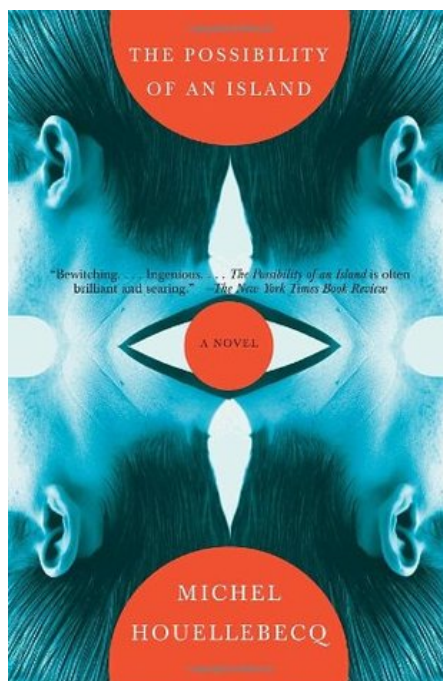




The Possibility of an Island

Michel Houellebecq

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The Possibility of an Island

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The Possibility of an Island Michel Houellebecq

A worldwide phenomenon and the most important French novelist since Camus, Michel Houellebecq now delivers his magnum opus—a tale of our present circumstances told from the future, when humanity as we know it has vanished.

Surprisingly poignant, philosophically compelling, and occasionally laugh-out-loud funny, *The Possibility of an Island* is at once an indictment, an elegy, and a celebration of everything we have and are at risk of losing. It is a masterpiece from one of the world's most innovative writers.

The Possibility of an Island Details

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Author : Michel Houellebecq

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From Reader Review The Possibility of an Island for online ebook

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Margot says

"Qui sait ce qu'est le vrai bonheur, je ne parle pas de ce mot si galvaudé mais de cette terreur nue. Même aux âmes esseulées, il apparaît voilé. Et les plus tristes d'entre nous en gardent toujours un souvenir ou une illusion." **Joseph Conrad**

La dernière chose à laquelle je m'attendais en lisant les trente premières pages de ce livre, c'est que je lui attribuerai quatre étoiles. Mais la vérité est là ; j'ai vraiment aimé ce livre. C'est mon premier Houellebecq; ne sachant trop par où commencer je pensais d'abord lire *Les particules élémentaires*. Mais en consultant le site de la librairie j'ai lu que l'auteur le considérerait comme l'un de ses meilleurs livres. Alors, mon choix c'est porté sur *La Possibilité d'une île*. J'ignore quelle est la qualité du premier, mais celui-là est puissant, je pense vraiment qu'il n'y a pas d'autres mots. Pour être tout à fait franche, il y a longtemps que je n'avais pas été face à un livre (et a fortiori un auteur) qui m'ait placé dans l'impossibilité de me fixer un jugement précis, clair et net. J'ai d'abord détesté le livre, je me suis dit que je ferais mieux d'abandonner, puis que la lecture serait rude jusqu'à la fin si je prenais la décision de poursuivre. Puis petit à petit, je n'ai plus eu de libre arbitre: je devais finir le roman. Cela m'était devenu nécessaire. Je me suis retrouvée à tourner les pages avec avidité, voulant à tout prix en savoir plus, pousser plus loin la découverte, et ce peu importe le prix de cette vérité, et son horreur aussi.

J'ai tellement entendu de choses concernant Houellebecq et pour la plupart elles sont sans doute vraies, mais bon sang, cet homme a des choses à dire! Des choses qui sont peut-être crues, horribles, voire vulgaires, mais qui sont vraies, réelles et que bien souvent la condition humaine se refuse à voir, à regarder en face. On le compare à Celine... certes mais, pour ma part, je ne suis jamais arrivée à terminer *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, même après trois tentatives. J'ai dévoré le roman de Houellebecq... alors je ne sais pas quoi en penser. Peut-être que l'histoire est un peu cliché, mais il faut reconnaître que Houellebecq a bien potassé et que cela tient sacrément bien la route. Rien que le choix des prénoms des protagonistes est significatif. Daniel, un des personnages les plus importants de l'Ancien Testament, préfigure du Christ, qui passa trois jours dans la fosse aux lions pour en ressortir vivant. Esther, elle-aussi figure de la Bible, étoile du soir, qui charma le roi Assuérus et sauva son peuple de la mort grâce à sa beauté, son intelligence et ses charmes. *La Possibilité d'une île* est un livre profond. Je le pense et je l'affirme ; et aussi surprenant que cela puisse paraître, j'ai pleuré à certains passages car l'écriture et ce que l'auteur nous livre m'ont sacrément remués. Je ne suis pas quelqu'un qui aime la vulgarité, le sexe pour le sexe et les allusions grivoises lourdes et pesantes. J'ai parfois eu du mal au début avec tous les passages portés sur le sexe mais arrivée à la moitié du livre, ils m'ont moins gêné car j'ai pris conscience qu'ils n'étaient pas vides de sens mais nécessaires à la compréhension même du personnage de Daniel, et surtout à celle de l'évolution de la narration. Et c'est d'autant plus vrai maintenant que j'ai terminé le livre. Et au fond, aussi cynique, machiste, vulgaire ou quoi que ce soit d'autre qu'apparaissent ce roman et son auteur, il n'en reste pas moins que ce que j'ai retenu de ce livre, c'est avant tout que le seul moyen de parvenir au bonheur est l'AMOUR. Et c'est sans doute pour ça que certains ont dit que c'était un de ses romans les plus légers en un sens. Car au fond, ce qui en ressort est une forme d'espérance, et de foi en l'amour.

Il y a, à de nombreuses reprises, des allusions aux diverses religions, notamment le bouddhisme, qui semble

être en partie la base de la religion des Elohims. Peut-être qu'au fond, Daniel²⁵ est le seul à avoir atteint le Nirvana, c'est-à-dire à être parvenu à se libérer des cycles des réincarnations. De manière purement métaphorique bien évidemment. Mais il a compris, après lecture du récit de vie de Daniel¹, qu'au fond, son existence n'avait plus vraiment de sens et que la possibilité de l'immortalité, de l'existence éternelle, de l'accès à l'infini, n'avait absolument aucune valeur sans quelqu'un pour partager cette expérience, et que la vie des néo-humains n'était qu'une étape intermédiaire vers un devenir qui serait (éventuellement) meilleur. Éventuellement. Ce qui manquait à Daniel²⁵, et qu'il confesse lui-même, ce sont les possibilités, le devoir de faire un choix. Aussi cynique qu'ait pu être Daniel¹, tout ce qu'il recherchait et souhaitait c'était la chaleur des bras d'une femme, ce sentiment d'appartenance qui l'envahissait lors des étreintes avec Isabelle d'abord, et Esther ensuite.

