

Write my Name on the Waters

Jean-François Haas

Novel

French



Write my Name on the Waters sets up a dialogue between the history and literature of a whole century as seen through the eyes of a young Swiss man, who goes to make his fortune in the USA. The novel has echoes of Flaubert and Valéry, of Proust, Joyce and Thomas Mann. After five novels and a collection of short stories, Jean-François Haas is back with his most ambitious work yet. Never before has he liberated, collected and mixed the human voice with the direct experience of history to this degree; never before has he so daringly exposed the ways of the world.

“Time opens its floodgates and engulfs you, like those fish swept along by the water from a dam.”

Title

Tu écriras mon nom sur les eaux

Publisher

Éditions du Seuil, Paris

Publication date

January 2019

Pages

469

ISBN

978-2-02-139003-2

Translation rights

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Jean-François Haas was born in Fribourg in 1952. After a career as a teacher, he devoted himself to writing. His first three novels, published by Éditions du Seuil - *Dans la gueule de la baleine guerre* (*In the Mouth of the Whale of War*), *J'ai avancé comme la nuit vient* (*I Advanced as Night Falls*) and *Le Chemin sauvage* (*The Wild Path*) - have won several literary prizes.

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Excerpt translated by Jackie Smith

Summer 1928

So no-one has come to meet you?... You look at the railway station: the branches of a climbing rose laden with red blooms brush lightly against the wall above the gently arched yellow stone lintel of a doorway marked "WAITING ROOM" in black-painted lettering. Yet you telegraphed them yesterday with your arrival time. The ticket inspector helped you lift your luggage down. You are the only ones on the platform. The station master, with a blast of his whistle and a wave of his flag, gives the signal to depart. The train clanks into motion. It is electric-powered. You think back to the day of its inauguration, the decorations, the festive floral arches made from intertwined pine branches that adorned the waiting room entrance and the doorway to the station master's office, and the third, larger one that greeted the officials, to the brass band with its oompahs and false notes, to the songs you sang with the other schoolchildren, conducted by your teacher. You think about the train travelling from Bonn to Cologne. Isaac is sitting opposite you. Saying nothing. You know he is dead and his eyes are so far away. You call him. Time opens its flood-gates and engulfs you, like those fish swept along by the water from a dam. You hold on to Ellen's hand, in the hope that the world will materialise around you again. In front of you, separated from the railway line by a chain link fence, is the factory which you saw being built as a child, with its red brick chimney, its gasometer, the smoke from its furnaces, and which I saw being demolished, so that today all that remains is a field where one of the last few farmers in the area sometimes puts his cattle to graze, though I wouldn't want to drink their milk.

A boy comes running up.

"Hello, my name's Daniel, Uncle Félix sent me. He couldn't come because the cattle dealer arrived just after dinner and they're at the barn, him and Uncle Félix and grandfather; they sent me to tell you not to worry."

"So you're Charles's son?"

You can see in his face the face of his father, but without

the anger that caused you so much suffering. You feel pity for the man who could have been your brother had he so wished, and who did not have time to live with this child in whom you recognise him. Through whom he could have become someone else. Then you look at Ellen. The two of you do not have a child yet.

"Auntie Marie is bringing the horse cart, but she's been delayed harnessing up the horses."

The cart in which you can still picture the whole family. You went out for a ride one Sunday afternoon, you can't remember where; it must have been in May, because part of the route took you along a shady avenue of flowering chestnut trees. Pink and white foam among the swaying green of the foliage... Your stepfather was leading the horses.

"And your grandfather?"

"Uncle Félix asked him to come with the cart, but grandfather said it was more important for him to talk to the dealer; he said Uncle Félix wasn't much good with prices yet..."

Your stepfather...

The café opposite the station has not changed much apart from having a new coat of rough-cast.

"Would you like a glass of lemonade?"

Daniel's eyes light up.

