



Novels in Three Lines

Félix Fénéon, Luc Sante (Introduction)

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A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS ORIGINAL

Novels in Three Lines collects more than a thousand items that appeared anonymously in the French newspaper *Le Matin* in 1906—true stories of murder, mayhem, and everyday life presented with a ruthless economy that provokes laughter even as it shocks. This extraordinary trove, undiscovered until the 1940s and here translated for the first time into English, is the work of the mysterious Félix Fénéon. Dandy, anarchist, and critic of genius, the discoverer of Georges Seurat and the first French publisher of James Joyce, Fénéon carefully maintained his own anonymity, toiling for years as an obscure clerk in the French War Department. *Novels in Three Lines* is his secret chef-d'oeuvre, a work of strange and singular art that brings back the long-ago year of 1906 with the haunting immediacy of a photograph while looking forward to such disparate works as Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project and the Death and Disaster series of Andy Warhol.

Novels in Three Lines Details

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Hugh says

Delightful! Could function as a lifetime of writing prompts. "Pauline Rivera, 20, repeatedly stabbed, with a hatpin, the face of the inconstant Luthier, a dishwasher of Chatou, who had underestimated her."

Edward says

Introduction, by Luc Sante

--Novels in Three Lines

List of Illustrations

Hadrian says

A collection of short little articles chronicling the absurd and comic and tragic events of 1904 France. The brevity and soul of a Maupassant, the journalist realism of Zola, in the length of a Tweet.

Adam Dalva says

A real find - this is a collection of 3 line newspaper reports by the enigmatic Felix Feneon. The introduction by Luc Sante is both illustrative and fantastic (it may be the high-point of the whole book.) Feneon is something of a Zelig figure whose literary output was limited, but the anonymity and fun of this particular form plays to his strengths. Think David Markson mixed with Lydia Davis, and add to that a strongly representative look at early 20th century France. The stories are often hilarious, sometimes moving, and it's fun to track certain oblique plots (this is Markson-y) through time: people trying to teach children about god; notorious phonewire thieves, fever, suicide. Feneon seems particularly fascinated by suicide, and, as the title suggests, there is a depth to many of these. The ultimate iceberg book. As a writer, it is up there with The Anatomy of Melancholy and Cheever's letters as an idea generator. The translation is a bit funky at points because it is necessarily obsessed with word-order - that gives these pieces a touch of poetry.

Here are 4 of my favorites:

- "If my candidate loses, I will kill myself," M. Bellavoine, of Fresquienne, Seine-Inferieure, had declared. He killed himself.

- Bonnaut, a locksmith in Montreuil, was chatting on his doorstep when the gangster called Shoe Face struck him twice with a knife.

- At Sainte-Anne beach, in Finistere, two swimmers were drowning. Another swimmer went to help. Finally

M. Etienne had to rescue all three people.

- At the Trianon Palace, a visitor disrobed and climbed into the imperial bed. It is disputed whether he is, as he claims, Napoleon IV.

Tony says

In 1906, Felix Feneon, an anarchist on his days off, wrote news items in three carefully crafted lines of one-column typeface. They read like French Haiku.

to-wit:

"If my candidate loses, I will kill myself," M. Bellavoine of Fresquienne, Seine-Inferieure, had declared. He killed himself.

At Saint-Anne beach, in Finistere, two swimmers were drowning. Another swimmer went to help. Finally M. Etienne had to rescue three people.

Harold Bauer and Casals will give a concert today in San Sebastian. Besides that, they may fight a duel.

Seventy-year-old beggar Verniot, of Clichy, died of hunger. His pallet disgorged 2,000 francs. But no one should make generalizations.

"To die like Joan of Arc!" cried Terbaud from the top of a pyre made of his furniture. The firemen stifled his ambition.

As if in mythological times, a ram has assaulted a shepherdess of Saint-Laurent, in the bed of the Var, where she was grazing her flock.

Adding salt to the sea, the Collburnary, which had that as its cargo, sank off Camaret, Finistere. The crew was rescued.

The artistry of a well-crafted sentence is apparent. Yet, the result is more clever than brilliant.

Dismemberments, suicides, adulteries gone wrong. Repeated often enough by Felix to bore Tony.

Iophil says

Recensione in tre parole per Romanzi in tre righe:

Sono
Estremamente
Perplesso.

Sparrow says

If you've wandered extensively around the Museum of Modern Art, you know this otherwise obscure author, because he's the subject of a great painting by Paul Signac in which Félix holds a tophat and cane, and offers a flower to... no one visible. Behind him kaleidoscopic colors swirl. Signac invented psychedelia to describe Félix Fénéon – and in this book we learn why. In 1906 Félix worked at a newspaper called *Le Matin*, where he had a job summarizing obscure news items. This he transformed into a pre-Dadaist (anonymous) art form. Here's one:

“On the riverbank at Saint-Cloud were found the saber and uniform of Baudet, the soldier who disappeared the 11th. Murder, suicide, or hoax?”