"Il n'y a pas d'amour dans la liberté individuelle, dans l'indépendance, c'est tout simplement un mensonge, et l'un des plus grossiers qui se puisse concevoir; il n'y a d'amour que dans le désir d'anéantissement, de fusion, de disparition individuelle, dans une sorte comme on disait de "sentiment océanique", dans quelque chose de toute façon qui était, au moins dans un futur proche, condamné".

Ce que j'ai trouvé le plus tragique, c'est ce vieillissement du personnage de Daniel, et d'Isabelle aussi, dans cette période terrible où le désir de possibilités se trouve accru par l'éminence d'une fin que l'on sait prochaine, et parallèlement, la diminution de ces possibilités par ce même vieillissement. Je pense vraiment que c'est là ce que Daniel cherche à mettre en avant et qui explique cette engouement pour les élohimites. Cette idée d'une énergie immense qui jaillit et qui pourtant se trouve confinée dans un espace clos qui en tue par là-même toute la vigueur. Il n'y a rien de plus tragique, surtout pour un homme qui a l'honnêteté et la vision du monde qui sont celles du protagoniste. Le *"Je t'aime encore"* d'Isabelle, jeté comme ça au détour d'une conversation, froid, nu, mais vrai; voilà des choses qui m'ont émue et remuée. Je crois que la fin du récit de Daniel a été pour moi le moment le plus fort, et surtout le dernier poème qu'il a écrit:

*"Ma vie, ma vie, ma très ancienne
Mon premier vœu mal refermé,
Mon premier amour infirmé,
Il a fallu que tu reviennes.*

*Il a fallu que je connaisse
Ce que la vie a de meilleur,
Quand deux corps jouent de leur bonheur
Et sans fin s'unissent et renaissent.*

*Entré en dépendance entière,
Je sais le tremblement de l'être
L'hésitation à disparaître,
Le soleil qui frappe en lisière*

*Et l'amour, où tout est facile,
Où tout est donné dans l'instant;
Il existe au milieu du temps
La possibilité d'une île."*

J'ai vraiment cherché à vous convaincre de la beauté de ce roman. S'il vous plaît, allez au-delà de l'image et lisez Houellebecq!

Roula says

εδω θα ταιριαζε και το gif της γιαγιας Rose απο τον τιτανικο που λεει κατι του τυπου: "it's been 85 years". τοσο καιρο φαινεται να διαβαζα αυτο το βιβλιο.ο λογοζομωσ σε καμια περιπτωση δεν ηταν επειδη δε μου αρεσε.ξεκινησα ενα του Πιντσον, το παρρατησα, επιασα αυτο , επαθα ενα reader's block αλλα ειμαι ακομη εδω :)

οσον αφορα στο βιβλιο τωρα: ηταν η απολυτη συνταγη θεραπειας της βαρεμαρας για το διαβασμα που με εχει πιασει.παρα πολυ ενδιαφερον θεμα, δοσμενο μεσα απο την απολυτα κυνικη ματια του Houellebecq.ειναι το δευτερο βιβλιο του που διαβαζω και ανακαλυπτω οτι οσα εχει να πει αυτος ο τυπος θελω πολυ να τα ακουσω .ακομη και αν δεν ειναι ευχαριστα...

Leonard Gaya says

Après Extension du domaine de la lutte, lu il y a quelques mois, je saute par-dessus Les particules élémentaires et Plateforme, sans doute les romans les plus populaires de Houellebecq (avec le récent Soumission), et tombe sur ce quatrième roman, “La possibilité d’une île”. Autant le dire tout de suite : c’est un grand roman désespéré ; un livre captivant, à l’écriture fluide et enroulée (assez éloignée du “style plat” de son premier roman), qui m’a tenu en haleine jusqu’au bout.

Houellebecq y mêle plusieurs fils narratifs, de manière un peu déroutante au départ. D’abord l’histoire de Daniel (Daniel1), un humoriste passablement obsédé sexuel et parfaitement cynique, qui fréquente la jet-set parisienne et madrilène et porte sur le monde un regard désabusé, le plus souvent drôle. Son récit tourne essentiellement autour de sa vie sentimentale et sexuelle et de sa rencontre avec Isabelle, puis Esther. Dans les deux cas, l’obsession du sexe (exprimée à travers plusieurs passages assez piquants : descriptions de scènes de film porno, de partouzes, etc.) révèle une angoisse plus profonde : celle du vieillissement, de la déchéance physique progressive et de la persistance douloureuse du désir. “La possibilité d’un île” est un livre sur la mort.

Le récit de Daniel porte également sur sa rencontre avec la secte des “Elohimites” un mouvement pseudo-scientifico-religieux inspiré sans dissimulation par le mouvement raëlien. La fréquentation de cette secte donne lieu à différents rebondissements et développements sur la décadence des religions en Occident, sur la naissance de l’organisation sectaire, sur ses doctrines et notamment sur la recherche d’une forme de clonage, permettant aux fidèles d’espérer (en vain ?) une résurrection future et une possible immortalité. “La possibilité d’un île” est un livre sur la mort.

Enfin, il y a les récits de Daniel24 puis de Daniel25, avatars clonés qui poursuivent la lignée et, surtout, commentent le récit du premier Daniel à travers les siècles. Ces récits, qui prennent l’allure d’un roman de science-fiction post-apocalyptique, alternent avec ceux de Daniel1 et lui répondent point par point. Ces “néo-humains” (d’inspiration cyberpunk ou évocateurs du courant H+, soutenu actuellement par la firme Google) sont des hommes génétiquement modifiés, invincibles et solitaires, qui semblent avoir échappé à la mort. Le reste de l’humanité est retombé dans un abrutissement animal complet. L’épilogue du livre, à la fois calme et déchirant, raconte le dernier voyage de Daniel25 à travers une Terre dévastée. “La possibilité d’un île” est un livre sur la mort.

