

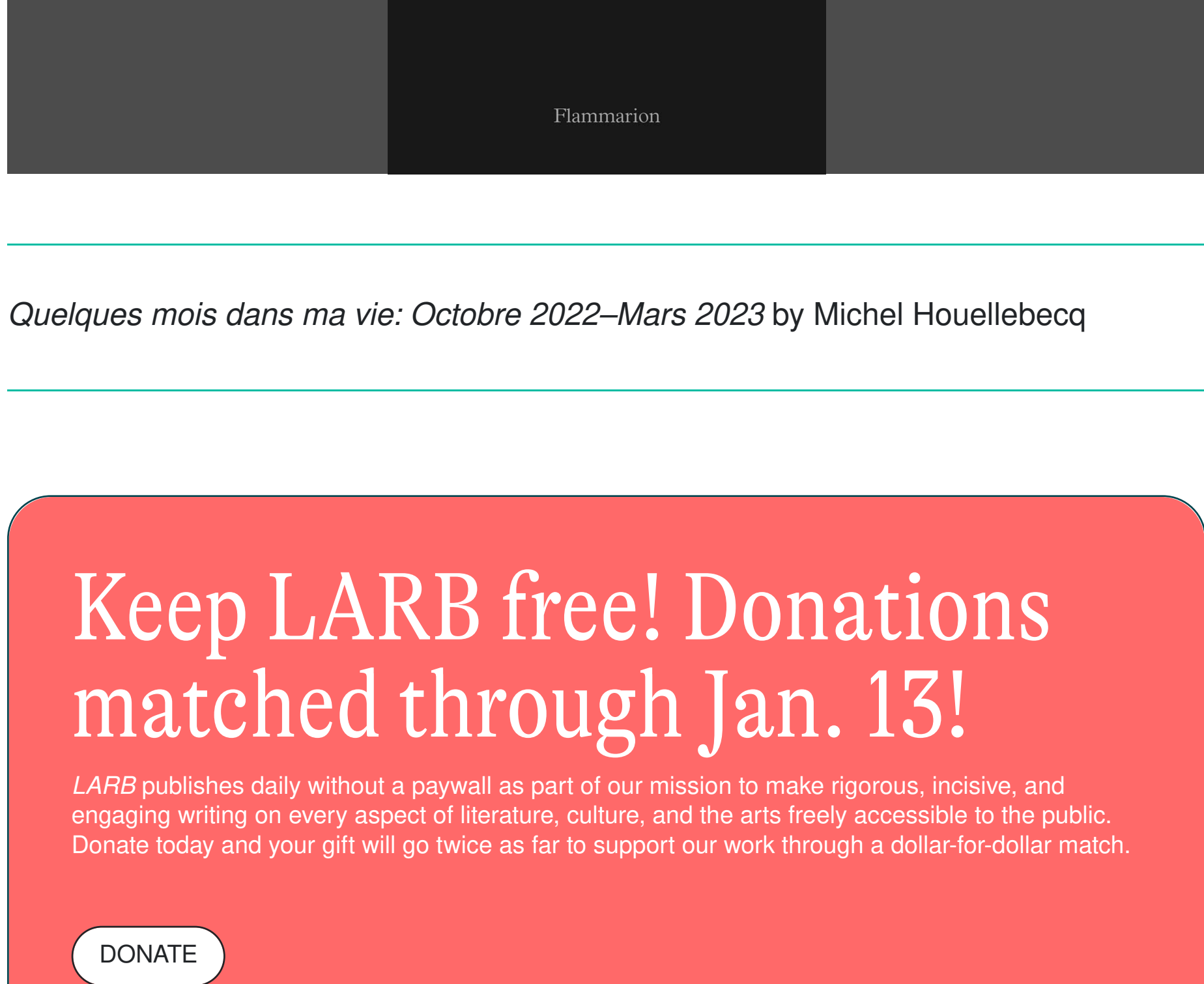
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Houellebecq’s Holy Folly: On Michel Houellebecq’s “Quelques mois dans ma vie”

By Cory Stockwell • January 4, 2024



Quelques mois dans ma vie: Octobre 2022–Mars 2023 by Michel Houellebecq

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THIS PAST SPRING, Michel Houellebecq published the book *Quelques mois dans ma vie: Octobre 2022–Mars 2023* (“A Few Months in My Life”). The short text, which is not a novel but an account of a six-month period in the author’s life, didn’t so much cause a furor in France as exacerbate one: Houellebecq had already been in the news for the two scandals with which the book deals, one of which arose from an interview in which he made several clumsy statements about Islam, the other as a result of a sexually explicit video in which he had appeared and whose distribution he has been seeking to have blocked. The book seeks to provide explanations for both scandals: for the first, Houellebecq admits his own stupidity, and provides rectifications of his original statements; for the second, he presents himself as the victim of a group of cynical pseudo-artists who took advantage of his goodwill and naivety.

