

BOOK REVIEW

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Game of Desire: Review of Annie Ernaux's *Getting Lost*

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Ernaux, Annie. *Getting Lost*. Translated by Alison L. Strayer. Seven Stories Press, 2022, 239 pp. \$18.95 US/\$24.95 CAN

The famous French writer Annie Ernaux's new book, *Getting Lost*, tells of her love affair in Paris with a married Soviet diplomat through the pages of diary entries from 1988 to 1990. S, as she refers to him, is a younger man in his mid-30s and Ernaux is approaching 50 and fearful of aging out of the game the only game, to her mind, that is the fulfillment of sexual desire and writing. The book is brilliantly translated by Alison L. Strayer. This memoir is a haunting record of a woman in the grips of love, desire, and despair. It appears to be a sequel to *Simple Passion* (1991), a slimmer volume, written in more stylistic prose. In both books, we have the same man but in *Getting Lost*, we are offered a penetrating insight into Ernaux's fascination for Soviet culture which is probably the main source of her passion and desire.

The plot of this book is rather simple and easygoing without any external digression or extraneous matter. It is autobiographical in tone and written in the form of diary notes full of emotions and passions. Annie went to attend a writer's junket in Soviet Russia and on the last day of the tour of the lit fest in Leningrad, she had an interesting affair with a young married Russian diplomat (aged 35)

from the Soviet embassy in France while she herself was 48 years of age. After returning to Paris, they met each other many times and had a roaring affair. The Russian diplomat is mentioned here as S, a code name. He spoke French fast with a strong accent. During that period Annie Ernaux wrote nothing else but articles which she was asked to write for magazines. This love affair of eighteen months ends when S leaves France and Annie starts writing a book about their passion. Starting from September (Tuesday) 27, 1988, and ending on April (Monday) 9, 1990, this diary note is studded with passionate descriptions of love and sex, memory and desire, tension and anxiety, separation, and union.

The language is simple, colloquial, and straightforward without any complex framework. Ernaux's physical, psychological, and sexual desire for the Russian man is breathtakingly revealed page after page. Here we have glimpses of secretive, aggressive, and macho Soviet culture which attracts and appalls Annie who looks for equal measurement and fulfillment. Apart from love and lust, sex and desire political issues are sparingly explored. The historical background is captured through the facets of various human relationships. The memoir is written in the form of a diary with interesting narrations of love episodes and Soviet culture. One is reminded of the diarists like Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. The writing is well-knit that we cannot stop turning pages. One must read *Simple Passion* for a better understanding of this book which is reminiscent of books like *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*.

The diary entries (from September, Tuesday, 27, 1988 to 9th April, Monday-1990) of eighteen monthly love affairs explore the concept of love, lust, and the fear of abandonment. Here we see that Ernaux is divorced and has two grown sons named David and Eric and they are living in Paris. Her lover, S, sees her there intermittently and she waits with expectation of their reunion. While she is waiting for his next call she needs to feel desire, real desire, the kind she felt in the streets of Leningrad. When he is gone and the moment of desire has faded, she feels as if she is a step closer to death. She suppresses desire in all aspects. To quote Ernaux – "We make love, eat, inseparable, our sweat, our mouths joined, as we caress each other. Yes, what a beautiful story. Yesterday, I reached new heights of

pleasure. On his side, there may be an element of performance. But it doesn't matter, desire is all that counts" (*Getting Lost* 147).