Aaron Arnold says

Reading negative reviews of Houellebecq novels is a good way to be amused for about five minutes, because, aside from the rare honest ones where the reviewer frankly states they just didn't care for him, it's pretty obvious that most of his detractors know that something is going over their heads, but they can't admit out loud that they don't get the joke. I say that as a confirmed fan, but I just don't see how it's possible to give this bleak, hilarious, passionate, misanthropic novel a fair read and not come away moved in some fashion. It's a science fiction novel that's not really interested in the genre's trappings, a religious novel that treats faith as a simple yet beguiling scam, and a novel about love with some of the least romantic passages imaginable. And, best of all, unlike with a Camus novel, who he's frequently compared to, it's actually really funny.

Instead of reviewing the book itself, it would almost be more interesting to review its fans. What kind of person likes Houellebecq novels? Well, a confirmed pessimistic streak is a must, the conviction that every silver lining has a cloud. However, it's not enough merely to acknowledge that the worst will usually come to pass, you also need some stoicism - to even remark on the plain fact that we live in a universe of routine disappointments and general unpleasantness is witless and dull. Life isn't something to be struggled against, merely endured; complaining is just a waste of time. Luckily there's the pastime of sex with hot girls to distract you, the more the better, and even more luckily hot girls seem to be in plentiful supply. Your casual familiarity with such gloomy personages as Schopenhauer and Hegel gives you a proper detachment from the world, but you can still have fun; "mindless pleasures", in Pynchon's phrase.

Yet you will always feel that post-coital ennui, the constant reminder that the brief moments of pleasure you experience are meaningless in the long run, not only cosmically but also personally. Fortunately, you have the temperament to find this state of affairs not only vaguely tolerable, in spite of your profound alienation from society and its moral strictures, but also somewhat funny, and when you're not banging hot girls you take fulfillment where you can find it, which seems to be most places. Despite the inevitable process of aging, which the youth-obsessed general culture unavoidably reminds you of as frequently as possible, and your near-total emotional isolation from your fellow man, you can conclude that life's not so bad really, or at least that the idea of life being any better is an idle dream unworthy of a sophisticated misanthrope such as yourself.

Now that the pool of potential fans has been whittled down, let's examine the book itself. Daniel is a fairly successful standup comedian who's reached a decent level of fame but can't really enjoy life, due to a persistent anomie which seems to bug some readers but which I considered plausible enough. At a certain point in his career, which is built on an interesting type of exploitation of our tendency to find humor in negativity (the descriptions of his jokes about racism/violence/pedophilia are hilarious), he stumbles upon a Scientology/Raelian-ish religious cult called the Elohimites that promises immortal life. He transitions from the doomed love for his wife to the doomed lust for his girlfriend, and eventually discovers that the Elohimite promise of transcending mortality is actually achievable. There's a frame story set in the future that confirms this, and shows how empty and meaningless it is to remove human weaknesses without adding in new strengths to replace them.

However, Houellebecq's real appeal to me is not his plots, as serviceable as they may be; no one is going to mistake this for a hard sci-fi novel about transhumanism. It's not his prose style either, which on a sentence-by-sentence level is not especially captivating. He gets the job done, but I doubt that many of his lines will serve as epigraphs for other novels. It's his role as a sort of devil's advocate for depression that fascinates me, since he's very good at building up opinions that build up like thunderclouds only to burst in an intensely arguable shower over the reader. Here he is on sharing feelings:

"Your only chance of survival, if you are sincerely smitten, lies in hiding this fact from the woman you love,

of feigning casual detachment under all circumstances. What sadness there is in this simple observation! What an accusation against man! However, it never occurred to me to contest this law, nor to imagine disobeying it: love makes you weak, and the weaker of the two is oppressed, tortured, and finally killed by the other, who in his or her turn oppresses, tortures, and kills without having evil intentions, without even getting pleasure from it, with complete indifference; that's what men normally call love."

There are days I might agree with that, and days I would definitely disagree. What's so great about it is the way he uses this character's thoughts (who undoubtedly shares a great deal with the real Houellebecq himself) to lay bare an ugly, unpleasant notion hidden away and present it in all its grotesque splendor. What in fact is the right way to look at love? What laws of power govern the way that men confess their passions and weaknesses to the women they care about? What if he's right - what would that mean? Similarly, here he is on sex:

"Sexual pleasure was not only superior, in refinement and violence, to all the other pleasures life had to offer; it was not only the one pleasure with which there is no collateral damage to the organism, but which on the contrary contributes to maintaining it at its highest level of vitality and strength; it was in truth the sole pleasure, the sole objective of human existence, and all other pleasures - whether associated with rich food, tobacco, alcohol or drugs - were only derisory and desperate compensations, mini-suicides that did not have the courage to speak their name, attempts to speed up the destruction of a body that no longer had access to the one real pleasure."

Maybe this guy has just had some really, really good sex; maybe he's wrong and all those other pleasures are actually superior; maybe it's impossible to say for sure and each has its ups and downs. For myself, I don't think that you can group vices like alcohol or drugs with sex, even if it's certainly true that sex can hurt people around you in the same way as a drinking problem or drugs addiction, to say nothing of potential diseases and so on. Sex is different and better than those things, even if he's possibly a little too rapturous. But it's the way that you agree or disagree with him that's important. Here's a long quote about the main character's wife Isabelle and girlfriend Esther that contains many hours of potential debate material:

"Isabelle did not like sexual pleasure, but Esther did not like love, she did not want to be in love, she refused this feeling of exclusivity, of dependence, and her whole generation refused it with her. I was wandering among them like some kind of prehistoric monster with my romantic silliness, my attachments, my chains. For Esther, as for all the young girls of her generation, sexuality was just a pleasant pastime, driven by seduction and eroticism, which implied no particular sentimental commitment; undoubtedly love, like pity, according to Nietzsche, had never been anything but a fiction invented by the weak to make the strong feel guilty, to introduce limits to their natural freedom and ferocity. Women had been weak, in particular at the moment of giving birth, early on they had needed to live under the guardianship of a powerful protector, and to this end they had invented love, but now they had become strong, they were independent and free, and they had given up inspiring or indeed feeling a sentiment that no longer had any concrete justification. The centuries-old male project, perfectly expressed nowadays by pornographic films, that consisted of ridding sexuality of any emotional connotation in order to bring it back into the realm of pure entertainment had finally, in this generation, been accomplished. What I was feeling, these young people could not feel, nor even exactly understand, and if they had been able to feel something like it, it would have made them uncomfortable, as if it were something ridiculous and a little shameful, like stigmata in ancient times. They had succeeded, after decades of conditioning and effort, they had finally succeeded in tearing from their hearts one of the oldest human feelings, and now it was done, what had been destroyed could no longer be put back together, no more than the pieces of a broken cup can be reassembled, they had reached their goal: at no moment in their lives would they ever know love. They were free."

