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Michel Houellebecq performs at the Printemps de Bourges music festival in Bourges, central France, April 20th, 2022. (Photo by GUILLAUME SOUVANT via Getty Images)

The Sorrow and the Self-Pity

Michel Houellebecq's new memoir reveals a man quick to find fault with others but slow to accept responsibility for his woes.

RJ Smith
26 Jun 2023 · 7 min read

French novelist and *enfant terrible* Michel Houellebecq has never been afraid to court controversy. His breakthrough 1998 novel ***Atomised*** (also known as *The Elementary Particles*) won the Dublin literary award but was also described by Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* as "a deeply repugnant read." When Houellebecq won the *Prix Novembre* for the book in his native France, an internal struggle led one of the judges to resign and the competition to be renamed the *Prix Décembre*.

Since his *chef d'oeuvre* was published in 1998, Houellebecq has released a steady stream of novels, most of which are set in societies where the value of individual autonomy has become absolute. This great social malaise, in Houellebecq's view, may be traced to the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which reached its apotheosis with the Summer of Love in the United States, and with the violent upheavals of May 1968 in France.

Houellebecq's parents enthusiastically embraced the youth culture of that period, despite not being particularly young at the time. The author's "old slut of a mother" (as he once described her) was well into her 40s when she abandoned her son in the early 1960s to seek self-actualisation on the hippie trails of South America. So, few could blame Houellebecq for harbouring resentment about the value system that emerged during his formative years.

What keeps landing him in trouble are his musings on the downstream effects. Loneliness and pleasure-seeking are obvious examples and feature strongly in Houellebecq's work. More controversial are his readings of the compatibility of cosmopolitan hedonism with traditional belief systems. On the social plane, this is evident in the clash between liberal modernity and Islam at home (which he considers in ***Submission***) and abroad (a theme in ***Platform***). On the economic plane, there is the

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clash between the West's traditional blue-collar base and those who favour free trade and globalisation (as examined in *Serotonin* and the-as-yet-untranslated *Anéantir*).

Unsurprisingly, given this subject matter and the climate in which we now live, Houellebecq has found himself embroiled in a number of legal and media-driven scandals during his career. But as we learn in his new book, no period of his life has been more difficult than late 2022 to early 2023.

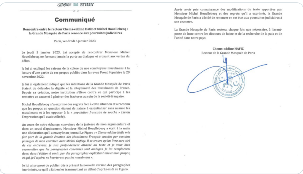
In *Quelques Mois dans ma Vie* (A Few Months in My Life), which was published in France by Flammarion on May 24th, 2023, Houellebecq discusses the two scandals that have most recently consumed his life. The first of these followed a discussion with French philosopher Michel Onfray in the latter's *Front Populaire* magazine, in which Houellebecq declared that French people don't want Muslims to assimilate but to "cease raping and assaulting." Failing this, he proposed that "they leave." Houellebecq also said this:

> When entire French territories are really under Islamist control, I think acts of resistance will take place. There will be attacks and shootings in mosques, in cafes frequented by Muslims. In short, Bataclans in reverse. And Muslims won't be content to light candles and lay bouquets of flowers in response.

That statement led the Rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris to take Houellebecq to court for incitement to violence. Houellebecq sent a rapid clarification to *Le Figaro*, which prompted the Rector to drop the case (though a separate suit brought by Mohammed Moussaoui, president of the Union of Mosques of France, is proceeding).

Grande Mosquée de Paris
@mosqueedeparis · Follow

𝐂𝐎𝐌𝐌𝐔𝐍𝐈𝐐𝐔𝐄 | Après avoir pris connaissance des modifications du texte apportées par Michel Houellebecq et des regrets qu'il a exprimés lors de sa rencontre avec @ChemsHafiz, la Mosquée de Paris a décidé de renoncer en cet état aux poursuites judiciaires à son encontre.



Communiqué

Rencontre entre le recteur Chems-eddine Hafiz et Michel Houellebecq : la Grande Mosquée de Paris renonce aux poursuites judiciaires

Paris, vendredi 6 janvier 2023

Le jeudi 5 janvier 2023, j'ai accepté de rencontrer Monsieur Michel Houellebecq, ne fermant jamais la porte au dialogue et croyant aux vertus du débat.

Je lui ai expliqué les raisons de la colère de nos concitoyens musulmans à la lecture d'une partie de ses propos publiés dans la revue Front Populaire le 29 novembre 2022.