Ernaux specifies the historical context of the moment: "The Berlin Wall had fallen several days before. The Soviet regimes established in Europe toppled one after the other. The man who had just returned to Moscow was a faithful servant of the USSR, a Russian diplomat posted in Paris". (7). And she has an affair with this Russian diplomat with whom she came in contact with during a literary junket in Leningrad in the fall of 1988. Ernaux says candidly, "We had spent the last night together, in Leningrad." (7). After returning to France, they continued to see each other. Sometimes he would ring to know if he could come around to see her in the afternoon or evening or more rarely, a day or two later. He would arrive and stay just a few hours and they spent their time in making love. When he left and she would wait for his next call to fix a date for sex again. S was thirty-five and his wife worked as his secretary at the embassy. To quote Annie, "He spoke French quickly, with a strong accent. Though outwardly a partisan of Gorbachev and perestroika, when he had a drink, he mourned the time of Brezhnev and made no secret of his veneration of Stalin." (8). S is tall and handsome, given to drinking too much vodka and waxing nostalgic about Brezhnev and Stalin. He is a wonderful lover, somewhat comical as he won't remove his socks. Amasingly Annie doesn't much care about his culture or his official activities. All she is interested in is the satisfaction of her body. She admits "Today, I am amazed that I did not ask more questions. Nor will I ever know what I meant to him. His desire for me was the only thing I was sure of. He was, in every sense of the word, the shadow lover." (8). She even expresses in a dream that: "Sex has always been a source of anxiety in my life". (91). Deeply in love as she is with the Russian diplomat, she transvests and starts dreaming about Russia: "I dreamt in Russian, uttered Russian sentences, thought in Russian (What, I don't remember)." (146). Ernaux feels as if she is a teenager all over again. Everything else in the world falls away amid their passion, and she thinks only of the appeasement of her carnal desire "I felt was desire, all-consuming desire each time, it's as if I am going to lose my virginity all over again" (51). Kissing S reminds her of being kissed at age 18 as he gives her back her 20-year-old self of desire and lust.

In moments of self-reflection Ernaux contrasts herself with S who “likes fancy cars, luxury, and social connections, and is not much intellectual” (15) and “As for me, I’m the writer, the foreigner, the whore-the free woman too. I’m, not a good woman.” (16). Passion and mourning are synonyms. Her whole life, as she notes, has been an effort to tear herself away from male desire and from her own passion even if it is violent. At 63, she reflects on the words from the Bible “And I will extend my peace to her like a river, not even knowing that these words referred to my desire, sperm flowing over me like a river.” (60). She does not think of S as a brute even though the bedroom scenes are bulldozing and erotic and their relationship is very erotic and simulative.

Annie Ernaux is influenced by the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre and it is a deeply revealing and intimate work that fully demonstrates her writing process. To quote Ankit Chakraborty, “The quality that distinguishes Ernaux’s writing on sex from others in her milieu is the total absence of shame. Desire in her brings forth more desire, the impulse of death, happiness, and even past trauma, like her abortion, but never humiliation. Ernaux intends it to be a love story from the beginning, but it’s not. Instead, it’s a study of a woman at her peak desire. In the future I suspect, the book will become a kind of totem for lovers: a manual to help them find their center when, like Ernaux, they are lost in love” (The Guardian n.p.). Dwight Garner opines “*Getting Lost* is a feverish book. It’s about being impaled by desire, and about the things human beings want, as opposed to the things for which they settle” (The New York Times n.p.). Jamie Hood, another critic, has commented “That we again face an era when gains of feminist and sexual liberationist movements are being reactionarily regressed, Ernaux’s erotic manifesto and her radical exhortation of the value of foregrounding women’s narratives in public and political context has perhaps never been more essential about ongoing demands for bodily integrity and autonomy” (The Baffler n.p.). Similarly, Sophie Haigney comments that “The memoir details an illicit affair in prose that feels startlingly immediate, full of particulars that seem to surface in real-time” (The Paris Review n.p.).

Indeed Annie Ernaux’s *Getting Lost* is a vivid and candid record of her intricate and blazing affair with the Russian young man and their

attitude to love, sex, writing, passion, desire, and despair. Eroticism runs through the book along with the desire for sexual hunger that seem to be the stimulant. This memoir celebrates the body and its desires. Here Ernaux challenges social hypocrisy and the tendency of readers to be judgmental.

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