And here's a second:

“Between Ville-du-Bois and Monthéry, vagrants beat to a pulp Thomas, a tailor, and emptied his pockets.”

Reading 1066 of these – nimbly translated by Luc Sante – slowly redefines “literature” in one's mind. The glaring uncertainty of life, its manifold dangers, yet the love one may feel even for a stranger – with no last name – inspire these pieces. Fénéon had a sense of humor like no one else on earth.

Ali says

Pre-review, 15 May, 01:35:

Oh look! I just finished reading a book, and I'm writing a review for it right away, as opposed to waiting for five or six weeks! That hasn't happened in months. ...

And it won't happen now, because I need to slump down on the floor and pass out in a haze brought on by copious amounts of Cerveza Caguama and miserI mean, get some peaceful beauty sleep so that I may wake up, more devilishly handsome than ever before, and, after calling up the sixty-four girls whose numbers I got at the club and who absolutely did not break beer bottles over my head to arrange some hot dates, I will pick up my golden...uh...keyboard, and pen this review for all your adoration (ladies). This is what the fast paced world of the twenty-first century does to a man! You have to prioritize!

Feliks says

Thoroughly enjoyable. A book designed for easy browsing and riffling through. You can pick it up; read a few of these items, and then set it down again.

Really, it's one of the finest examples of its type I have come across. Pithy, terse, quizzical encomiums plucked from the ranks of everyday life.

Superb in their selection: suicides, venereal diseases, executions, street accidents, horses bolting, men killed

cleaning their pistols, suspicious packages, foundlings and orphans, strikes, riots, embezzlements, blackmails, husbands shooting their wives; wives-poisoning-their-lovers.

This is livin'!

My favorite so far:

'His head injury was not serious, believed Kremer--of Pont-a-Mousson--who continued working for a few hours, and then dropped dead.'

There is an art inherent to making succinct statements. Perfectly punctuated, too. Newspapers--from which these morsels are all drawn--show how it's done. This is a non-fictive work!

Thus: a superb format for a shelf or a coffee table, because every page intrigues.

And the lesson of the book is clear: the human condition never changes. Newspaper obit and police blotters are the same from era to era. There were morons a hundred years ago and there are just as many morons today. More!

Jim says

What a strange book! Read this one, and you will reconsider the whole notion of the French being a rarefied and civilized race. **Novels in Three Lines** consists of nothing hundreds of two- and three-line news pieces, usually bizarre, violent, and occasionally mysterious. Its author, Félix Fénéon (1861-1944) was at one and the same time an anarchist, a litterateur, and a champion of the arts (he discovered Toulouse-Lautrec). Yet, however well connected he was, he preferred to cling to the shadows: "*Je n'aspire qu'au silence*," was how he put it.

In 1906, he wrote these "novels in three lines" for *Le Matin*, a liberal broadsheet. Here are a few selections, just to give you the flavor of the work:

"Again and again Mme Couderc, of Saint-Ouen, was prevented from hanging herself from her window bolt. Exasperated, she fled across the fields."

"Mme Fournier, M Vouin, M Septeuil, of Sucy, Tripleval, Septeuil, hanged themselves: neurasthenia, cancer, unemployment."

"A dishwasher from Nancy, Vital Frérotte, who had just come back from Lourdes cured forever of tuberculosis, died Sunday by mistake."

The religious repetition of names, places, and means of mayhem become like a sort of haiku. It reminds me of a book that came out almost thirty years ago, Michael Lesy's **Wisconsin Death Trip**, except with Fénéon, the method is pure poetry, rather than the combination of photographs and longer news stories.

Khashayar Mohammadi says

Fantastic concept, but although the translation is decent, some sentences are awkward and hard to comprehend

"A Parisian singer, of Rue Saint-Antoine, M. Henry Nonnoy, 31, drowned at the cape of Chamigny while bathing"

Or

"Avenging her band, expelled from Cormeilles-en-Parisis, Nita Rosch, a gypsy bit a leathery policeman from Argenteuil"

Over-all a refreshing book and a unique find. Worth reading once.

Cody says

Absolutely brilliant. No, there is no 'plot' to speak of, no 'narrative.' What lies inside is something entirely original. Culled from Fénéon's year as a reporter, his distillation of the chaos of humanity is incomparable—all in three lines.

The book starts out curio-clever and delightful in its beyond-mordent delivery, but somewhere, as if by transubstantiation, there's a paradigmatic shift impossible to pinpoint. As the year rolls on, Fénéon the man emerges. It's in the way that he orders words, the angles he takes on his subject. While all are facts, you come to know him through his manipulation of language. His opinions on religion, love, money, poverty, and more slowly reveal themselves, and the author's handling of one far-too-recurring crime betrays a man with a lovely heart. What more could you ask for?

Everyone will get something different out of this. I got devastated.

Kathrina says

"On the left shoulder of a newborn, whose corpse was found near the 22nd Artillery barracks, a tattoo: a cannon."