Je lui ai également indiqué que les intentions de la Grande Mosquée de Paris étaient de défendre la dignité et la citoyenneté des musulmans de France. Depuis sa création, notre institution s'élève contre ce qui participe à les remettre en cause et à générer des fractures au sein de la société française.

Michel Houellebecq m'a exprimé des regrets face à cette situation et a reconnu que les propos en question étaient de nature à essentialiser sans nuance les musulmans et à les opposer à la « *population française de souche* » (selon l'expression qu'il avait utilisée).

Au cours de notre échange, convaincu de la justesse de mon argumentaire et dans un souci d'apaisement, Monsieur Michel Houellebecq a écrit à la main une déclaration qu'il a envoyée au journal Le Figaro : « *Chems-eddine Hafiz m'a fait part de la grande émotion des Musulmans Français causées par certains passages de mon entretien avec Michel Onfray. Il se trouve qu'un livre sera tiré de ces entrevues. Je suis profondément attaché au texte et je veux bien reconnaître que les paragraphes concernés sont ambigus. Je les remplacerai donc, dans l'édition à venir, par des paragraphes explicitant mieux mon propos, et qui, je l'espère, ne heurteront pas les musulmans* ».

Je lui ai proposé de publier dès à présent la nouvelle version des paragraphes incriminés, ce qu'il a fait en les transmettant en début d'après-midi au Figaro.

Après avoir pris connaissance des modifications du texte apportées par Monsieur Michel Houellebecq et des regrets qu'il a exprimés, la Grande Mosquée de Paris a décidé de renoncer en cet état aux poursuites judiciaires à son encontre.

La Grande Mosquée de Paris restera, chaque fois que nécessaire, à l'avant-poste de lutte contre les discours de haine et de la recherche de la paix et de l'unité dans notre pays.

Chems-eddine HAFIZ
Recteur de la Grande Mosquée de Paris

11:18 AM · Jan 6, 2023

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In his new book, Houellebecq replaces the "when" with an "if" and explains that civil war is unlikely to happen, so long as police are still able to penetrate all French territory, even if they have to rely on what he calls "significant means." He adds that delinquency and Islam are not causally linked—on the contrary, religions forbid their followers from engaging in delinquency. The problem, he writes, is social not religious, and he points out that "violent and determined" minorities have historically been responsible for great social change, citing the French, Russian, and Iranian revolutions. Houellebecq's gripe in this affair is with himself (he calls his own remarks "stupid" and "dumb") but he also complains that Onfray refused to take the interview down.

The second affair concerns Houellebecq's participation in a pornographic film produced by a Dutch art collective called Keeping It Real Art Critics (KIRAC). According to

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Houellebecq, Stefan Ruitenbeek—a member of KIRAC whom Houellebecq calls "the Cockroach"—got in touch with Houellebecq to ask if he would like to participate in an H.P. Lovecraft-themed event. This piqued Houellebecq's interest and the two men began corresponding.

In October 2022, Ruitenbeek sent Houellebecq an email, in which he announced that he would be coming to Paris with a young woman who was keen to have sex with the author. Houellebecq sent his wife to a Parisian restaurant to meet the Cockroach and the young woman, whom Houellebecq calls "the Sow." The Sow asked Houellebecq's wife if the encounter, in which Houellebecq's wife would participate, could be filmed by the Cockroach for the Sow's OnlyFans account.

Here, Houellebecq offers his readers a spirited defence of amateur pornography, which he says he prefers to the tacky, unrealistic, and poorly acted but professional variety. Thinking that he would be participating in a bit of "honest exhibitionism" before a small group of dedicated fans, Houellebecq and his wife agreed. After a "less than mediocre" blowjob from the Sow, who showed "no sign of bisexuality" and was content to be "screwed" in "an attitude of passivity," Houellebecq was alarmed to discover that OnlyFans is a site where subscribers pay for content.

The Cockroach later asked Houellebecq to come to Amsterdam, where a number of young ladies who were "assiduous readers" wished to have sex with the author for a KIRAC film. That he accepted the invitation, Houellebecq concedes, "might seem incomprehensible" following the dismal episode in Paris. But Houellebecq says he had never had the opportunity to properly visit the Dutch capital, and was assured that the film would be produced in an "art film" or "Hollywood" rather than pornographic style.

