

Annie Ernaux – Little Honour Outside Her Own Country?

Ian Butcher, Independent scholar

Annie Ernaux has published some 23 books, many shorter texts and articles, and is much celebrated in her native France. Her most famous book *The Years* (Ernaux 2017) won, among others, the Prix Renardot in 2008, the Premio Strega in Italy in 2016, the Marguerite Duras prize, the 2019 Warwick Prize for Women in Translation and Francois Mauriac prize. In 2017 she won the Marguerite Yourcenar Prize for her life's work. Many other awards followed, and in 2022 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Only the seventeenth woman, and first French woman to win it. The Nobel Committee celebrated her “uncompromising” 50-year body of work, that “reveals the agony of the experience of class, describing shame, humiliation, jealousy or inability to see who you are...she gives words to these experiences that are simple and striking”. They praised “her courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory” (Nobel 2022). Her books are regularly used as set books in French schools, and are considered contemporary classics in France.

Yet... Ernaux is little known in English-speaking countries, apart from in certain academic circles. The Nobel Prize has certainly increased interest in her work. Although many of her works had been translated into English over the years, only now are the remaining ones being translated. Some currently remain in French only.

One could be forgiven for seeing Ernaux's *oeuvre* almost as an extended memoir, a continued layering of familiar, key themes which she evokes repeatedly throughout her books. She refers to the “palimpsest sensation” where various memories “float on top of each other” (Ernaux 2017). A palimpsest is a parchment or document where earlier texts are covered over or barely legible by layers of new writing. Ernaux continually amends and reassesses her version of events as new exterior events happen and she is changed by them. Every time she repeats a story she tells it slightly differently. Just like the extended-family dinners: always the same but with different people filling the roles.

Born in 1940 in Lillebonne, née Duchesne, into a prudish Catholic family, her parents left school at 12, worked in factories and moved to Yvetot to run a modest café-grocery store in one of the poorer quarters of town. Ernaux was a talented student and her education took her out of her parents' working-class milieu. It was when she came into contact with middle class girls as a scholarship student that she felt the shame of her parents and her humble origins, yet at the same time did not feel that she belonged entirely either to her “new” intellectual, bourgeois class. She writes that her mother “spent all day selling milk and potatoes so that I could sit in a lecture hall and learn about Plato” (Ernaux 1991). For this reason, she considered herself as a “social defector” from her class (Nobel 2022).

She dedicates one of her books – *A Man's Place* (Ernaux 1992) – to the death and memory of her father. Another, a sort of mirror-image, *A Woman's Story* (Ernaux 1991), focuses on her mother's decline and death from Alzheimer's. In an ironic reversal, she becomes the care-giving, mother-figure to her ailing mother. Perhaps in echo of Camus' *The Stranger* (Camus 2012), (“Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I don't know”), the memoir begins matter-of-factly “My mother died on Monday 7 April in the old peoples home attached to the hospital at Pontoise..”. She seeks to understand the woman who raised her and the guilt she feels about describing someone she had known so intimately, but who had a life independent from hers. When she was alive, her mother imposed strict rules and codes that did not allow

for deviation. Typically, having kicked against her ambitious mother's strong will all her life and having been somewhat cowed by her, she discovers that she loved her more than anyone else, that her mother's voice was "everything", and is totally devastated by her death. As she reflects "The worst thing about death is the loss of voice" (Ernaux 1991). Her mother's Alzheimer's is as much about forgetting as Ernaux's work is about remembering. The fragmentary, unreliable nature of her memory and her struggle with the mechanisms of it is reflected in her spare writing style, and her extensive use of lists and single sentences.

Her book *Shame* (Ernaux 1989) begins with the laconic narrator as a twelve-year old girl witnessing a momentary family altercation: "My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon". It should be noted that the father did not kill the mother, and the couple returned to their normal lives within a few minutes. However, to the girl, the event was a shock which refuses to go away, a mature woman's vision of herself in a moment when childhood innocence is shattered by childhood terror as we are plunged into the minutiae of that day. It is notable that Ernaux sums up her reaction to the event in terms of shame – given the almost instantaneous return to normal life after the event - rather than fear, trauma, terror, or other sentiments.

