



# SVENSKA AKADEMIEN

## Biobibliography

The French writer **Annie Ernaux** was born in 1940 and grew up in the small town of Yvetot in Normandy, where her parents had a combined grocery store and café. Her setting was poor but ambitious, with parents who had pulled themselves up from proletarian survival to a bourgeois life, where the memories of beaten earth floors never disappeared but where politics was seldom broached. In her writing, Ernaux consistently and from different angles, examines a life marked by strong disparities regarding gender, language and class. Her path to authorship was long and arduous.

Her memory work dealing with her rural background appeared early as a project attempting to widen the boundaries of literature beyond fiction in the narrow sense. Despite her classic, distinctive style, she declares that she is an “ethnologist of herself” rather than a writer of fiction. She often refers to Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but equally illuminating is that she has been deeply impressed by a sociologist like Pierre Bourdieu. The ambition to rip apart the veil of fiction has led Ernaux to a methodic reconstruction of the past but also to an attempt to write a ‘raw’ type of prose in the form of a diary, registering purely external events. We see this in books such as *Journal du dehors* (1993; *Exteriors*, 1996) or *La vie extérieure 1993–1999* (2000; *Things Seen*, 2010).

Annie Ernaux’s debut was *Les armoires vides* (1974; *Cleaned Out*, 1990), and already in this work she started her investigation of her Norman background, but it was her fourth book, *La place* (1983; *A Man’s Place*, 1992), that delivered her literary breakthrough. In a scant hundred pages she produced a dispassionate portrait of her father and the entire social milieu that had fundamentally formed him. The portrait employed her developing restrained and ethically motivated aesthetics, where her style has been forged hard and transparent. It flagged a series of autobiographical prose works one step beyond the imaginary worlds of fiction. And even if there is still a narrative voice, it is neutral and as far as possible anonymized. Moreover, Ernaux has inserted reflexions about her writing, where she distances herself from “the poetry of memory” and advocates *une écriture plate*: plain writing which in solidarity with the father evinces his world and his language. The concept *écriture plate* is related to *le nouveau roman* in France from the 1950s and the striving towards what Roland Barthes called a “zero degree of writing”. There

is however also an important political dimension in Ernaux's language. Her writing is always shadowed by a feeling of treason against the social class from which she departs. She has said that writing is a political act, opening our eyes for social inequality. And for this purpose she uses language as "a knife", as she calls it, to tear apart the veils of imagination. In this violent yet chaste ambition to reveal the truth, she is also an heir of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

A few years later, she gave us an even shorter portrait, now of her mother, simply called *Une femme* (1987; *A Woman's Story*, 1990). It offers significant elucidations on the nature of Ernaux's writings, shifting between fiction, sociology and history. In its severe brevity it is a wonderful tribute to a strong woman, who more than the father had been able to maintain her dignity, often in fraught conditions. In her relationship to her mother, shame and onerous silence are not present in the same acute way.

Illustrative for the agony that accompanies Annie Ernaux's reconstruction of the past is *La honte* (1996; *Shame*, 1998). It appears in many ways to be a continuation of the portrait of her father in its attempt to explain the sudden rage of the father against her mother at one particular moment in the past. The first line is a veritable whiplash: "My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon." As always, Ernaux seeks to exceed the limit of the tolerable. With her own words in the book: "I have always wanted to write the sort of book that I find it impossible to talk about afterward, the sort of book that makes it impossible for me to withstand the gaze of others." What makes the experience unbearable is the shame rooted in humiliating living conditions. When Annie Ernaux writes, the question of dignity or lack of dignity is moot. Literature gives her a haven to write what is impossible to communicate in direct contact with others. For Ernaux, before one's sexual debut, shame turns out to be the only lasting trait in personal identity.

A masterpiece from her production is the clinically restrained narrative about a 23-year-old narrator's illegal abortion, *L'événement* (2000; *Happening*, 2001). It is a first-person narrative, and the distance to the historical self is not stressed as in many other works. The I is made an object anyway through the moral restrictions of a repressive society and the patronizing attitude of people she is confronted with. It is a ruthlessly honest text, where in parentheses she adds reflexions in a vitally lucid voice, addressing herself and the reader in one and the same flow. In the spaces in between, we are in the time of writing, 25 years after the "event" took place, making even the reader intensely part of what once happened.

In *L'occupation* (2002; *The Possession*, 2008) Ernaux dissects the social mythology of romantic love. On the basis of notes in a diary recording her abandonment by a lover, she both confesses and attacks a self-image built on stereotypes. Her jealousy is painfully revealed as a form of obsession, and once more the dates of writing signal the moment when writing becomes a sharp weapon dissecting truth.

Annie Ernaux's writing is throughout subordinated to the process of time. Nowhere else, the power of social conventions over our lives plays such an important role as in *Les années* (2008;

*The Years*, 2017). It is her most ambitious project, which has given her an international reputation and a raft of followers and literary disciples. It has been called “the first collective autobiography” and the German poet Durs Grünbein has lauded it as a pathbreaking “sociological epic” of the contemporary Western world. Ernaux substitutes in the narrative the spontaneous memory of the self with the third person of collective memory, suggesting the force of zeitgeist on her life. There is no affective memory in the Proustian sense with which she can transport herself directly to her early years. Our lives are formed by the stories being told, the songs being sung or the trends in rule. And these conventions rapidly pass by. Therefore, Ernaux has great difficulty recognizing herself in the person that she once was. In *Les années*, personal and collective memory have merged together.

Annie Ernaux always returns to the obstacles of clear vision. In her social perspective the mechanisms of shame have a special force, and in *Mémoire de fille* (2016; *A Girl's Story*, 2019), she recovers them from another angle. In that work she confronts herself as a young woman at the end of the 1950s, when she loses her virginity at a summer colony in Orne, Normandy. The reactions to her behaviour, which she herself contributes to make known, have the effect that she is expelled from the community. During half her life the writer has chosen not to deal with the painful event, which had negative effects both on her mental and physical health. She writes that it is a question of “a different kind of shame from that of being the daughter of shop-and-café keepers. It is the shame of having once been proud of being an object of desire.” Her eye is just as ruthless against herself as a young woman as against the ones humiliating her. A key passage runs: “When you want to clarify a prevailing truth [...] this is always missing: the lack of understanding of your experience at the moment when you make your experience.” This obstacle is called “the opacity of the present”.

Annie Ernaux manifestly believes in the liberating force of writing. Her work is uncompromising and written in plain language, scraped clean. And when she with great courage and clinical acuity reveals the agony of the experience of class, describing shame, humiliation, jealousy or inability to see who you are, she has achieved something admirable and enduring.

Anders Olsson  
Chairman of the Nobel Committee  
The Swedish Academy

The quotations are taken from:

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