

## Interview

This 'written interview' is an extended version of a questionnaire to be sent out to reviewers along with the galleys. The questions were supplied by Dalkey.

### **Why choose fourteen working-class men in France during the 1970s as the subject matter for your novel? What in particular attracted you to that setting and time?**

It wasn't like that: I didn't start with the desire to write a novel and then choose a subject, setting and time. The four novels of which *November* is the first came out of an experience which I had partly sought, partly stumbled into and which dumped the 'subject' in my lap – though it took me a while to appreciate it.

The phrase 'fourteen working-class men' makes them seem samey or somehow homogeneous, whereas they could hardly be more diverse: for a start, one of the fourteen men is actually the owner-manager of the plant; as for the thirteen workers, they range widely in age, outlook, background and aspirations and hail from seven different countries. Even the six Frenchmen comprise a 'Gypsy', a 'part-Gypsy', a Marseillais, a hill farmer, and an ex-soldier. However, as I wrote in the novel's Afterword, apart from such small details as nationality, appearance, gesture, and behavioural tics – fished like old hooks direct from my memory – each individual in the novel is the fruit of unbridled but systematic imagination. However, two of the fourteen central characters – as well as the scores of secondary characters – never had any original model and are therefore whole-cloth inventions.

### **Why did it take over 700 pages to do what you wanted to do with this book? Did you know it would or could be this length before you started?**

When I started writing, I had no idea that a series of novels might eventuate. First came headlong prose devoid of people, wit, humour, real-world references, or any attempt to communicate. Later, when I began writing voluminously (an hour a day, a day a week, sometimes a week a month, always a month a year), the bare outlines of people I recalled appeared to self-fictionalise, materialising like Tomec's crowd in ancient Brundisium (see page 3) as if from a fog, dragging with them a cohort of intimates, acquaintances, relationships and histories. The more questions I asked, the more answers I got. I soon had thousands of pages of scenes, dialogues, notes. Only then did I work out a structure for a suite of novels.

What I sought to do with *November*, while bracketing society and history from the narrators' purview, was to get at the 'things themselves' – the work, the place, the processes, the lives of bodies and minds, as they might have – or at least *could* have – unfolded second by second. Rather than floodlight and therefore privilege any single man or sub-group (for example by aping Balzac or Zola to write separate novels centred on different characters), I wanted to foreground each in turn, individually, in twos, or in groups, creating a fiction of group experience where each member would be semi-detached, semi-estranged, seen both immanently and externally; I could do this only by multiplying perspectives. When I realized that the grain of the writing

and the organization of its parts had also to change markedly throughout the course of *November*, I knew I had a long novel on my hands.

**What were your biggest challenges writing *November*?**

I was eager for *November* to be compelling not in spite of but because of the absence of a main protagonist and straightforward narrative arc. I came to think of both the writing and the reading as cognitive: I was writing in order to find out what I wanted to know (involving sometimes quasi-scientific experiments: what is there between Luigi and Jean? Bring them together and see...); similarly, the reading needed to be driven by an eager curiosity to know more about the individuals, their interrelations and the small and large events affecting them. The achievement of this forward momentum and the maintenance of the reader's keen interest necessitated intense choreography, which in turn enforced a labyrinthine mapping of the narrative time and space, which of course was always overwhelmed by the compositional process itself, triggering fresh mapping and planning, and so on, dialectically.

**Who's your perfect reader for this novel?**

No exclusive reading expertise is expected or required, merely a readiness to take the odd word on trust or to look something up. An interest in unfamiliar human territory would help... but isn't that a requirement of all fiction?

**An advance review likened your book to Jean Eustache's 1973 film *The Mother and the Whore*, and called the novel 'complex, deep, and seemingly unending.' Do you think the comparison is a good one and the comment fair?**

I've just seen Eustache's film. The comparison is surprising but welcome. As for the comment, I'll take it as single-edged. Complex – certainly. Deep – maybe, but light too. Unending? Of course. Yet the novel does in fact have a clear beginning and ending.

**How far along are you with future volumes in this series?**

Some of the writing is done, more remains ahead. I'm faced with a whole set of new difficulties, but I'm learning, experimenting.