As Ernaux confesses in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, her work is about "shame and shame at feeling shame" and "the writing which had caused me to be distanced from my origins". Indeed, a key thread is the exploration and categorisation of the various types of shame. As she swore at the age of twenty, her objective in writing was to "avenge my people and avenge my sex...delving into the unspeakable in repressed memory, and bringing light to bear on how my people lived" (Nobel 2022). Her "people" are the forgotten underclass, the downtrodden and those oppressed by the great disparities regarding gender, language and class.

Her unflinching gaze examines her life and confronts taboos in austere, hard detail and clinical analysis: her own body, her first periods, burgeoning desire and first, disappointing sexual experiences in *A Girl's Story*, at a time when "no one was supposed to have sex before marriage" (Ernaux 2020). Mixing the personal and the public, this traumatic and disappointing sexual and emotional awakening (arguably a rape) takes place during "the summer of De Gaulle's return, the new franc and the new Republic... and Dalida's *Histoire d'un amour*". It was the summer when "thousands of servicemen left France to restore order in Algeria". Memory – public and private – lives both inside and outside of us.

She recounts her wrenching, illegal back-street abortion that almost killed her in *Cleaned Out* (Ernaux 1990) and *Happening* (Ernaux 2001). She "saw the thing growing inside me as the stigma of social failure" (Ernaux 2001). Other painful memories are of cancer; her unhappy, failed marriage and divorce in *A Frozen Woman* (Ernaux 1997); her physical obsession as the mistress of a married Russian diplomat in *Simple Passion* (Ernaux 1993); social inequality; the pain of the death of an older sister who died before her birth in the French-language only *L'Autre Fille [The Other Girl]* (Ernaux 2011); the deaths of her parents; changing class, the rise of the feminist consciousness... All these testimonies resist the temptation to erect barriers and remain silent, secretive and complacent about "extreme human experience" (Ernaux 2001). All of these themes are explored again and again in her work and testimony to how individual memories interact with the collective social and cultural contexts in which they occur.

She judged her eventual marriage with trepidation. Her then husband belonged unambivalently to the middle classes, settling in one of the suburbs that she knew and describes so well: "I am afraid of getting into this quiet and comfortable life, and afraid to have lived without being aware of it" (Ernaux 2017). This life was a barrier to her long-time ambition of

writing her book. She had to pretend to work on a PhD to get some time alone to write her first novel. When the novel was published at 34, her then husband was upset, saying “If you are capable of writing a book in secret, then you are capable of cheating on me” (Capelle 2020).

From the age of 16 she had been an assiduous writer of notes and diaries, which remain the basis of much of her writing. Some of these diaries have been published, their rawness forms a complex relationship with the carefully-written memoirs on the same topics. For example, *Getting Lost* (Ernaux 2022) is the diary she kept during the two-year illicit affair she had with a married man, and which she turned into her book, *Simple Passion*. In it she admits that she “measured time differently, with all my body”. Time tends to speed up when the lovers are together and suspended when he is not with her. She does not attempt to excuse, contextualise or explain the affair; she simply describes it. Writing honestly – and cathartically – about her infatuation helps to break down the very real taboo at the time of women having affairs.

Typically, *Exteriors* (Ernaux 1996) is a diary which turns outwards to the public sphere rather than the usual intimate diary focusing upon oneself. One might call it a public diary. She is even an archivist of family super-8 films which she turned into a film with her son, *The Super-8 Years* (Ernaux-Briot 2022). The objective is to record and, as she writes in *I Remain in Darkness* (her mother’s final words), “attempt to salvage part of our lives, to understand, but first to salvage” (Ernaux 1999). She writes about searing pain and profound personal suffering with controlled detachment.