And thus begins the tale by Edgar Allan Poe...what, no. In fact, it is the story complete, published on a regular newsday on 1906 for *Le Matin*, a popular French broadsheet. Felix Feneon, a writer and intellectual who traveled in circles with the leading radicals of French literati of his time, humbly took a job for less than a year as the author of the *faits-divers*, a daily column of small news items. At the time, no one apparently noticed the skill and finesse he applied to his lines, but years later they were collected, with very little else of his writing, though he is acknowledged as the invisible support behind many a famed French author, including Proust, Apollinaire, Paul Claudel, and more. He employed, as the editor of his own publication, *Revue blanche*, Debussy as music critic, and Andre Gide as book critic. He translated to French works of

Jane Austen and Edgar Allan Poe. It is claimed he discovered the artist Georges Seurat. He edited and published Rimbaud, James Joyce, Lautreamont.

So, you get the idea, he was an important cog in French intellectual circles, and likewise, perhaps a political activist, as well. He may or may not have thrown a bomb into a cafe normally patronized by politicians and financiers, which took the eye, by accident, of a fellow poet, Tailhade.

But Feneon reports here mostly on the more banal of news stories, not much anarchic rebellion or uprisings, but plenty of accidental and intentional death, collisions, strikes. In fact, one might think the French did nothing in the year 1906 but shoot each other, commit suicide for want of love or money, and slice themselves in half on the tracks of rails and streetcars. But while *Le Monde* might report, for the 56th time that year "M. Picco, of Gentilly, dies of stab wounds," Feneon artfully crafts this statement: "There had never been so much squabbling at the Picco home in Gentilly. Finally the wife's paring knife put to death the husband."

Another favorite stabbing is reported thus: "Pauline Rivera, 20, repeatedly stabbed, with a hat pin, the face of the inconstant Luthier, a dishwasher of Chatou, who had underestimated her."

If you have recently read *How to Write a Sentence*, which I strongly recommend you do, read this book immediately after, and you will take enormous pleasure in applying all the sentence deconstruction outlined in Fish's work upon the sculptured craft of Feneon's short prose. If you are a writer faced with an incorrigible blank canvas, pick any line at random and take it from there. If you have any interest in the ways words must pull their weight to bring meaning, you must read this book.

David Schaafsma says

I'm a little obsessed with this book, which I keep sharing with others. My principal interest in it was and is the form. Experimental writing, formal experiments, different ways of representing the world, all interest me. Then I teach writing courses, the world of which focuses on argument, which I resist as one interested in and committed to narrative. I like multi-genre approaches to inquiry, too. These three line "novels," or "news" (*nouvelle* could maybe be either in French) are really short haiku-like disseminations of news events, stripped to the essence of the tale as Fénéon saw it.

Félix Fénéon was a French anarchist who every day in 1906 wrote three line news items in *Le Matin*. These were not collected until 1948, and not translated into English until 2007. His world view is bleak, and bemused, if you just flip through the book, as I initially did. Terrible things were happening to people in Paris every day, and Fénéon wrote of them, and I love the deftness and irony of the form, and of his telling. They're not all delightful or insightful, sometimes just the facts, ma'am.

They sometimes remind me of Edward Gorey without the illustrations.

The introduction by Luc Sante is wonderful.

Some examples, just randomly selected:

Nurse Elise Bachmann, whose day off was yesterday, put on a public display of insanity.

A certain madwoman arrested downtown falsely claimed to be Elise Bachmann. The latter is perfectly sane.

Their canoe having capsized, M. Guittard and M. Sabathe, of Marmande, drowned. Upon hearing the news, M. Guittard senior dropped dead.

A young woman was sitting on the ground in Choisy-le-Roi. The only identifying word that amnesia allowed her was "model."

He had bet he could drink 15 absinthes in succession while eating a kilo of beef. After the ninth, Theophile Papin, of Ivry, collapsed.

Joseph Vergers, of Belping, Pyrenees of Orientales, and Alphones Jerome, of Pouxeus, Vosges, drowned without intending to.

It suddenly occurs to me why I might be fascinated with the short form news: The three line novels/news are an early model for Twitter! Poetic tweets! I am inspired to do this for one year ion my twitter account. Maybe I will do it!

R. says

My Novel in Three Lines:

Free ride to R.M. in a police cruiser Sept. 28 to make positive the I.D. of a prowler he caught breaking into his father's girlfriend's car at 1:30 a.m. A criminal with a fashion statement: the elegant perp's black clothes were offset with a zebra patterned hoodie.

One thing is certain: France in 1906 was a dangerous place for pedestrians and lovers.

Terrorism also was a concern, with bomb threats at just about every juncture (usually a scare tactic: bags of sand, pipes of sugar - *Oui, Monsieur! Zand, now, but wait unteel I geet mah handz on zum goonpowdar!*) - indeed, the author himself was an anarchist-dandy suspected of the bombing of a restaurant.

Highly recommend this to anybody who has every had to boil down some serious topic to a paragraph or a headline. Contextulize a photograph with names, dates and circumstance. To poets, to tweeters.