He is ten years old. The age at which you beat those fox cubs to death with a stick. As you watch him drink his lemonade with that earnest expression that children sometimes assume when they discover a flavour they like, you see something of Lin's cheerful diligence in him. Will he have the same innocence as him? Or is he already like you? You watch his hands take hold of a withered beech sapling, raise it in the air, bring it down on those playful little rust-coloured lives, their fire suddenly extinguished... You are returning to the scenes of your childhood; you wanted to show them to Ellen, to present her with the sorrowful child you used to be, and you are rediscovering your dark side, the person you once were, who has occasionally reappeared in you, the person you still perhaps are, and who frightens you.

I would like to have known Daniel. All I have is what he confided in you, which you relayed to me, and a few pages of a notebook he left... At that time he is still only Charles's orphan and the child of a mother lost in her

sorrow; it is your mother who has raised him until now, with the help of Alice and, increasingly, of Marie. Madeleine's family never makes contact, and acts as if their daughter were dead and her child did not exist. You know from a letter from your mother that he likes school and books, and that riles your stepfather, who does not understand why a ten-year-old boy would waste his time reading; he ought to have a tool in his hand; yet Daniel is happy to do his share of the work on the farm. It is Marie who gives him books; books are for women... what's more, they muddle their thinking... Remember how Marie had the nerve, one Sunday at table, to say that she hoped to be able to vote one day? "Go and wash the dishes with your mother." Much later, in those few years when life allowed the two of us to talk to one another, she would say to me: "And now young people don't even bother to go and vote. That's the same as neglecting your freedom, neglecting yourself, losing yourself..." Her mind took leave of us, little by little; and yet, though she was far away, her smile did not abandon us; maybe sometimes it even brought her back to us, or sought us out so that we might inhabit her silence. Daniel was her first child. I am her great-grandson; she did not love me any less, even though, the last few times I kissed her, her memory, which was falling apart more and more, made us strangers to each other.

The station master sits down just along from you and orders a beer, then gives you a stare.

"You're Lucie's son, aren't you? Tobie? You were at school with my son. But you're a gentleman now."

The man does not know if you are still Tobie the kid he saw playing, or if you are now a stranger, someone different. You translate, in an attempt to explain this to Ellen.

"Is that English? You're speaking English? So it's true you've become an American... Little Tobie...!"

What is his son's name? You have forgotten... Unless... George, maybe... Yes George, "Georgiel," he runs in front of you, you call his name, he turns around and, laughing, throws a snowball at you, you both slip on the icy path, Lin joins you, makes a misshapen snowball which crumbles in his hand as he goes to throw it... You had forgotten the people from round here, and these people, through the words of this man, have made you into a gentleman...

The man who addressed you using the familiar *tu* when you were a child, who should have carried on calling you *tu*, as is the norm, is addressing you formally as *vous*, and you sense in his voice his uncertainty in your presence, but the *vous* wins out: the Tobie he used to see playing has disappeared; you have become for him someone different, someone who never lived here.

"Nice to see you..." He raises his beer glass. "Cheers! It must seem pretty small to you, back here, now that you've seen the world. I've heard it's so big, America... And your lady friend, it must seem strange to her..."

You feel like telling him: "I'm still the same little Tobie, you can call me *tu*, and this is Ellen; I want to show her my childhood, let her meet my mother and everyone from here; you are a piece of me; don't deprive me of that, don't deprive her of the person I once was."

The cart eventually arrives, drawn by two horses that halt in front of the terrace. A young woman steps down from it, smiling, a young woman who appears at the door of the orphanage, bends down to you, lifts you up in her arms; "All right, all right, that's enough fuss, otherwise he'll be all upset this evening when you come to leave, and we'll have a job calming him down;" you can already feel the sting of the nettles on your bare body; Marie looks so much like her; she fastens the horses' harnesses to the ring, steps forward at last, showing little sign of being overawed: "Tobie!" You are lost for words; you are struggling with the night of the stinging nettles, with your urge to cry: "Mother, why did you abandon me?", you know she is waiting for you, that she will be there at the farm door, "Mother wanted to come, but with all the emotion... She hasn't slept a wink ..." says Marie, and you introduce her to Ellen; they greet each other with a kiss; how simple the world is...!