Apart from her first couple of “traditional” novels, her books have no plot, little humour and no “characters” in the classical sense, and are more memoir or autofiction. Her aim was to stay away from mainstream fiction. Ernaux called herself the “ethnographer of my own life” (Ernaux 1999), attempting to find “the collective in the particular”, the “lived dimension of history” (Guardian 2022). She claims to write “something between literature, sociology and history”. One could also call her an archaeologist in that she excavates her own life, examining and investigating in great detail the fragments she unearths. The act of writing helps her understand what she discovers. Interestingly, one of Ernaux’s English-language publishers – Fitzcarraldo Press – publishes fiction under “blue covers”, whereas Ernaux’s work is published under “white covers”, classified as “non-fiction”, indicating the autobiographical and historical nature of the works.

She writes in great detail about banal, fleeting experiences, such as travels on RER trains, parking the car, anonymous encounters in big-box supermarkets in the currently untranslated *Regarde Les Lumieres Mon Amour [Look at the Lights, My Love]* (Ernaux 2014). As she opines in *Exteriors* “A supermarket can provide just as much meaning and human truth as a concert hall” (Ernaux 2021). Supermarkets are rarely the subject of art or literature, or the glitzy France of popular imagination, but are part of everyone’s life and thus deserve to be included and explored. She looks around and sees “anonymous figures glimpsed on a street corner or a crowded bus, unwittingly bearing the stamp of success or failure”. She considered writing “a political act” (Aubonnet 1994) which helped her discover what she had not properly grasped until that moment. The politics is in the attention she pays to these seemingly insignificant things.

The Years is generally regarded as her masterpiece, her magnum opus, her iconic defining work. Originally written in 2008, the English translation of the work was nominated for the Man Booker prize international in 2019, of which the judges commented that it was a “genre-bending masterpiece” (The Years 2019) where she uses “language as a knife to tear apart the veils of imagination” (Nobel 2022). A memoir about her generation and its origins,

it opens with the words that “All images will disappear”, hence her quest to understand them and write them down and bear witness before they vapourise. Her objective in writing the book is to “capture the reflection that collective history projects upon the screen of individual memory”. Written “in an unremitting continuous tense” (229), with only paragraph breaks to allow for subject change, there are no chapters in the book, but a long flow of text which moves in chronological order from 1941 to the 2000s.

The book can be divided into roughly five sections of 30-50 pages each, often delineated by contemplation of an old photo featuring the unnamed girl: childhood and schooldays; adolescence and life at university away from home; the married woman and her divorce, against the backdrop of the troubles of May 1968; middle-age with grown-up sons having left home, with right-wing politicians on the rise; now retired with grandchildren and struggling with the new technologies and in a relationship with a much younger lover. Fragmented images flash before her like a flickering film, sometimes barely a sentence, sometimes developed over several pages. The first few pages of the book are (deliberately) muddled and fragmented as they represent the memories of a small child.

The first images in the book – a woman urinating in public in the ruins of post-war Yvetot, a film star dancing in a film, seeing an adult thalidomide victim, an old TV ad, a supermarket jingle... There are poignant, haunting memories such as the demented old man in the nursing home in pyjamas and slippers, holding a dirty piece of paper with a telephone number on it, crying and asking visitors to call his son. The narrator socializes with her peers but tends not to seek deeper friendships. Throughout, her “characters” appear to be isolated, though not necessarily lonely, with a suggestion in the narrative that the self-isolation is linked to her social status. The overall tone is somewhat complaining, melancholic, with a poetical undertone and sense of loss.

She acknowledges her debt to Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (Proust 2022) as the true model for her work, and her own search for past time and the mechanics of memory. Although she tries to write “against” such writers, so as deliberately not to write like them (Aubonnet 1994). She is attempting to write a new kind of biography. She delves into her past trying to find and understand her present through the lens of memory. *The Years* explores the collective memory of a generation across 60 years of a woman’s life from girl, student, wife, mother, orphan, divorcee, lover, teacher, grandmother. For Proust, memories are evoked by the dipping of the madeleine in the tea. For Ernaux, her memoir is stimulated and catalysed by a memory-box of photographs of herself at various decades of her life, each of which churns up new recollections which overlap with each other, and time collapses. The narrator comments on the photos and attempts to suppose what the child/girl/woman is thinking, but always tentatively, prefaced with “perhaps”, “no doubt”. The females she sees in the photos are strangers: “The girl in the picture is a stranger who imparted her memory to me... The girl is not me, but is real inside me”. She even refers to herself in the third person as in, for example, “the girl of ‘58” (Ernaux 2020). They are her various past egos which have morphed over time.