The vast majority of France’s cultural establishment, however, looked upon these explanations—and the book itself—with an attitude of derision. In a review entitled “Michel Houellebecq shoots himself in the foot again,” the influential magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* [called the book](#) “a tedious exercise in revenge devoid of any literary quality”; the radio station *France Inter* succinctly [referred to it](#) as “a mess.” Elisabeth Philippe, literary critic for the leftist weekly *L’Obs*, [mused that](#) the book, “from a literary standpoint, is nothing.” “It’s very poor,” she declares, before labeling it “indecent.” The leftist daily *Libération* [asked simply](#); “Has Houellebecq gone crazy?” while the center-left *Le Monde* [called the author](#) “his own victim.” (The center-right daily *Le Figaro*, often viewed as “friendly” to Houellebecq, [devoted plenty of attention](#) to the book and the controversies surrounding it, but neglected to run an actual review.)

These judgments have been echoed in reflections on the book that have begun to appear in English. By far, the most rigorous of these is Joséphine Haillot’s [recent review](#) in *Compact*, which correctly identified Houellebecq’s severe critique of how modern Western societies have ravaged “the most intimate aspects of life, not least love and sex,” but ended up characterizing the book as a duplicitous exercise in political correctness—surely the first time the famously controversial author has been accused of this. Other reviews have been equally critical: in *Quillette*, R. J. Smith [described Houellebecq](#) as “hedonistic and self-centred,” while in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Russell Williams [argued that Houellebecq](#) “pushes the worst of himself to the fore” in the book. In a *New Statesman* review that plays loose with facts (leftist thinker Michel Onfray will be surprised to discover that he is a “conservative philosopher”), David Sexton [characterized the book](#) as “a rapidly written, rapidly published and remarkably unconvincing self-justification,” while Jonny Diamond’s [takedown in Literary Hub](#) began by labeling Houellebecq a “reactionary,” and ended by observing that his “remaining fans [are] composed largely of xenophobic incels at this point,” all [evidence to the contrary](#) be damned.

What follows is at once a review of Houellebecq’s book and an attempt to respond to this flood of criticism, which is remarkable for its unanimity. I’ll therefore have to ask whether the critics are wrong—whether the book, in other words, has any merit. My response is a resounding yes, which raises a second question: what does the chorus of disapproval with which the book has been met reveal about those doing the criticizing? The answers to both of these questions, as will become clear, are tied to Houellebecq’s constant and severe criticism of the current state of Western values, of which this book may be the clearest and most succinct expression in his entire corpus.

A word about the scandals in question. The first scandal concerned two statements Houellebecq made in a long interview with the magazine *Front populaire*: initially, an observation that young Muslims in France are more likely to commit crimes than young non-Muslims, which appeared to posit a causal link between Islam and delinquency; second, a warning of sorts that “once entire areas are under Islamist control, [Houellebecq thinks] acts of resistance will take place,” acts that might be thought of, he suggested, as an “inverse Bataclan”—the Bataclan being the Paris theater where Islamic State extremists killed 90 people in November 2015. When Chems-eddine Hafiz, rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris, lodged an official complaint against Houellebecq, the writer looked back on his statements and realized just how stupid he had been; his awkwardness with the spoken word, he notes here and elsewhere, is one of the reasons for which he so rarely gives interviews. In a subsequent meeting with Hafiz (organized by Haïm Korsia, the chief rabbi of France), Houellebecq both apologized to the rector and presented him with rectified versions of the statements (which are reproduced in the book); as a result, Hafiz withdrew his complaint.

The second scandal, on which the book focuses at far greater length, concerns Houellebecq’s dealings with the Dutch artist collective [KIRAC](#) (Keeping It Real Art Critics), and above all the man who is its “[creative center](#),” Stefan Ruitenbeek. In October 2022, Ruitenbeek contacted Houellebecq to say that he would soon be traveling to Paris in the company of a young woman, Jini van Rooijen, who, he inferred, wished to have sex with her favorite author. Houellebecq discussed the matter with his wife, [Lysis Houellebecq](#), who met the pair at a Paris restaurant, and concluded that a threesome—between her, Houellebecq, and van Rooijen—had every chance of being a success. Ruitenbeek filmed the encounter, and Houellebecq notes that there were two reasons for this: first, so that he would have a memento that he could watch fondly once old age made sex impossible for him; second, so that the video could be posted on van Rooijen’s “personal website” (the name of which—this is one of many signs of Houellebecq’s naivety—is OnlyFans). Despite what Houellebecq judged to be an unsatisfactory experience—he gives a scathing appraisal of van Rooijen’s sexual prowess—he accepted an invitation by Ruitenbeek to travel to Amsterdam a few weeks later; this time, however, he mostly rebuffed Ruitenbeek’s entreaties to film him in the company of the young women brought to his hotel by the director. While in Amsterdam, however, Houellebecq made what he now considers one of the biggest mistakes of his life, hastily signing a contract that allows Ruitenbeek to use the images he had shot in Paris for a film that would be posted on KIRAC’s website for paying customers. Houellebecq, realizing his error, took the matter to a Dutch court, where he sought to have Ruitenbeek blocked from posting the film; he lost, but immediately filed an appeal, which is ongoing.

