A Voice in French Literature: Her Own

Since the 1970s, Annie Ernaux has poured a lifetime of memories into her intensely personal books. Now, readers in English are catching on.

By Laura Cappelle
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PARIS — On a recent afternoon, by phone from her home in the suburbs, the French writer Annie Ernaux was describing her living room. “I’m sitting in my old armchair. There is a south-facing bow window, so I can see the sky, some clouds, and a tree, to the left,” she said, picking out details with the ease of a master memoirist. “It’s a very silent place. Even more so at the moment.”

France had just entered a strict coronavirus lockdown, and Ernaux, 79, couldn’t meet in person for an interview. Yet it was easy to imagine what she and her home might be like from her intensely personal books: She has poured a lifetime of images into them.

Since the 1970s, Ernaux has carved out a special place in the French literary pantheon for her ability not just to excavate individual memories, but to show the subtle ways they interact with the collective experience.

Her first book, “Cleaned Out,” from 1974, is a bracing account of her working-class childhood in Normandy, and a back-alley abortion she underwent, published shortly before the procedure became legal in France. While her early work was thinly fictionalized, she has focused on memoir since the 1980s, writing about her ill-fated marriage, her mother’s decline from Alzheimer’s, her own experience of cancer, as well as several passionate affairs she enjoyed in middle age.

Though Ernaux has long been praised in France, she was little-known in the English-speaking world until last year, when one of her most recent self-portraits, “The Years,” was shortlisted for the Booker International Prize. Now, English readers are discovering her back catalog, and her most recent book, “A Girl’s Story” will be published in the United States this week.

“A Girl's Story” was the missing piece in Ernaux’s autobiographical puzzle. In it, she finds her way back to the summer of 1958 and her first sexual experience — a traumatic event, left unspoken in previous books, which led her to become depressed and develop an eating disorder.
It took nearly six decades to unravel the event, Ernaux said, “because it was so complex. Had it been a rape, I might have been able to talk about it earlier, but I never thought about it that way.” Instead, her book delves into the gray areas of sexual consent, at a time when that notion wasn’t taught or discussed.

“The man was older — that mattered to me — and I gave in, so to speak, out of ignorance,” Ernaux said. “I don’t even remember saying, ‘No.’”

After the events of that summer, it took Ernaux another decade and a half to find her voice. Her early influences — from Simone de Beauvoir to the social upheaval of May 1968 — are captured in vivid snapshots in “The Years,” which weaves together nearly 70 years of autobiography and history.

Her first novel, written at college, was rejected by publishers as “too ambitious,” she said. When she took up writing again, in the early 1970s, she was a French teacher and a married mother of two, newly acquainted with the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of social reproduction.

Bourdieu’s emphasis on the ways the education system excludes working-class children brought Ernaux to a realization: Suddenly, the shame she felt as a scholarship student, with a background so unlike her bourgeois peers, made sense.

She wrote “Cleaned Out” without telling anyone. “My husband had made fun of me after my first manuscript. I pretended to work on a Ph.D. thesis to have time alone,” she said. When the book was picked up by a prestigious publishing house, Gallimard, her husband Philippe was aggrieved, Ernaux said: “He told me: If you’re capable of writing a book in secret, then you’re capable of cheating on me.” By her third book, “A Frozen Woman,” which explored the writer’s ambivalent feelings about being a wife and mother, divorce loomed.

Ernaux said that choosing not to remarry had given her freedom. “I lived with men for periods of time, but very quickly, I would get tired of it. I’m picturing being on lockdown with someone right now — what a nightmare,” she said, laughing.

In the early 1990s, she startled many in France with “A Simple Passion,” an account of her affair with a married foreign diplomat, which explores desire in disarming, sensual detail, without moralizing. By that point, Ernaux had done away with any pretense of fiction, and the book, which sold 200,000 copies in two months, attracted virulent criticism from social conservatives.

Regardless, many readers saw themselves in “A Simple Passion,” and Ernaux was deluged with letters, she said. “Men and women confided in me, told me they wish they’d written that book,” she added. (A film adaptation of it, directed by Danielle Arbid, will be released in France later this year.)
The sociologist and novelist Christine Détrez, a professor at the École normale supérieure de Lyon, said in a phone interview that Ernaux’s work serves to “de-particularize” women’s experiences. “You’re scared to recognize yourself, because then you’ll have to draw your own conclusions, but you do,” she said, adding that Ernaux’s impact on the lives of women in France could be compared to de Beauvoir’s on previous generations. “It helps, because it means what you’re experiencing is the result of a shared condition,” Professor Détrez added.

This much was obvious from the audience’s reactions during a public reading of “A Girl’s Story” at the venerable Comédie-Française theater in Paris, in early March. As the actress Dominique Blanc spoke, murmurs of recognition and giggles greeted details that recreated a long-lost era: the novelty of disposable sanitary pads, a popular cookie from the time. For women of Ernaux’s generation, they were Proustian madeleines.

Ernaux was in the audience that day, but she usually prefers to stay away from Paris’s literary scene. Instead, she has been increasingly outspoken, in interviews and essays, about social and political issues. She has thrown her weight behind #MeToo, which has struggled to gain momentum in the French arts world, as well as the popular Yellow Vest protests that rocked the country last year. “I come from a line of people who could have been Yellow Vests,” Ernaux said.

Her attention to the structures of social domination paved the way in France for writers like Édouard Louis, 27, who rose to prominence with “The End of Eddy,” a novel inspired by his own working-class upbringing. “For me, it was like an explosion,” Louis said of his first encounter with Ernaux’s work, in a telephone interview: “I felt represented.” He added that Ernaux had made him “realize how subversive autobiography can be.”

Still, when politics or personal trauma came up on the phone with Ernaux, there was no trace of outrage in her voice. She is forthright yet impressively measured; even in “A Girl’s Story,” disentangling the damage done to her in 1958 leads to a sense of peace.

Ernaux’s only fear, it seems, is to lose the ability to look inward and rewind the years, after watching her own mother’s memories fade away in the 1980s. “Frankly, I’d rather die now than lose everything I’ve seen and heard,” she said. “Memory, to me, is inexhaustible.”