Houellebecq is an unflinching chronicler of the way that an individual adjusts to the mismatch between reality and expectations, whether the subject is love, sex, society, or self-worth. While he isn't always correct, or even necessarily insightful, he's always thought-provoking, or at least wrong in an interesting

way. His unenthusiastic embrace of the world can be unpleasant, yet never unpleasurable, and when you're done with one of his novels, it makes you appreciate the upsides of life all the more.

Manny says

Male, rich, successful, 47, GSOH, not yet completely impotent WLTM female, slim, attractive, preferably blonde, 20 to 26. Maybe 28. I guess 30 isn't out of the question if you're really into keeping fit, classical dance or something similar, but let's face it, before we know what's happened you'll be getting old and fat, I won't be able to get it up for you any more and you'll decide you'd rather not be a burden and leave and a bit later top yourself. That keeps happening to me for some reason. Of course if you're young and beautiful you'll most likely decide that I'm the old, ugly and useless one and I'll be getting my heart broken and committing suicide, but I think it's slightly the better of the two options on offer. God (which I don't believe in, of course), I hate people. They killed my dog.

You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this in a contact ad, but I've had this idea that maybe I could write down everything about my life, at great length, I don't want to miss anything out, this is the complete Proust trip, or more likely I mean Balzac. I love Balzac, especially *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*. That is a fantastic book. So where was I? oh yes, I am writing all this down, being strictly honest, I'm hiding nothing, honesty is what it's all about. Before I forget, when we have sex you need to pay attention to my balls, stroke them or maybe lick them, it's essential. If you don't understand this, don't bother to reply. But anyway, honesty. I am writing this down, and I've given my DNA to this weird sect, they are totally not the Raélians, I'm tired of getting sued by all these crazies. When they've sorted out the technology, they say they're nearly there, they will create a clone of me. Then the clone will read what I've written and he'll basically become a second me. And when he's worn out, they'll create a third me, and so on. They can do the same with you. We'll have all eternity together, except of course that we'll soon be tired of each other.

Anyway, I know this is a bit early because we haven't yet met, but I have written a poem in your honour. Here it is. And okay, it's pretty stupid, but then so is all art and literature except maybe Balzac. I can't remember if I already mentioned that. So, the poem:

*Roses are red
Violets are blue
Life is as pointless
As being with you*

I'm dying to know what you think. Or probably I should just say I'm dying, we all are, mortality is what it's about, but maybe we've got a couple of years left so why not spend them together torturing each other?

If this is you, reply to houyhnms4ever@yahoo.com enclosing a couple of nude photos.

Jason Pettus says

(Full review can be found at the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com].)

So before anything else, let's just get this out of the way: that if you aren't horrendously and profoundly offended at least once by the work of controversial French author Michel Houellebecq, you're not paying close enough attention. Because Houellebecq, see, is what's known as a misanthrope; that far from being a racist, or a sexist, or a homophobe, he simply hates *the entirety of humanity*, every last one of us air-

breathing meatsacks, and goes to great pains in his celebrated and award-winning novels to detail all the various ways that you too should hate humanity as well. And that of course is what marks him as different than the typical life-hating streetcorner obscenity screamer, is that Houellebecq has some incredibly astute observations about life to back these opinions up; that he has an almost magical ability, in fact, to take the detritus from those "news of the weird" departments, and to somehow combine them all into one of the bleakest yet fairest descriptions of humanity you will ever come across. His truths are difficult truths, and they're often insulting truths, and they are truths that very meticulously pick apart the veneer by which most everyday people live their lives; and it's for all these reasons that so many people have such a violent reaction to Houellebecq's work, and why there are as many haters of his fiction as there are champions of it.

Like...say, the Muslims, a group of which weren't very happy at all with what Houellebecq had to say about them in his 2001 sex-tourism farce *Platform*; so unhappy, in fact, that this group took Houellebecq to court for "attempting to incite racial violence," which like libel is easier to prove in European courts than American ones. And Houellebecq reacted to this lawsuit (which he was eventually cleared of) in the exact way you would expect Houellebecq to react to such a lawsuit; as if the entire thing was beneath him, and simply further proof of the point he makes in his books in the first place, of what a bunch of mouth-breathing jackasses humanity in general is. And let's face it, in a world of full-frontal nudity in movies and high-school massacres on television, it's almost impossible anymore for a mere novelist to arouse this kind of passion and ire in the general public; and thus it was that Houellebecq became a literary sensation in Europe (which was pretty much ignored by the media in the US, what a surprise), and suddenly found himself rich and famous and with several of his projects suddenly being adapted into major movies.

But a troubling question lingers after all this, of course: that when you write the most outrageous novel of the century, the one that simultaneously made you a media star and almost killed you, what do you do for an encore? In Houellebecq's case, he writes the darkly funny tale *The Possibility of an Island*, which ostensibly is a dystopian science-fiction novel, but as Houellebecq himself admits near the end, is in actuality an autobiography, his private views on all the things that happened to him as a result of *Platform*. And in this sense, the book is pretty much the most perfect thing he could've done after *Platform* -- not to try to outshock the public, which let's face it, he'll never be able to do again, but rather to reflect on both his mistakes and the ones made by the rest of the world, to mercilessly tear apart the culture of fame that made him a Continental star to begin with, and incidentally to further argue the main thrust of all of his books, i.e. that humanity is a pathetic, outdated concept that needs to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. As with his entire oeuvre, those who...

RK-isme says

"J'étais, je n'étais plus. La vie était réelle."

