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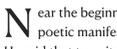
How Michel Houellebecq diminished himself

Full of explicit depictions of bizarre, humiliating events, the French novelist's new memoir reads like the ramblings of a buffoon.

By David Sexton



Photo by Alessandro Albert/Getty Images



Near the beginning of his career, in 1991, Michel Houellebecq published a poetic manifesto, *Rester vivant (Staying alive)* that remains key to his work. He said that to write you must have no shame. "Be abject and you will be true." Remember, he counselled, "basically, you're already dead."

In his novels, Houellebecq went on to write about the abject aspects of male sexuality, among other ugly truths, with greater explicitness than anybody before. For a long time, he was reviled by the French literary establishment, which simply could not stomach the fact that he was by far the bestselling French novelist internationally. Eventually, though, he had to be acknowledged. In 2010, he was finally awarded France's most prestigious literary award, the Prix Goncourt, long overdue. In 2019, his admirer Emmanuel Macron raised him to become a Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, the highest French order of merit.

Now Houellebecq's in trouble again. In January last year, his eighth full-length novel, *Anéantir (Annihilate)*, 736 pages long, was not well received, despite being published in a luxury edition of 300,000. Oddly, it has still not appeared in English. And he has just published a new book that has been roundly reviled in France, including by his former admirers, on the right as well as the left.

Quelques mois dans ma vie: Octobre 2022-Mars 2023, or A Few Months in My Life: October 2022-March 2023, is a rapidly written, rapidly published and remarkably unconvincing self-justification of a couple of major disasters Houellebecq has recently suffered. Like all his writing, it's lucid and highly readable – but it leaves you with a much diminished view of Houellebecq, including perhaps of all his previous work too.

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Late last year, a lengthy, wide-ranging interview with Houellebecq, conducted by the conservative philosopher Michel Onfray, was published in a special issue of the magazine Onfray edits, *Front Populaire*, in which Houellebecq once again caused offence with remarks about Islam in France. He said that the "indigenous French" did not hope for Muslims to assimilate but simply that they would stop robbing and attacking them; in short, that they respect the law and respect them. "Or else, another good solution, that they go home." He also predicted civil war in France, acts of resistance, attacks and shootings in the mosques and cafés frequented by Muslims, "in short, Bataclan in reverse".

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The Grand Mosque of Paris filed a complaint against Houellebecq and he caved, apologising for his stupid and false remarks and issuing revised versions of these statements, exculpating Islam, specifying that "we're not dealing with a problem of religion but quite simply one of delinquency".

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Now Houellebecq tells us in his new memoir that he asked Onfray to withdraw the entire issue of the book-sized magazine and republish it with his revisions. Onfray, understandably, refused and Houellebecq broke off relations with him. When Houellebecq notoriously said "La religion la plus con, c'est quand même l'Islam" (Islam is still the stupidest religion) back in 2001, the excuse was that it was a throwaway remark in a drunken late-night chat. Here he admits that he was indeed given the interview to read over before publication but says that it was so long that his attention may have wandered. Not such a good excuse, he concedes. Beyond feeble, in fact. So that's that. That his original, ill-chosen words were sincere seems obvious enough.

The other disaster is much more traumatic he reckons: being tricked, as he claims, by some Dutch art provocateurs, into participating in a porn video and signing away all rights to it, so that it will shortly be available to all online. Houellebecq, true to form, tells all in *A Few Weeks in My Life*.

At the beginning of October last year, a "pseudo-artist", Stefan Ruitenbeek, whom Houellebecq now calls "the Cockroach", emailed him saying he would be coming to Paris with a young philosophy student called Jini van Rooijen (now dubbed "the Sow"), who was a fan of his works and eager to participate with him in a pornographic video. Houellebecq fell for this (he blames authorial vanity) and Ruitenbeek filmed a two-hour session with Houellebecq, his third wife Qianyum Lysis Li, 20 years his junior, and the Sow, although Houellebecq was disappointed by her performance.

Ruitenbeek has a track record of similar stunts, having made a similar video called *Honey Pot* (2021) which humiliated a young Dutch rightist, viewable on his "Kirac" website. He had even sent Houellebecq a link to this – but Houellebecq hadn't looked it up.

When the Cockroach asked Houellebecq to come to Amsterdam in December for another bout, he went along, partly he says because he loves the trains of the rail operator Thalys so much. Although more girls were produced for him, he didn't participate this time beyond "hugs" – but he did sign a completely compromising contract, which he reproduces in the book, giving away all rights to the videos, including retrospectively, only because, he says, he was addled by tranquilisers and a bottle of wine and didn't read that clause.

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Since then, Houellebecq has tried in court to prevent the release of the video but has lost comprehensively – his final appeal was rejected in April. The Kirac website ominously says more information will be coming soon. Houellebecq laments that, though he had never had much sympathy with feminists before, now he feels like a rape victim.

So how did this happen?

"Sexuality has been the greatest joy of my life, and, in a surprising way, the most durable in the end," he reckons. Gastronomy, alcohol and drugs don't compare, while reading and writing are not part of life, so much as an alternative. Fair enough.

The necessity of *triolisme* (threesomes) he argues in great specificity. "The extreme physical pleasure it gives a man can be explained by elementary anatomical considerations." The details follow.

As for porn, Houellebecq is enchanted by the modern development of amateur couples, "honest exhibitionists", not only filming themselves having sex but then putting these films online. He would like to take part in such prolongation of the life of a couple, to make available such tender memories of shared happiness for future enjoyment. The problem, though, is that you really need somebody else to film it: he himself gets so carried away he can't hold a camera at the same time. A tripod doesn't solve the problem. So a third party is necessary. Alas, he chose the Cockroach, rather than a trusted collaborator.

There we go, that's how it happened. Alternatively, he refers us to the pronouncements that he has long admired of Valerie Solanas in her *SCUM Manifesto* on "the unfathomable and suicidal stupidity that males of all species demonstrate when it comes to disseminating their sperm".

Far from embracing shame, as he himself once recommended, Houellebecq is tormented that the porno will be what he is known for. "It was atrocious for me to think that the only trace that would remain of my sexual life, the most vital part of my life, would be a mediocre coitus with an inert sow, filmed by a degenerate cockroach, the whole thing being completely ugly. I deserved better than that; anyone deserves better than that."

Derided by the media but urged on by his friends Bernard-Henri Lévy and (wait for it) Gérard Depardieu, he fought the case legally and has now written this book to try to take back control of his own story. Neither these events nor this publication seem likely to ease his passage to the Nobel he still deserves, some of us think. *A Few Weeks in My Life* resembles nothing so much as one of those *Fast Show* sketches in which an incomprehensible buffoon relates some bizarre and humiliating events he was involved in before mumbling "of course I was vair... vair drunk at the time".

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