maday

The nameless narrator of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's debut novel, *The Bathroom*, takes up residence in his bathroom and refuses to leave, while others attend to him and try in vain to coax him from the bathtub, where he cultivates the "quietude of [his] abstract life." The premise brings to mind Ivan Goncharov's Oblomov, the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Russian nobleman who does not get out of bed for the first 150 pages of the novel. However, while *The Bathroom* is no satire, neither does Toussaint weigh it down with seriousness.

Toussaint's man is sincerely content to lie in the tub, the "warm human voices" coming from the radio enough of a connection to a world which has little to offer that his bathtub and attendants cannot. Only an invitation from the Austrian embassy seems to make him consider leaving his ceramic paradise.

10. Seated on the edge of the bathtub, I was explaining to Edmondsson that perhaps it was not very healthy, at age twenty-seven going on twenty-nine, to live more or less shut up in a bathtub. I ought to take some risk, I said, looking down

and stroking the enamel of the bathtub, the risk of compromising the quietude of my abstract life for . . . I did not finish my sentence.

11. The next day I left the bathroom.

Toussaint's novel moves in new and interesting ways, countering the narrator's quest for immobility. Readers who require a traditional story arc with predictable plot lines and a sweet spoon-fed ending may find this book a bit quiet and contemplative. However, read on its own terms, *The Bathroom* opens up. The elements accumulate and begin to interact.

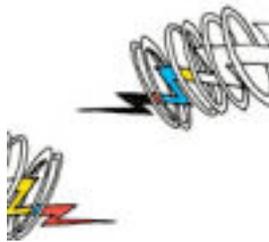
In Part II, entitled "Hypotenuse," the narrator leaves for Venice without telling anyone. Here he does little besides loaf in his hotel room, throwing darts, and wandering to the bar while housekeeping refreshes his room. His program toward total "immobility" is cemented: "My hands froze on the table and I tried with all my strength to hold this immobility, to keep it, but I realized that upon my body, too, movement was streaming."

Developing a nasty case of "incipient sinusitis," he is confined to his hotel room for most of Part III (titled "Paris" like Part I), until, near the end, he finally returns to his apartment, to his bathtub. The final pages repeat the first few pages: his lying in the bathtub, Edmondsson bursting in with the envelope from the Austrian embassy, and the two final sections are repetitions from earlier in the book, almost verbatim, but of course they now mean something different. Was it all "just a dream"? Was everything beginning again in a recursive loop? If so, does he (can he?) make a choice to go into the world once again, or simply return to his bathtub instead?

The text is broken up into numbered fragments in the manor of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*. Pascal also contributed to the philosophy of mathematics with what is now called Pascal's triangle, which also seems to receive a nod from Toussaint, titling Part II "Hypotenuse." Each paragraph continues from the previous, but breaking and separating the text with numbered paragraphs indicates that each may stand as a disconnected moment in the narrator's mind, a compartmentalized thought or experience, where each present moment seems to be its own entity, unrelated causally for the narrator to what came before and after. Or, maybe the numbers, even though they maintain sequence, are arbitrary. They are there, breaking the flow of the text, even though the sections continue a linear narrative, making the numbers almost redundant, as though the obsessive narrator cannot help

himself from forcing the narrative flow with mathematical certainty despite his quest for total immobility.

Toussaint has certainly given the reader a wealth of elements to contemplate in a slim volume. However, while there is a lot to think about philosophically, *The Bathroom* is above all an entertaining novel. Fortunately, Dalkey Archive thinks so, too, and took the steps to make this interesting new French novel available in English.



### **Camera**

Novel by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

Translated from the French by Matthew B. Smith

[Dalkey Archive](#), November 2008

ISBN-10: 156478522X

ISBN-13: 978-1-56478-522-0

Paperback: 122pp; \$12.95

Review by Josh Maday

In the geology of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's career and development as a writer, his third novel, *Camera*, is easily placed in the same strata as his debut, *The Bathroom*. However, *Camera* is funnier and more romantic (in the nameless narrator's weird way). The book opens:

It was about the same time in my life, a calm life in which ordinarily nothing happened, that two events coincided, events that, taken separately, were of hardly any interest, and that, considered together, were unfortunately not connected in any way. As it happens I had just decided to learn how to drive, and I had barely begun to get used to the idea when some news reached me by mail: a long-lost friend [. . .] had informed me he was getting married.

And this is true – the events are not connected in any way, except by occurring to the narrator. The phrase “from time to time” is repeated over

and over throughout the story, and I am tempted to read some significance into this phrase, but then again they may not necessarily be connected in any way.

What happens is that the quirky, obsessive narrator decides to take driving lessons. He goes to the driver's ed office to sign up and he meets the young woman, Pascale, with whom he spends most of the book.

The narrator in *Camera* is, as the back cover of the book states, "obsessed with himself." Often his self-obsessive relation of details, which could easily have gotten grating and annoying, is actually rather funny:

Besides that, having nothing special to do in Milan – read the paper, of course, lifting my head from time to time to contemplate the shaded pathways of the park – I walked around almost the whole day, going from place to place with my newspapers under my arm, and was soon inconvenienced by numerous little annoying blisters that were perniciously forming between my toes (right there where my baby skin is so delicate, let it be a warning to you). I began walking in an unnatural way, to say the least.

Despite the idea of movement, the driving lessons, the trip to Milan, the driving about the city with Pascale and her father, the narrator draws toward the still darkness where he feels he is able to "think," much in the same way the narrator of *The Bathroom* seeks immobility. However, the narrator here seeks a black screen void of words and even images – simply a plane:

Seated in the darkness of the booth, my coat wrapped around me, I didn't move. I thought. Yes, I was thinking and, when I was thinking, eyes closed and body sheltered, I imagined another life, identical to this life in shape and scope, its breathing and its rhythm, a life in every way comparable to *life*, but with no wounds imaginable, no aggression, and no possible pain, far away, a detached life that blossomed up through the thinning ruins of exterior reality, and where a different reality, interior and peaceful, accounted for the sweetness of each passing moment, and it was scarcely words that appeared to me then, nor images [. . .] but moving forms that followed their course in my mind like the movement of time itself.

Okay, so there appears to be a reason for the repetition of "from time to time" after all. In *Camera*, Toussaint moves from the mundane to the comic to the romantic to the dark and beautiful as fluidly as the narrator's ecstatic vision of the movement of time. *The Bathroom* and *Camera* are similar books in many respects, very obviously from the same period of Jean-

Philippe Toussaint's development as a writer, and I am tempted to say that *Camera* is a richer novel (it is more emotionally moving), but each novel moves brilliantly within itself, existing in and accomplishing its own moment in time.

After the novel is an interview with Jean-Philippe Toussaint by Laurent Demoulin, entitled "Towards an Infinitesimal Novel," where Toussaint speaks about his process and intentions with his work. Dalkey Archive has given yet another gift to the English speaking/reading world by initiating and offering translations of these early novels by Jean-Philippe Toussaint.