The memories evoked (sometimes aided by naps which help the old times to resurface in dreams) are of words, Normandy dialect and outdated expressions, slang, books, advertisements, brands and jingles, TV programmes, radio, graffiti, popular songs, products, politicians, food, summer camps, newspaper headlines, clothes, films, supermarkets, popular trends, the birth of the computer and mobile phone... This is set against the context of geopolitical events such as May 68, the Vietnam War, the decline of the Catholic church, the rise of industrialism, immigration, various French politicians, nuclear threat... Each element is explored as they coincide with the character’s own development: what is happening to the

world through what is happening to the narrator. These same memories may evoke similar memories in the reader. Sometimes it takes her several decades to unravel and understand complex events that have befallen her – and the damage suffered – in her own mind. All this, as she writes in the last line of *The Years* is an attempt to “save something from the time where we will never be again”.

Her world as a child is limited largely to her parents’ home and the immediate environs of devastated, post-war Yvetot. It then expands to her high school in Rouen, her first, liberating stint away from home working in a summer-camp, and her stay in London as an *au pair*. As the narrator matures and glimpses the new world afforded by her education, she expresses her shame at her parents’ cramped home, the lack of running water, poverty, life and habits (her father continues to eat with a pocket-knife), she has to share a bedroom with her parents and the outdoor toilets with the clients of the café. Her parents spoke the Normandy dialect, which she spoke at home with them. For her “the original tongue...the language that clung to the body, was linked to slaps in the face, the Javel water smell of work coats...the sound of piss in the night bucket, and the parents’ snoring” (Ernaux 2017). “La Javel” (a cheap cleaning product) is how her social superiors referred to her as they claimed to smell it on her clothing (Ernaux 2013).

Yet – the eternal conflict – she is grateful that her parents are proud of her achievements and encourage her to succeed in her initial objective to be a teacher. Her father proudly keeps newspaper clippings of her exam results in his wallet and her mother agrees to buy anything she might need to further her studies (while complaining about the expense and her daughter’s perceived ungratefulness at the same time).

Even though the memoirs and internal monologues are obviously highly autobiographical – she even reflects on the book she is writing as she writes it – Ernaux eschews using the “I” and favours “she”, “we” or “one” (the useful French pronoun “on”), calling it in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech “transpersonal”. It is as if the selves she is writing about are no longer her but someone else from another time, with herself eliminated. She uses no dialogue, favouring direct and indirect discourse. Starting after her fourth book, she writes, “I adopted a neutral, objective kind of writing, ‘flat’ in the sense that it contained neither metaphors nor signs of emotion”. There are no “lyrical reminiscences, no triumphant displays of irony...I have to tear myself away from the subjective point of view”, all “in search of reality and truth”. As the Nobel Prize Committee put it: “plain language scraped clean...reflective, intimate – but also impersonal and detached”.

A highly unscientific, random survey of half a dozen English bookshops revealed that two had a few Ernaux books on their shelves, notably since she was awarded the Nobel Prize. Whereas the rest had none. Translating Ernaux’s quirky French into English must not be easy, but the various translators have done an excellent job. Ernaux’s works are slim – sometimes barely 80 pages – but plunge extremely deep, deeper and deeper into the core events of her life, those of her country and working-class compatriots, giving words to experiences that are simple and striking. She has invented a new kind of biography, revolutionised the memoir and created a new language for speaking about women’s lives. She deserves rightful and long-overdue recognition and a wider readership outside her native France for her extraordinary catalogue of work and her seemingly inexhaustible memory.

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Ian Butcher
110 Vlierbeekberg, 3090, Overijse, Belgium
AND 111 Roret, 3070, Snekersten, Denmark
ian.butcher@hotmail.com

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