Judging solely from this sketch, it is easy to understand Houellebecq’s critics. Is this not, after all, the behavior of a libertine—of someone, in other words, who seeks to free himself from all moral constraints—and if so, does this not leave Houellebecq open to the charge of hypocrisy? Libertines, after all, fare poorly in his novels—the best example remains Bruno from *The Elementary Particles* (1998), whose libertinage leads him to solitude and madness. Why, then, is Houellebecq so surprised when the very same behavior leads to less than positive results?

The response is quite simply that he in no way views himself as a libertine: on the contrary, he places his actions squarely within a rigorous moral system, the description and exploration of which is the book’s main purpose. He begins to outline it early in the book, as he describes the sexual encounter with his wife and van Rooijen. Pleasure in a threesome, he observes, depends not on fulfilling preexisting fantasies but on the presence of love, or at the very least those sentiments that derive from it (all translations my own):

Inspired by various erroneous psychological theories, we often overestimate the importance of fantasies in sexuality. Fantasies are individual and autonomous mental creations, developed in the absence of all human relationships; they have virtually no importance where sex is concerned, and become completely unimportant as soon as love is at stake. As everyone knows deep down, the most important component of sexuality is love. After love comes a less exhilarating—and often less exalted—sentiment that is generally referred to as *sympathy*. While a threesome between a man and two women is often thought of as first and foremost a masculine fantasy, it is in fact based on a threefold flow of simultaneous sympathy, and ideally, on love between two of the participants.

If we take Houellebecq at his word—and as readers of his novels, articles, and interviews will recognize, his observations here do not differ in any substantial way from those he has made in the past—we might say that if he is guilty of stupidity and what he freely admits is a brittle ego (he confesses on several occasions that he is a sucker for flattery), he nonetheless views his acts as direct or indirect expressions of love. In doing so, he places himself within a decidedly Christian framework.

The claim might seem ludicrous, given the nature of the acts in question, and the fact that he freely admits that he is not a believer, despite his best efforts. In a [2017 interview](#), he confessed that a much-discussed scene from his novel *Submission* (2015), in which the protagonist kneels for hours in front of an important shrine before finally admitting to himself that he is incapable of true belief, is based on his own experience; in *Quelques mois dans ma vie*, he says he is “persuaded that no society is possible, much less desirable, for long without religion,” even though, here as well, he confesses that he is not a believer. For all that, the book is shot through with religious language and imagery: Houellebecq quotes scripture, employs concepts such as admiration and transfiguration, and, above all, makes constant use of the term *Evil*—which he capitalizes throughout—when referring to KIRAC. But the book’s religious nature comes out most clearly in his understanding of joy and its conditions of possibility. In the interview to which I’ve just referred, [Houellebecq discusses joy](#) in quasi-mystical terms, maintaining that “all joy is religious in essence,” for only religion “offers the feeling of being connected to the world, of not being a stranger in an indifferent world.” And for him, there is no joy remotely comparable to the one attained through sex.

Houellebecq says as much about two-thirds of the way through the book:

Aside from sex, there are other pleasures in life, for example those related to gastronomy, to alcohol or to other drugs; if I wanted to compare their intensity to that offered by sexual pleasure, I’d have to divide by about fifty. Above all because they’re not shared, not to the same degree, and not with the same blinding sensation of union.

It is clear that his hyperbole here indicates not a quantitative but a qualitative difference, between experiencing something pleasant and being brought into a spiritual union—a communion—with another human being.

Yet even this does not go far enough. For Houellebecq, sex cannot be reduced to the two (or three) people who participate, which is why he is no mere hedonist: in his understanding, the very possibility of sex arises on the foundation of a broader sexuality, which he understands less as a personal attribute than as a societal bond of sorts, or at least an emanation of such a bond: what is at stake here is a conception of love very close to Christian *agape*, of which sexual acts, in Houellebecq’s logic—a logic in no way foreign to that of many of the greatest sexual mystics—are the highest forms of expression. Given this framework, it is easy to understand how, for Houellebecq, such acts, private though they may be, bring us into a communion with all those around us, and indeed are possible only on the basis of the bond that holds us all together in the first place.

