



Camera

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In this improbable love story, Toussaint creates a character who is obsessed with himself: how he does things and all the ways he might have done them, how he thinks, why he thinks the way that he thinks, how he might do or think otherwise. What happens? He takes driving lessons, goes grocery shopping, spends endless hours with an adorable employee of the driving school he attends. And though he is aloof, though caught up in his own actions and in the movement of his own thoughts he somehow emerges as surprisingly insightful and also very funny. In Toussaint's touching novel, we come to know this character intimately and yet know almost nothing about him. These two extremes, existing together, are at the heart of Toussaint's remarkable style."

Camera Details

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Kyle says

An anonymous man -- calmly riding the ups and downs of driver's ed training, a dull social life, and a giddy romance -- abruptly faces a new, more serious savagery, the philosophical questions of perception and movement. The adventures start out plainly enough: the narrator enters a driving school and is immediately smitten with the receptionist. Their romance blossoms, and after a series of jokey but grim episodes involving petrol containers and the mysterious workings of automobiles, they decide to take a trip together to England. An odd beginning for a philosophical novel? Maybe. But there were hints that something deeper and more sinister was at work: the sad, sophisticated voice underneath the comic surprises; the ominous notes covering even the silliest situations; and Toussaint's ever-present turns toward intricate and unstable structures. England then becomes an inversion of what it was in Hamlet, a place to tighten up spiritual knots instead of unravel them. This is where the ironically labored tone (like a dry, complex sitcom) starts to become actually, attentively labored.

Camera would be an intriguing experiment with these qualities left intact, but the novel is troubled by some very small but recurring problems in editing. Most are forgivable within a few pages, but some last through an entire reading. I don't know whether it's some quirk in French writing, faithfully reproduced in this edition; whether Toussaint's editors or translator purposely ignored it in the pursuit of some new, unorthodox style; or whether it's just my imagination. But the basic, fundamental syntax of this entire book strikes me as a little screwed up. It might be the huge, interminable paragraphs that seem quite arbitrary and unnecessary. It might be the stingy and wasteful dialogue that gets crunched together in a mountain of unrelated material. It might be the thoroughly odd and distracting parenthetical digressions, some of which aren't even digressive and most of which aren't very funny at all. It might be the way the sentences wander, in a train of silly phrases and clauses and addendums, like some undisciplined child who doesn't yet understand cause and effect; I know, thanks to the interview with the author included as a supplement to the novel, that the language was intended to be long and complicated, but there is rarely any hint of control or restraint to excuse its excesses.

Odd, given that these are all such petty and embarrassing qualms, most of which I'm fairly sure could (maybe?) yield some decent writing elsewhere. Especially odd, given that they're left inside a novel that is so seriously, intractably enmeshed in the basic grammar of observation and activity and life. The surface of this book is marred by a similar problem it's struggling with on the inside: how expectations created by systems and organization, like the machinery of a car engine, can lead people so far from the fluidity and humor of modern life. And, considering how sublime and impressive Camera is outside of these, I'm willing to overlook the majority of them. It can't escape them all -- even art is subject to regulations and standards – but sometimes these are okay to shrug off.

Donald says

Not as good as The Bathroom, which is a small masterpiece, but Camera is brilliant in a sly and quiet way.

Adam Dalva says

Well-written, oddly structured little book; a transition between my favorite Toussaint (the traveloguer of his later Marie tetralogy) and the overly staid Monsieur. The first third is quite funny, a humor which melts out and is reformed as lovely and philosophical by the time the title object finally appears. The problem: the bridge between the two sections (a shopping mall sequence) is too long, a misstep in a book this short. I most like Toussaint as a palate-cleanser, which is underselling his skill on the line level and composer of scene, but his books have a lightness that's hard to find. And this one had a very good line, worth the price of admission:

"Maybe it was already love, that flu-like state."

abcdefg says

This was a charming book that I found to be light and airy, but also simultaneously melancholic and quite serious. Jean-Philippe Toussaint explains in an interview with Laurent Demoulin that the book "progressively shifts from the 'struggle of living' to the 'despair of being.'"