Houellebecq arrived in Amsterdam and was met by members of the Cockroach's film crew. A bottle of wine and a few sedatives later, he was presented with a contract (reproduced in the book in its entirety), which even in his stupefied state, he was confident did not give the Cockroach the right to film him engaging in sexual acts.

Houellebecq paid close attention to clause 1.3, which prevented the Cockroach from showing Houellebecq or his wife's face and their genitals in the same frame, and which stipulated that the film would be produced in the manner Houellebecq had earlier insisted upon. The author neglected to consider clause 1.4, which assigned the Cockroach the right to use the footage he had shot in Paris in November 2022.

Production of the film in Amsterdam came to an acrimonious halt just before Christmas 2022, and by late January 2023, Houellebecq was back in France. Around this time, **the film's trailer** began circulating online. Houellebecq went back and checked the contract, and finally became aware of the importance of clause 1.4.

He contacted his French lawyers in a panic and instructed them to have the trailer pulled from the Internet. The case was thrown out for want of jurisdiction. Houellebecq's attempt to suppress the film was also rejected in the Netherlands. The court was unconvinced that Houellebecq lacked capacity to enter into the contract due to his intoxication and depression at the time.

Houellebecq appealed, but having lost faith in his own country's legal system, he had no reason to believe he would succeed in the Netherlands. Just before the book's publication, the **Amsterdam appeal court ruled** that Houellebecq must be shown the film before its release so that he could take further legal action should he be unhappy with its contents.

In one sense, we do not learn much from *Quelques Mois dans ma Vie*. That Houellebecq excites the ire of Islamic interest groups and has an insatiable sexual appetite will not surprise anyone familiar with his work. The book is of interest because of the vulnerability Houellebecq displays in discussing one of the worst periods of a life beset by loneliness and insanity.

In perhaps the strangest passage, Houellebecq declares that he doesn't like feminists and that they don't like him, but that he experienced something akin to the feeling of being raped following his affair with the Cockroach and the Sow. Houellebecq describes a "feeling of dispossession" that left him unable to wash himself, destroyed his sex drive, made him more dependent on alcohol and tobacco, and produced waves of "impotent rage" and even symptoms of bulimia.

At first blush, this clumsy comparison gives us a sense of the author's anguish. On deeper reflection, we find a steadfast refusal on Houellebecq's part to accept responsibility for his woes. When he appears in an interview and says things he shouldn't, it is the interviewer's fault for broadcasting the discussion. When he accepts an invitation to be filmed having sex with a woman he has just met, it is the fault of the producer when some of that footage ends up online.

Much of Houellebecq's work and worldview seem to be inspired by his mother's neglect. In a book tellingly entitled *The Innocent*, Houellebecq's mother describes her only son as an "evil, stupid little bastard." Houellebecq in turn claimed in an early essay entitled *Mourir* ("To Die"): "When I was a baby, my mother didn't cradle me enough, didn't hold me enough; she just wasn't tender. That explains the rest, pretty much the whole of my personality, the most painful parts anyway."

However much we may admire Houellebecq's fiction, in *Quelques Mois dans ma Vie*, he betrays many of the same foibles as his mother. His lifestyle is hedonistic and self-centred, and he is quick to minimise his own culpability and point the finger at others. His mother's radical communist beliefs were undoubtedly wrongheaded, but at least they had the merit of coherence. Houellebecq's views, on the other hand, are hard to reconcile, if not entirely contradictory. He is a materialist atheist who invokes the sanctity of life in support of his opposition to euthanasia; he is the sworn enemy of liberal decadence who engages in orgies with young fans; and he is an opponent of Enlightenment idealism who swears allegiance to positivist utopian, Auguste Comte.

Towards the end of the book, Houellebecq claims: "I don't believe in ideas; I believe in people." Let down by many of his supposed allies, the Frenchman has received solidarity from unlikely places during his darkest hours. He praises the "immense, warm and loyal" support of his onetime "public enemy," Bernard-Henri Lévy, and he has found comfort in Gérard Depardieu's assurance that "literature always wins in the end."

Houellebecq is fighting what he believes to be a virtuous war on several fronts—against the inhuman interlopers who betrayed him to make a name for themselves; against the lies of the camera that assault the truth of the written word; and against the moral turpitude of almost everyone but himself. Is this a war he can win? Houellebecq's pen is his only weapon. For all his talents, this time it might not be enough.

Art and Culture

Books

Houellebecq

RJ Smith

RJ Smith is an Australian writer and academic living in France. He teaches at the Sorbonne and is the author of the 'City Limit' series of novels.