La possibilité d'une île

The Possibility of an Island

A word of thanks to Léonard Gaya for his recommendation. The book was an interesting challenge. The kind of book I thoroughly enjoy.

I have to admit that in a world of readers divided into "J'adore Houellebecq" and "J l'haïs", I find myself on the 'adore' side. I may tire of him some day, as there is a bit of repetition in his message, but he writes with wit, intelligence and, to a great extent, I agree with his central message: "Modern humankind lacks basic values and we are not, perhaps never have been, capable of much better. But there was a Golden Age, wasn't

there?”

Having read, and been exhilarated by Houellebecq’s most recent novel (2015), *Soumission*, I thought I knew what to expect from him in this novel (2005): something critical of modern society; at times crude; political; satirical; and, within a plausible world. Critical of modern society – definitely. Crude – at times, yes. Not overly so but often unnecessarily so. Political - Not really. Satirical – Not in the way *Soumission* is. Partly because of the lack of political commentary. Partly because the irony is less humorous. Within a plausible world – Starts out that way but moves on into a Sci-Fi world – dystopic/utopic take your pick.

I tend not to retell the story in my reviews and will follow that inclination here. There are lots of reviews of the story line elsewhere, either on GR or more ‘professional’ reviews, i.e. somebody who gets paid. What follows is my take of what Houellebecq was trying to tell us, because you can be sure that Houellebecq will always have a serious message about the human condition. So here comes the ‘spoiler’: This book is about DEATH. There you have it. Perhaps more properly it is about humankind wanting to avoid death. But let’s not be fooled, ‘Death’ is not a simple “You’re alive or you’re dead” bifurcation for Houellebecq. In between, there is a lot of genetic thinking (think Richard Dawkins and friends) and the possibility of old age, with all of its disadvantages and the constant irritation of a sex drive, with the complications of, dare I say it in our Houellebecqian cynical age, “LOVE”, or at least “love”.

To unpack all of that a bit took Houellebecq most of the book, but in an interesting, character development sort of way. Daniel1 (as opposed to Daniel24 and Daniel24) takes us through his life as he progresses from a cynical young man with little, or no respect for his fellow beings, to a somewhat confused older man who is aware of his failing sexual capacities and the lack of any love in his life. He is basically lonely and, although he has become fantastically wealthy, lost in life. It is at this point in the story that Daniel1 undertakes an analysis, not only of his own life, but of human life in general. The result of this analysis falls somewhere between Richard Dawkins’ teleology and the Buddha’s soteriology. That is, we exist to continue our genetic line, to keep our DNA out there. This is, as per Dawkins, our sole *raison d’être*. As for the Buddha, the only cure for all of the suffering that goes with Dawkins point of view is to get over the desires associated with the above.

So the book unfolds with the development of the life of Daniel1 as he moves from being a hedonistic young man taking every sexual opportunity to being an older man aware of his flagging sexual capabilities, lack of love in his life and no progeny (well one son whom he detests and with whom he has no contact whatsoever. Not really a good example of passing on the genetic inheritance.) Along the way, Daniel1 realizes that part of his drive to reproduce involves the idea of love, and he does know what love is. It’s then other side of the coin of sex. Looking at the relationships of his life, he realizes that he’s never been able to toss the coin in his hand and get the obverse. In one case, the woman, Isabelle, provided a strong love interest but, finally, lacked the necessary sex drive. The other woman, a young sex-driven beauty, Esther, carried Daniel1 into a world of deeply felt love and every man’s dream of sexual ecstasy. And then left him without so much as a, “Goodbye, might catch ya’ later.” Women – either love without sex or sex without love. What is wrong in Houellebecq’s world. The same problem arose in *Soumission*. There the resolution was much easier – Islam (*Soumission*!!). A Western conception of love doesn’t come into it.

Diversion: Before looking into Houellebecq’s non-solution to this age-old human dilemma, I would like to turn briefly to an issue which shows up in *Soumission* and seems to underlie his view of modern humanity. It is the principle represented by Joris-Karl Huysmans in *Soumission*. To quote *La possibilité d’une île*:

“It’s sad, the wreckage of a civilisation. It’s sad to see the most beautiful minds slipping into the shade – we start by feeling the slightest unease in life, and we finish by wishing for the establishment of an Islamic republic.” (My translation – sorry.)

Besides setting the grounds for Soumission, this quote suggests, as does Huysmans, that there was a better time...that there was a time of a Western civilization which is now past. In Soumission, this golden age is said to have been brought to an end during the 1960s. The great youth movement of that time, the much celebrated May ’68 in France, is seen by Houellebecq as the beginning of the end of a golden age. In a certain sense, I agree with him. I was there. Not in France but definitely in the streets promoting “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll”. I was one of those who challenged calling my boss Mr. Smith. He became ‘Bob’ and had no say in the matter. My university professors stopped being Professor Whatever. They were Eric, Peter and Alice. ‘Virginity’ became a bad word and the values of our parents (who basically didn’t know where I was or what I was doing) were there to be challenged and overturned. WE took Nietzsche seriously and decided to “revalue all values”. And we had a lot of fun. Indeed, growing up, becoming an ‘adult’ was a pretty strange concept. I avoided it like the plague.

Then we had our own kids. Their teachers had only first names and we taught our children to challenge them and to find their own way of seeing the world. There was no authority (except for us as their parents who were having a hell of a time keeping them from self destruction and wishing they would just grow up and move out.) We ended up with a society with which we are not necessarily happy. A great deal of human respect with which we had grown up and taken for granted had disappeared. Our children not only didn’t call the teacher Madame Fleury, they called her a ‘shithead’. ‘Fuck’ became the most popular word, not only in the English language, but in the world over. I would have preferred ‘Marie’. Loosened sexual controls somehow turned into 13 year-old boys assaulting 13 year-old girls in the school hallways. We had created a Golem and it is running amuck in the streets. (Yeah, I know. I sound like an old man. It’s not really that bad, but Houellebecq believes so.) My point is that Houellebecq, who detests the Baby Boomers, sees us as being in a time of despair today and it’s all our fault. Mea culpa.