It certainly is a postmodern existentialist novella in a sense, where the main character, falling in love with the "sleepy" Pascale, also becomes a witness to his own thoughts. There's a metaphysical, philosophical touch to this "witnessing" of the mental processes and the protagonist's relationship with reality.

There's quite a shift in tone also after the protagonist finds the camera on the boat. The first half of the story focuses on his relationship with Pascale and their growing friendship and love for each other. The second half takes quite a turn. You're not sure what happened between them, but you know that the protagonist's insight into his own condition as it becomes revealed not only through the roll of film he finds on the boat, but through his own continued witnessing of his thoughts, is the underlying cause for a rift that may never be bridged between them.

There are beautiful images towards the end of the book of solitude, night, rain, and utter darkness that I've never quite experienced from any other book. The darkness isn't threatening or entirely despairing, but revealing. There's a heaviness that very much reflects the inner condition of the protagonist. There's no sense of where he's going, but while lost in the dark, the book doesn't necessarily end on that note. While the last sentence might be construed as somewhat sadistic, it's also quite fragile and energetic.

Jim says

One would be hard-pressed to find in a novel a character who examines the nature of his existence as scrupulously as the protagonist of Camera. Improbably, it's a love story.

The affair commences when a man with a "propensity not to hasten matters" becomes smitten with a woman named Pascale Polougaiëvski, who works as a clerk in a driver's-education office. (While Toussaint's narrators are habitually nameless, the women are saddled with ungainly handles.) The romance proceeds in disarmingly oblique fashion:

“We made small talk while I was catching up with current events and, when her tea was ready, she asked me, yawning, if I would like a cup. Without putting down the paper, still reading, I told her no, God forbid, what’s the world coming to? But a cup of coffee, on the other hand, I said, putting down the paper, I wouldn’t turn down.”

Aside from the suitor’s fascination with Pascale’s “natural and fundamental languor,” we never find out why he thinks it’s a good idea to accompany her to pick up her son at school, or to whisk her away on the ferry for a one-night excursion in London. Motive, Toussaint seems to be telling us, is entirely beside the point, especially in the early “flu-like state” of romantic love.

Camera has no narrative thrust; its energy is frittered away in endless asides, discursions, parentheticals, etc. Yet there is an undeniable tension at work, as the protagonist moves “from the struggle of living to the despair of being.” These hypercontemplative periods invariably follow a burst of frenetic activity and restless motion. He’ll confine himself to a service-station restroom, a photo kiosk, or telephone booth and wait for the “thinning ruins of exterior reality” to give way to “a different reality, interior and peaceful.”

What is it about these slender, yearning novels that makes them so charming and compelling? How do books with almost no dialogue but obsessed with weighty topics, sound so breezy? Why do these vague and laconic yet relentlessly specific narratives penned some 20 years ago feel timeless and new?

Perhaps Toussaint’s infatuation with the quotidian is a mask for his true subject: what it means to be a human being. Though his judgments are rendered in existential fashion, they are expressed as comedies that are “purposeless and grandiose” — like life.

Read an interview with Toussaint's translators [here](#).

Ronald Morton says

It was at about the same time in my life, a calm life in which nothing ordinarily happened, that two events coincided, events that, taken separately, were of hardly any interest, and that, considered together, were unfortunately not connected in any way.

Or, to paraphrase: “I’m going to tell you about some things that taken separately are not very interesting, but taken together are still not very interesting”

Which is an honest way to open a book, but unfortunately it’s also an accurate way to open this particular book. It’s well written, and it’s got a sweet little budding romance in it – but it’s intentionally languid/sleepy (hell, they have sex half asleep), and it mostly just bored me.

Unfortunate, especially as I think I own at least 3-4 more by this author. I will say that the writing in the second half is quite strong (which tipped it to 3 stars), but this book wasn’t really for me; or at least it wasn’t for me here at work, wishing I’d brought a different book to waste the afternoon away with.

Adam Tramposh says

Central premise:

Absolute refusal of meaning is a graceful way of life.