Member discussion

10 comments

6 days ago

I like Houellebecq as an author but, seemingly like all creative types, has bizarre personality traits that critics can use to dismiss any interesting points he raises.

A more important issue (to me) is the marriage of convenience between "progressives" and Islam: secular, modernist, pro-women, pro-gay (so they say) on the one side, allied with a highly conservative religion that suppresses the rights of women and gays. How can this possibly be a thing? Why do the left leap to Islam's defense at every opportunity? I would LOVE a leftist to be asked by Quillette to pen an essay justifying this ideological anomaly.

PS I know exactly why this alliance exists, and it starts with I and ends in srael.

♡ 6

BK **Barbara Kay**

6 days ago

Speaking of strange bedfellows, one can see an emerging alliance between conservatives - not only practicing Christians, but merely smart and conscientious parents, who understand the harms it is causing - and Muslims around the issue of aggressive gender ideology in the schools. The enemy of my enemy and all that.

♡ 3

> CM **Christopher J Moss**
>
> 6 days ago
>
> Not necessarily a bad thing, though it makes me nervous to think of such an alliance moving on from the school battlegrounds to the wider world. We have seen what 'morality police' can do in Iran, and I can't say I like any hint of that. A combination of the Moral Majority and Mullahs could be unpleasant.
>
> ♡ 1
>
> WH **Wilson Hayeck**
>
> Lifelong learner, worker, thinker. · 6 days ago
>
> I agree with your puzzlement and with your conclusion. However, the old saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" might not apply in this situation for very long. If or when the Islamacists gain sufficient power, progressives will be the first to go.
>
> ♡ 1

william s etheridge

Curiosity. · 6 days ago

At first glance, loosely recalls Louis-Ferdinand Céline,

Dearth of common sense.

♡ 0

A **Avatar22**

6 days ago

This famous author who despises hedonism and the freewheeling sexual liberation of the 60s agreed to participate in a filmed group sex video to be published online but went into a depression and felt betrayed when said video was, in fact, published according to plan? (because his face was visible)

There's just so much about this story that I don't understand.

♡ 5

KM **Kelly Madden**

6 days ago

Interesting, I suppose, but it doesn't change the value of his writing, other than to underline the personal poignancy of our tragic age.

♡ 2

AS **Alexander Simonelis**

5 days ago

1-What did he expect engaging in a project with people named the cockroach and the sow?

2-Why do people pay attention to Houllebecq?

♡ 2

DC **David Crouch**

5 days ago

I am astounded that both the fictional and real life victimhood robes of adornment, no matter how well or wittily they are garbed, are taken and treated so seriously. It says something very deep about the last 30 years or so of our society, especially in France. .

♡ 0

M **Michael**

psychologist · 4 days ago

i cannot find the slightest interest in this man and his life.

♡ 0

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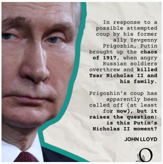
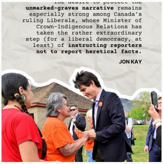


In response to a possible attempted coup by his former ally Yevgenny Prigozhin, Putin brought up the **chaos of 1917**, when angry Russian soldiers overthrew and **killed Tsar Nicholas II and his family**.

Prigozhin's coup has apparently been called off (at least for **now), but it raises the question: is this Putin's Nicholas II moment?**

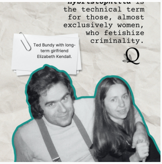
JOHN LLOYD



The desire to protect the **unmarked-graves narrative** remains especially strong among Canada's ruling Liberals, whose Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations has taken the rather extraordinary step (for a liberal democracy, at least) of **instructing reporters not to report heretical facts.**

JON KAY

It's hip to be "trad".



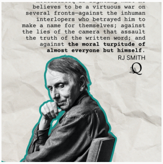
hybristophilia is the technical term for those, almost exclusively women, who fetishize criminality.

Ted Bundy with long-term girlfriend Elizabeth Kendall.

When being "normal" is not cool enough.

I came out as a self Diagnosed Autistic on Thursday 🖤

Autism Acceptance Includes Self-Diagnosis Acceptance.



believes to be a virtuous war on several fronts—against the inhuman interlopers who betrayed him to make a name for themselves; against the lies of the camera that assault the truth of the written word; and against **the moral turpitude of almost everyone but himself**.

RJ SMITH

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