While I am in some agreement with Houellebecq in his judgement here, I feel that it takes away from the story. It does so because Houellebecq’s problem lies not in this generation, although he sees Esther’s free sexuality as destructive of love, when it’s not directed at him of course. Her generation is a disaster in his view. But then, he hasn’t done any better in his life – his generation is equally a result of the 60s. After this aside in the book, it becomes apparent that the problem is not with any generation. The problem is the human condition. We want sex whenever and wherever with whomever while wanting the security of love. There is a terrible tension in this. The tension need not be so destructive though. Some of us manage that quite well however. Just saying, M Houellebecq.

Back to our story: Having defined the genetic existential problem, Houellebecq offers us a somewhat Buddhist soteriological solution by way of New Religious Movement (NRM), the so-called “Elohimites” a pseudo-scientific NRM which offers an innovative means to avoid death by having one’s DNA replicated eternally thus ensuring that each ‘generation’ is an exact replication of the last and the first. Thus Daniel²⁴ and Daniel²⁵ are genetically identical to Daniel¹ – just a couple of millennia later. And it’s all done in the lab. As each generation ages and dies off, they are replaced by their 18-year-old genetic duplicate. The concept seems to be that if, as genetic biologists like Dawkins assert, our only reason for existing is to pass on our DNA, replication would seem to fit that end. That in turn would obviate the need for sex and love which only serve our original teleology. A very Buddhist end in my view. Suffering, based on our bodily desires, ends. Indeed, as an afterthought, the geneticists decide to replace our need for food as well. A little water and some salts and we’re good to go. Thus is created a species of ‘neo-humans’ that inhabits protected environments, each member living alone, not being in need of other neo-humans (not sure why). Pets are

allowed so the Daniels keep a small dog, also genetically replicated, named Fox

The main story is the autobiography of Daniel1. Daniel24 and his replacement, Daniel25, for the most part provide a sort of Greek chorus commentary going on Daniel1's biography. They also tell us something of themselves and other neo-humans with whom they maintain electronic contact. Finally, not happy with his existence, Daniel25, apparently like other neo-humans, becomes dissatisfied, leaves the comfort and safety of his home to wander off into the world. The world in the last couple of millennia has been pretty well messed up by nuclear wars and environmental disaster. The rest of the human race has been reduced to the state of savages. Daniel25 puts himself out there, supposedly to indicate once again that a utopia, even without sex, is still not perfect. So the Buddha was wrong. There's something more to us than a need to replicate and live forever. I'm not sure what Daniel25 was looking for but he shows little concern that he, the line of Daniels, will die out.

I'll stop now. No need to spoil it for anyone who may have persevered with this review.

"Je n'étais pas, à proprement parler, certain de vouloir vivre, mais l'idée de la mort n'avait aucune consistance. Je percevais mon corps comme un véhicule, mais c'était un véhicule de rien. Je n'avais pas été capable d'accéder à l'Esprit; je continuais, pourtant, à attendre un signe."

By the way, just to note that there are references to the original pragmatist and semiologist, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 - 1914). Although little appreciated today, he altered the course of American philosophy, as the father of pragmatism, as well as of European philosophy with his views on semiology. The reference to "un signe" above is meant to take us back to Peirce. A personal note here. In 1969, I attended my first philosophical discussion which featured two renowned American philosophers: Charles Hartshorne (June 1897 - October 2000) and Paul Weiss (May 1901 - July 2002), who were known for publishing the collected papers of Peirce (pronounced Purse). They might also be known for their longevity. Perhaps Peirce does have something to do with living forever. I don't want to live forever (definitely not) but I shall be getting back to reading Peirce.

Jeremy says

I thought again of Daniel ... and, for the first time, I was tempted to pity him, without, however, respecting him.

If someone would have suggested to me that the novel, as a genuine art form, was dead, that it had effectively died in the 80s sometime; or, at the very least, it had been in what amounted to a slow, wasting coma since then, and would never really emerge, and we may as well flick a switch and be done with the whole fucking thing; I would have found very little to argue agin 'im.

Now, however, I would toss him a copy of this novel.

If I had it on me. Which would be unlikely. I mean, I would have had to be standing right in front of my bookcase.

And if I had a second copy.

And I'd still want it back, I would impress upon them.

After hearing about Houellebecq I had already kinda vowed that I would no longer read any more French until I could read it in French. Then a friend waves a second-hand copy of this book in English in front of my face and it's ten bucks in Federation Square and I cave in like a Chinese coalmine...

'It was an ex-boyfriend...' she said in English, as if to convey that it wasn't very important.

Because, really, I wanted to know if I was going to love him like I thought I was going to love him. So, surely, those gods who still care about such things as vows, even literary vows, would cut this brother a break on this one, huh? Huh?

And I do love him. In English, at least, thanks to Gavin Bowd.

It's amusing to observe that it's always the enemies of freedom who find themselves, at one moment or another, most in need of it.

Houellebecq has been called everything. He has been branded with the 'ists and the 'phobes. It's amazing that he's published at all, really. Maybe it's a French thing? And you can see where socio-political ire can certainly be drawn in this novel. You just need to peruse some of the review-fodder on this site. The primary narrative focal character is white and a man and a heterosexual and ageing. And he's brutally honest about a process of these things in the society he occupies ... and is occupied by.

To increase desires to an unbearable level whilst making the fulfilment of them more and more inaccessible: this was the single principle upon which Western society was based.

And, yeah, he obsesses over his dick, as in, he would like it to work. Wow. How the fuck does this not feature in more novels with some degree of interiority of an ageing man? That's what you should ask yourself if that's what you're whining about. There is something both beautiful and savage in the way in which Houellebecq plays with the sense of polemic in his fiction here, and when you read the angry people, he seems to have written these people's rants too. They seem like his characters. You could slot them into the book in most cases, no problem at all, since he has this sense of humanity that defeats them even in their base expression. It's cute, but terrifying too.

...this opposition between eroticism and tenderness appeared to me as it truly is: one of the worst examples of bullshit of our time, one of those that signs, definitively, the death warrant of civilization.

And it is about civilization, and the civilised, that Houellebecq writes about. We get to read work from three different Daniels, the first of which is a stand-up 'shock' comic who ends up hating the sound of laughter. The other two are different versions of him from the future.

...then they grow weary, little by little, narcissistic competition takes the upper hand, and in the end they fuck even less than at the time of strong religious morality.