Revelatory excerpt:

"The conditions were now perfect, it seemed to me, for thinking. A few minutes earlier, on the maritime platform, I had stopped to watch the rain fall in a bright projected beam, in the exact space delineated by the light, enclosed and yet as devoid of material borders as a quavering Rothko outline, and, imagining the rain falling at this place in the world, which, carried by gusts of wind, passed through my mind, moving from the shining cone of light to the neighboring darkness without it being possible to determine the tangible limits between the light and shadows, rain seemed to me to represent the course of thought, transfixed for a second in the light and disappearing the very next second to give way to itself. For what is the act of thinking —if it's not the act of thinking about something? It's the flow of thought that is so beautiful, yes, the flow, and its murmur that travels beyond the world's clamor. Let yourself attempt to stop thought, to bring its contents to light, and you'd end up with (how could I say, how could I *not* say rather) trying to preserve the quavering, ungraspable outlines, you'd end up with nothing, water slipping through your fingers, a few graceless drops drying out in the light. It was night now in my mind, I was alone in the semi-darkness of the booth and I was thinking, protected from outer torments. The most favorable conditions for thinking, the moments when thought can let itself naturally follow its course, are precisely moments when, having temporarily given up fighting a seemingly inexhaustible reality, the tension begins to loosen little by little, all the tension accumulated in protecting yourself against the threat of injury—and I had my share of minor injuries —and that, alone in an enclosed space, alone and following the course of your thoughts in a state of growing relief, you move progressively from the struggle of living to the despair of being." (p.82-83)

Jay says

A novella that rises to the possibility of becoming a more realistic, nuanced, and subtle version of Camus's "The Stranger", but intentionally fritters away the opportunity; or does it? The theft of the camera parallels the killing with the protag's subsequent alienation, isolation, inability to form a meaningful relationship, concluding acts, etc. paralleling Meursault's relationship troubles and death sentence. Good luck, humans!

MJ Nicholls says

A novel in which nothing significant happens on purpose, to draw attention to the insignificant things that comprise 90% of our lives. Toussaint calls this the 'infinitesimal novel' and his entire canon could be read in an afternoon. That's how infinitesimal these novels are.

There is a richness here, a more philosophical flavour to the second half of the novel, so it isn't merely about a man hanging around a DMV office trying to shack up with a single mum. But mainly it is, and there's nothing wrong with that: it's funny and incisive. *Très bon.*

Lee says

A remarkable and fascinating little book. There is a superficial stasis of plot and character that will turn off

some readers, but great riches lurk beneath the quotidian surface. At an aesthetic level, "Camera" reminds me of how I feel when standing alone in large clean empty parking lot or in a newly opened airport terminal. Each moment here manages to become both small and large, and has the smell of abandoned infrastructure.

Lukáš Palán says

Fotoaparát od Toussainta sleduje hrdinu, který si nakrájí do autoškoly s tím, že si chce udělat papíry, ale jelikož nemá fotku na idušák, tak se jen tak pochlakuje na recepci, písemž začne koketovat se sekretářkou a zanedlouho už ji nakládá jak okurky a jezdí s ní a s malým synkem do školy a pro plynovou bombu a na výlety, večeře a kávinky. Opet se tedy potvrzuje, že ve Francii jde lidem jen o sex, krosenty a kafe. Je suis penis.

Zároveň je to co jsem napsal výše asi celým díjem této knihy, která se stejně jako Koupelna nezaobírá tím, co se děje (pávovo se nic neděje), ale spíš se vznáší na oblažku z banalit. Toussaint píše jako autista, popisuje naprostě vše co se kolem něj nachází a svým způsobem se mu z toho daří budovat velmi plastický svět, který vlastně dělá ani nepotřebuje – protože jeho díjem jsou banality - knihu bych tedy doporučil všem, kteří mají rádi banány.