It is on the basis of this understanding that Houellebecq feels so betrayed. When he realizes the mistake he has made in signing the contract, he decides at long last to look at KIRAC’s work: he watches their best-known film to date, *Honeypot* (2021), in which van Rooijen seduces the Dutch right-wing philosopher Sid Lukkassen, who at some point, [per KIRAC’s website](#), “realizes that the woman has set him up for humiliation.” The disgust Houellebecq feels while watching the film, and the prospect that he will soon be the subject of a similar film, leads him to make the book’s most controversial claim: “[T]hinking about these images being broadcast against my will, I felt, for the first time, something akin to what is described by women who have been raped.”

The claim seems ridiculous at first glance, and it is the main reason for which he has been taken to task in the interviews he has granted since the book’s publication. [Where he has been reminded](#) of the fact that, unlike a rape victim, he freely chose to engage in the sexual acts in question. Houellebecq is nothing if not rigorous in his reasoning, however, noting that, like a rape victim, he experienced “a painful feeling of being dispossessed of his own body, a dull hostility towards it, a desire to punish it”; overall, he says, he felt utterly ashamed. All of this led him to feel a disgust for sex, and this, he argues, is “the worst consequence of rape,” for “to infect the sources of joy in a person seems to me, indeed, not to be far from a crime.” This infection of joy is precisely the accusation he makes against KIRAC. As he watched *Honeypot*, he recalls, “I had, for the first time in my life, the impression that sexuality contained something *dirty*”; overall, the films of KIRAC “inspire a true disgust with regard to sexuality, and perhaps, if endured in overly frequent doses, a permanent disgust.” In doing so, they pervert the bonds of love from which sexuality is inseparable, leaving us with nothing more than a semblance or a spectacle of this love. Is it any wonder, then—given that KIRAC is less a cause than a symptom—that our time is characterized by what Houellebecq calls an “immense movement toward asexuality”?

It is at these moments—when Houellebecq discusses what he calls the “absolutely modern” nature of KIRAC’s evil—that his work joins up with the many writers and thinkers who have recently examined our turn toward asexuality, figures such as Matthew B. Crawford, whose work turns often to the question of what makes societies sexy (a sexiness, he says, that continues to dwindle “[in our radically anti-sexy times](#)”), and Geoff Shullenberger, who has gone so far as to refer to what is taking place in our era as an [asexual revolution](#). Rather than merely joining these voices, however, Houellebecq adds something new, or at least fleshes out something that to this point has remained obscure: the idea that this asexual revolution is quite simply an attack on the bonds that have traditionally tied us together.

What is perhaps most troubling about all of this, to return to the question with which I began, is that Houellebecq’s critics, far from disagreeing with him on this point, don’t even identify it as an issue—a sure sign that they already inhabit a world from which sexuality has been evacuated. To be sure, this is not a world from which sex has disappeared; it may even proliferate and take on hitherto unseen forms. But it is a world in which the links between sex and sexuality—and, more broadly, love—have been severed.

Houellebecq, for his part, refuses to completely give up hope, stating at the end of the book that, while he has abandoned every other belief, “I still believe in love.” It is no doubt on the basis of this belief that he has written this book, which should be viewed as a brief but major addition to his corpus, one that sketches out a framework within which his entire oeuvre might be read.

LARB CONTRIBUTOR

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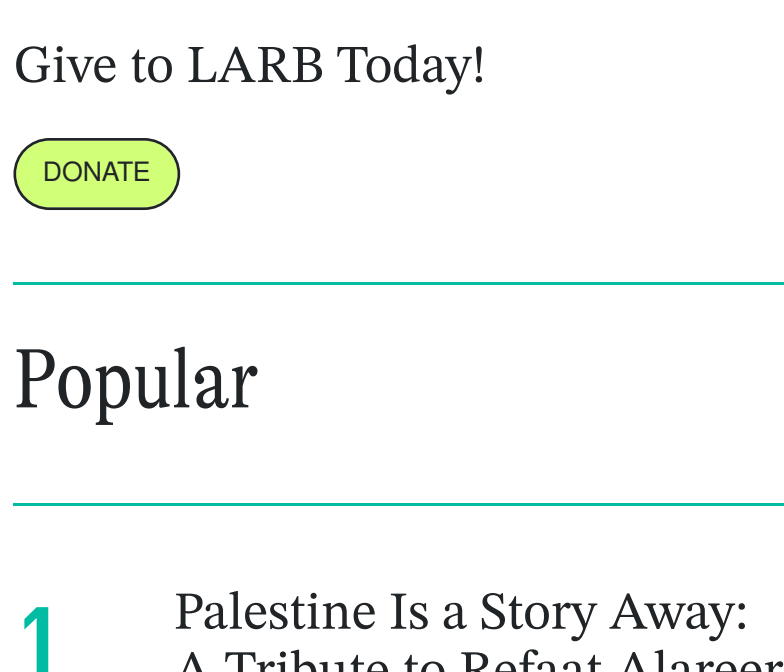
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