And Daniel diminishes before our eyes, but he fights, and he rages against the dying of the light. Even when he gives in, even when he goes down, he does it in a way that is completely undignified and unwholesome, which is a kind of victory, the only kind possible in Houellebecq's world here.

It's sad, the shipwreck of a civilization, it's sad to see its most beautiful minds sink without a trace — one begins to feel ill at ease in life, and one ends up wanting to establish an Islamic republic.

Houellebecq plays with the sense of the individual and being a man (that is, in the specific visceral sense, not 'masculinities') as well as the role religion (and the sense of the religious), science (and the sense of the scientific) play and interact with consumer-capitalism. Once a fully working and well-marketed model can operate between all these realms, then humanity becomes neohumanity, and humanity is no more than a then ending whimper.

And there is much about neohumanity that is already among us, the Supreme Sister, and there's plenty of them already, the kind of new-puritanism that always runs, paradoxically, across the crass, advertising-ploy of hyper-sexualisation. Where it's all '...a question of casting aside any notion of political choice, the source ... of 'false but violent' passions.

And in and among all this, there is Love. But not necessarily as-narrative, but as the instant, as not an island that exists firmly and resolutely there, solid, a refuge, among teeming seas; but as its possibility, the idea that such a thing can-be despite it not being able to. So that maybe the neohuman can be human?

...this had happened all the same, despite us, despite me ... we had not surrendered, to the end we had refused to collaborate and to accept a system that was designed to destroy us.

Houellebecq, for his part, does not seem to delight in the kinds of things he explores regarding humanity. He seems as much horrified by a Daniel1 as any other version. But there's a sense of pity, and a sense of hope, too; even if a sad hope. It really is frighteningly powerful stuff, and may even convince you that the sex and colour and age and sexuality of an author is not the driving force behind the work? No? Unlike for Supreme Sister...

The problem is, she's both right and wrong, but wrong most horribly.

Et je vais lire La possibilité d'une île un jour ... en langue française.

MJ Nicholls says

Middle-aged and misanthropic and suffering from a rock-hard cucumber in the pants? Introducing the novels of Michel Houellebecq. This one experiments with SF concepts alongside its middle-aged-misanthrope-having-lots-of-implausible-sex plot (the protag in this case a bile-spouting gagmeister) as our antihero secures himself immortality as part of a sex-tourist cult during his post-midlife crisis. As in his previous novels, the sex is usually erotic and depressing at the same time and the prose touches upon the brutal truths of life, the first being that all males are self-loathing humping machines, and others similar in timbre with a lot of cod-scientific waffle to beef up the general concept. Good.

Carolyn says

The day I took this out from the library, a greasy man in reflective sunglasses, floral shirt unbuttoned to reveal curlicues of revoltingly masculine chest hair, meowed at me as I stood frowning beneath a sticky sun.

I feel, upon reading this book, as though he were the author.

Metodi Markov says

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Daniel says

The first great novel of the twenty-first century written by the only writer living today who really matters. Houellebecq in the year 2005 did what Aldous Huxley did in *Brave New World* in 1932..., except that Houellebecq's characters are so much more well-defined, real and wacky...(utterly our age...)...

This novel, like "Les Particules Elementaires" goes off on crazy philosophical tangents in which the narrative stream of the novel disappears and we are subjected to bold and controversial critiques of the safe left-wing ways of thinking that predominate the well-educated Western person of the early twenty-first century (what we have inherited from the late-sixties free-speech Berkeley crowd - ironically enough, another form of intellectual fascism like all the others...) The difference being that in "La Possibilite..." there is some faith in the possibility of human redemption - something quite remarkable from a Frenchman known for focussing on the darkness of animal alpha-male posturing, including obsessive masturbation, and the inherent silliness of Islam which led to him being essentially kicked out of France all together.

The ending, though of course not a 'happy' one (he is a fucking frenchman for Chrissakes), is completely sublime in its stressing of the essence of the human search and need for love, beauty and art...read it, I tell 'ya...

I have recommended Houellebecq to every fool I know who had ever read at least one novel from cover to cover for the sheer fun of it and out of these hundred or so people only about five have actually read him and they have all thanked me a thousandfold...

Takisx says

Σαν την Πλατφόρμα δεν είναι, αλλά σ'αρπάζει.

(Μ?λιν κλωνοποιηθ?με ίσως να το επανεκτιμ?σω)

RandomAnthony says

I don't know. This is one of those books that really seemed to be multiple books. Here are three of them:

1. This book is partly the product of a guy who read too much Celine and wants to talk about girls' asses. There's a nihilistic streak in which the narrator asserts that *nothing* matters but fucking, and getting old is the worst thing that could happen ever, and anybody who says anything against that are just fooling themselves. FOOLING THEMSELVES. While a few of the rantings are funny/insightful, more often than not they're bleak and not particularly interesting. Just because the narrator (or evangelists, hippies, etc.) says something at a loud volume doesn't mean it's true.
2. This book is partly a science fiction novel about the possibilities of immortality, the destruction of the human race and the rise of "neohumans". I couldn't complain...Houellebecq did his research here and worked the scenario well.
3. This book is partly a meditation on isolation, immortality, and whether or not love provides meaning to our years on the planet (or even exists).

I didn't regret reading *The Possibility of An Island* but the bleak nature of the book bored me, and I had to trudge through the last hundred pages. Sometimes lazy writers use nihilism as a crutch. The novel could have

been 200 pages shorter and might have served just as well as a short story. There's some decent writing here, and some interesting ideas, but I only want to shovel so much shit to find them. Houellebecq will have his beret-clad apologists, I'm sure, who will play the "you just don't get it" card, but you know what? I get it, I thought the book was ok, but...it didn't rock my world.

Szplug says

Houellebecq is another writer in the grand French school of misanthropy, in the shadow of its master, Céline, but making every effort to cast his own. *The Possibility of an Island* is, I think, his best work to-date: bleak, brutal, funny, revolting, tender and, in the end, ineffably sad. The world of Houellebecq is one of cratered streets, perpetually in the dark because its inhabitants continually and maliciously put out the street lights to impair the ability of others to proceed safely.