Vysvětlivky pojmu:

banalita - banánová brutalita
krosén - croissant ve vesnickém dialektu
nakládat jako okurky - dělat sex
autista - sběratel aut

Mike Lindgren says

This is one of those quintessentially French postmodern novels that is intriguing and exasperating in the same measure. Toussaint's book is an example of the novel of the infinitesimal, apparently the latest flavor in French intellectual circles. The narrative is aggressively quotidian, the tone flat, the action inconsequential, interrupted by occasional vaguely poetic meditations on the nature of thought, time, action, et cetera. If fiction built on abstract theoretical constructs interests you, you'll like this. The book was pressed upon me, against my will, by my Europhile friend Ron.

Brent Legault says

A waiting room novel. Not to say that it's a novel that it should be read in a waiting room, although it can be and, if the wait runs a little long, it can be read in full. But to the point, it is a novel that is interested in the waiting rooms of life, where nothing much happens "on the page" but where some thinking can get done. It might be a little boring sometimes or maybe mildly amusing or slightly frustrating but the wait will be short at least and then something else will surely come along. Something better, perhaps, or something worse.

Larry Gggggggggggggggggggggggggggg says

Sorta funny like when he eats chips on the toilet

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Toussaint's take on life: monotonous, boring, and monotonous. And boring, too!

Toussaint's novel: A guy tries to get a license. He meets a cute girl. They try to fill a propane tank for half the book, he files some papers, he takes some driving classes, still no propane, they buy some groceries, still no license, still no propane, they drive around, the car breaks down, they travel by train, and everything is monotonous and boring. Isn't it just like living, Toussaint? You truly, truly get it! Thank you, sir, for reminding me how monotonous and boring life can be by making my life monotonous and boring with your monotonous, boring novel. Before anyone says anything, let me just say that I get that monotony was the point. I got it the first time I read a Toussaint novel (*The Bathroom*), where it actually worked because it was framed around the monotony and boredom of long-term relationships that are taken for granted rather than cultivated. This time, it just felt pointless.

Oh, and everything is sooooo pensive. In fact, almost every single time Toussaint wants to express what the male lead (Toussaint himself?) is thinking about, he just says he's pensive. He describes every emotional state, every gesture and expression, everyONE as "pensive." It became not only a counting game for me, but (sadly) the most entertaining thing about reading this book. He uses the word "pensive" 8 times in the first 56 pages. Considering the text of the story doesn't even begin until page 7, it works out like so:

$$56-7 = 49$$

$$49/8 = 6.125$$

He's pensive roughly every 6 pages! One wonders how he even manages to brush his teeth or get a decent night's rest and still squeeze in so much pensiveness. He describes himself as pensive while sitting down in a bathroom stall to urinate. Pensivepissing? Taking a pense, maybe? He walks out of the stall, greets a mildly frustrating situation, and "pensively kicks up dust from the ground" (two or three paragraphs later, seriously). In all fairness, though, the 5th pensive moment stars the Female Character (who has about as much personality as a blade of grass) pensively looking out a window. The 8th time (2 pages later), it's a service station attendant pensively tapping his fingers in his palm (representing, perhaps, the existential crises faced by blue-collar workers? Monotony! Oh, Toussaint, thank you for my pensive retching!)

At least the main character (you know, the pensive guy) is a gentleman. He offers to carry the propane tank, but only until it is filled up and heavy ("my back huuuwts," he says to The Female in so many words). They go to London, fall asleep in a hotel room, The Female wakes up to him inexplicably "firing his pistol" on her sleeping body, they travel to the train station, The Female falls asleep there, and he wanders off leaving The Female to her rest (in public, unattended and passed out next to her luggage) to go take pictures of himself. "I love you," he tells her one time, then they presumably don't speak again until he calls The Female looking for a ride out of the middle of nowhere at 2am. A true romantic.

Like *The Bathroom*, this book is easy to read due to sing-songy writing which moves directly from page-to-brain with even the teeniest little bit of effort on the reader's part. However, the redundant word-usage and one-dimensional characters make for an wholly unsatisfying experience. The book just seemed...disingenuous? Was that the point? Yeah, whatever...I'm done thinking about it. At least it was short.