The story is that of Daniel, a bitter Frenchman from roughly our times, as told by himself and commented upon by Daniels 24 and 25, the latest in a line of *neohuman* clones who have descended from the original's recorded DNA. Daniel is a French comedian who, at a relatively young age, has amassed a fortune via savage and biting routines and sketches he writes and performs to amuse the *bastards and monkeys*. Daniel despises mankind and its contemptible—and doomed—efforts to find happiness. Railing against a society where everything is sacrificed to the young—with their luscious and virile bodies that Houellebecq describes over and over—he mocks the old—decomposing, sagging and sexually repulsive—who try ever harder, and invest ever more time, in a pitiful effort to be young themselves. It is a world for kids in every way: morally, ethically, commercially, aesthetically. Daniel tries to find love with two different women: one, his age, who can love, but hates sex; another, of the younger generation who loves sex, but is incapable of love. In between these two failed relationships—and copious graphic depictions of all forms of sexual activity—Daniel becomes involved with a new age cult, the *Elohimites*, who preach, basically, a life of selfish gratification—fully in tune with the times—and of the imminent arrival of a benevolent race of advanced aliens, who will soon descend to the earth to bless all their elect with (what else?) release from the bondage of death and the joys of an immortal life of pleasure. Eventually, the leadership of the cult comes to realize that, as they are well-advanced—and funded—in their genetic research, perhaps the help of the Elohim can be dispensed with and man *himself* realize his own salvation. This does not *quite* work out according to plan, as we discover in the commentary of the Daniels of the far future. Humanity is a failed concept: can the neohumans be anything but failures themselves, descended as they are from such a corrupt and conflicted source material?

Houellebecq is most definitely not a writer for everyone; the gonzo sex scenes become tiresome at times—indeed, take on the feel of gratuitous padding—and there is very little to like or admire in any of his characters. Yet he deftly dissects the obsession with self, the evolution of virtue into the fulfillment of personal desire, and the sex-celebrity-youth obsessed culture that we are in the process of fully-forming in our own world. The philosophic asides are frequently trenchant, and the science-fiction aspect of the story intriguing and mysterious. The coda, in which the ultimate Daniel clone goes searching for Xanadu, ends the novel on a fittingly bleak note; there are few happy endings in Houellebecq's world. The translation is fluid and clear, allowing the strength of the prose to propel the reader along. I truly like this Frenchman's work—even if I need to take a hot bath (after hiding the razor blades) once I've finished reading.

Jessica says

To me, this was surprisingly sentimental, even arguably kind of sweet.

Read all in one day, so I guess I must've liked it? Immediately thought of two (male) friends I want to make read this, but I really wouldn't recommend it to most people so please don't read it on my account unless specifically instructed.

Michael says

I was recently in a class where the teacher was talking about how "meaning" is derived from literature through subtext. Most literature in the past generated subtext in opposition to cultural norms or censorship imposed by the author or society. A classic example might be Hemingway's story "Hills like White Elephants," which deals with abortion only subtextually because stories about abortion were simply not written at the time.

So the question becomes: In a society where nothing is taboo and everything is revealed, how is subtext created? Where is the "meaning" in literature of today?

In this book and perhaps in all his works, Houellebecq seems to cut right to this matter. There is nothing he won't write, no boundary he won't cross. He is willing to reveal every desire and turn his critical, cynical perception on all that is sacred. In a work like this where is the subtext?

I don't have an answer but I did find meaning in this book. There is something about Houellebecq's brutal honesty (which shouldn't be dismissed as mere controversy) that appeals to me but at this moment I can't quite elucidate. His world view is certainly very dark but if you can enjoy his insights without getting sucked into the black hole, it is well worth it.

Marketa says

Já upřímně nevím, co k této knize napsat, jak ji ohodnotit.

Na jednu stranu obdivuju autorku všestrannou vzdělanost, na druhou stranu mi to dost šlo na nervy, jelikož tato kniha byla spíše povídkám s minimálním dějem. Ale pokud z toho vyhlodáte onen děj, tak dostanete zajímavý výsledek opředený neméně zajímavými myšlenkami o smyslu života a mezilidských vztazích a jak jsou pro člověka z jakého hlediska důležité. Ovšem k tomu se dostaneme až ke konci knihy. :D

Nebudu lhát - aťkoliv mi popisovaný sex v knihách nevádí, dekadence mě zajímá v jakémkoliv případě, tato kniha byla hlavně o tom jednom. Hlavní hrdina středního věku, který není schopen dál vnímat smysl života, pokud se mu nechce postavit jeho úd. A o tom mluví dobrých 150 stran z celé knihy. A to za ně?tenáři trochu lézt na nervy, když pokud jste Markéta, která si přečte anotaci o "nesmrtelných" lidech v budoucnosti, a pak ji udeří realita.

Ale alespoň jsem se seznámila s autorem, protože teď už vím, co v jeho knihách očekávat a co naopak ne. :D

PS: nakonec slabší 4*. I přes ty údy a vagíny v tom nakonec bylo něco rozumného a záživného ke čtení, ale některé věci mohl autor trochu rozepsat, protože jsme se toho přes přehřel informací (naprosto k ničemu) moc nedozvěděli.

Leonard says

The species have reached immortality. Through cloning and the propagation of historical memories. But the time of the humans is over. It is the age of the neo-humans, clones without joy and grief, without neurosis, without community, without sexual desires. Only a lifetime of reviewing and of analyzing the life of the human from which their DNA came. A lifetime of isolation, except for a pet. A lifetime of pseudo-touch through electronic communications. A lifetime of reflection and contemplation.

When the grief, the denial, the struggle to remain virile and attractive dominated the aging man or woman, the life of the neo-human seemed heavenly. And no wonder the creator of these neo-humans chose to eliminate the neurosis associated with aging.

Neo-humans live without joy; and they die without grief. They don't need food, only minerals and water. A superior race more suitable for survival. Living in a post-apocalyptic world. What does it mean when a few decided to leave their isolation, to end their immortality, to trek across the dried ocean surface, in search of a legendary community?

Would you choose to be human or neo-human?

The Possibility of an Island is a sad, sad depiction of the possibility, or impossibility, of humanity. Without youth and sexual virility, what is man or woman? When our mind and body decline, what do we make of life? Is a lifetime of tranquility more preferable to the fluctuations between joy and grief? What kind of Omega Point are we moving toward?
