

Hélène Bessette
La Tour The Tower
2010
200 pages, 17 euros

“Money influences love. The tragedy is in suspense.”

Louise, married to Marcel for one month, wins a huge sum of money from the show *Double or Nothing*. Despite the irregular erudition that permitted her to shine on the show, Louise has but one real passion, one goal in life: to spend. She talks of nothing but money, thinks of nothing else. It is like time: past, future, never present, and yet always there.

In contrast to the monetary dynamism of the Louise/Marcel couple, we also witness the relative poverty of Fernande/André. For them, money is just as important; they speak of it with the same constancy, but without the same certitude of always having more and more. Fernande is bitter when accompanies her friend to the department stores that turn Louise's head, bitter to the point that her home life begins to darken... What will become of these beings after the unraveling of the credit card culture and its illusions?

HÉLÈNE BESSETTE (1918-2000) published 12 books with Éditions Gallimard. Supported at the time by the biggest names in French art and literature, two of her books have been recognized with the Goncourt and Femina prizes. Inexplicably forgotten by literary history, this injustice has been mitigated since the publication, by Laureli/Léo Scheer, of *Bonheur de la nuit* (September 2006), *maternoA* (May 2007), *Suite suisse* (May 2008), *Ida ou le délire* following *Résumé* (May 2009) and of the biography (*Biographie*, November 2008) that Julien Doussinault admiringly devotes to her.

“Hélène Bessette, furiously modern.”

Claire Paulhan, *Le Monde*, November 3, 2006

“A style extraordinarily singular and free. (...) Hélène Bessette shatters the traditional storyline, invents forms, throws phrases and words onto the page in wise arrangements, and always the essential is said: of human nature, of its vices, its virtues, its humor, its banality.”

Martine Lecœur, *Télérama*, January 24, 2007

“Nine years after the death of Hélène Bessette, the republication of her books permits the discovery of one of the most exciting French writers of the second half of the 20th century. Nothing less.”

Raphaëlle Leyris, *Les Inrockuptibles*, June 23, 2009

Hélène Bessette

Le Bonheur de la nuit **Happy Is the Night**

Afterword by Bernard Noël

Hélène Bessette spiritedly and cruelly stages a cast of characters for whom life has no meaning unless they are shaking the bars and provoking scandal. A grumpy doorman, a dissatisfied maid, an actress on the rise but not yet famous, a moneyed young man making a comeback, a pampered *bourgeoise*, a fallen nobleman: each finds him- or herself trapped both ways in his or her own life, strangled by the noose of time that tightens with each lie and compromise. Their society molts in a nameless refuge of the mad.

Hélène Bessette (1918-2000) had 14 books published by Éditions Gallimard between 1953 and 1973, won the Prix Cazes in 1953, and was named twice on the lists of Goncourt and Médicis. Despite the fact that she has been ceaselessly espoused by prestigious writers and critics, this major writer remains strangely unknown. The posthumous publication of *Le Bonheur de la nuit* works against this silence, presenting a powerful portrayal of the incarceration that is the couple and of a society inexorably weighed down by its dependence on power and money.

Hélène Bessette

maternA

maternA is one of Hélène Bessette's masterpieces, published for the first time in 1954 and never republished until now. *maternA* with a final capital A because "A is the childhood of life," according to the author. For this reason, all the novel's heroines bear names that end in A.

These characters, schoolteachers, feel like the prisoners of the profession they are ashamed to hate. In a comedy of desperation, their rivalries and their neuroses eventually surface to illuminate their strategies for quotidian survival. One discovers the quasi-amorous passion of one of their number for her principal while another, newly arrived, sees herself publicly and humiliatingly disdained to the detriment of both her career and her emotional health. One thread of the plot focuses on this indignant outcast-by-consensus, mirror to the author. Will she manage to escape the talons of her jealous colleagues or will the system eventually break her down?

Hélène Bessette

Suite Suisse ***Swiss Suite***

Afterword by Florence Giorgetti and Robert Cantarella

Suite Suisse, according to its author, is “a book about the DOOR”: the door continuously slammed in the face of the writer trying in vain to earn a living with continual bad luck. Perfect representative of this sad fate, Hélène Bessette realizes in this work a sort of autofiction, evoking her self-imposed Swiss exile in search for a land less hostile to what had become considered a marginal activity: writing.

She evokes with humor the continual failure of her job search, her life in pitiful hotels and noisy family housing projects—in contrast to the luxurious side of Switzerland—as well as her immoderate love of the tea rooms and the ever-conflicted encounters between her expansive sensitivity and the empty politeness offered by others, who seem to live a life from which she feels excluded.

Hélène Bessette tells the tale of her wandering path with an irresistible irony that spares nothing. *Suite Suisse* represents an important stage in her body of work, at once powerfully anchored in narration and at the same time transgressing the limits of the genre, offering to the reader’s imagination ever-branching poetic paths.

Hélène Bessette

Ida ou Le délire ***Ida or Delirium***

(following *Le Résumé*)

Introduction to *Le Résumé* by Julien Doussinault

Ida, the novel's heroine, is already dead from the first line. She lives only through the speech of her employers, of those who crossed her humble and furtive path. A discreet silhouette, compacted by age: Ida was only a maid. Her life was limited to her work. Ida was thrown into the air by a truck. Why didn't she pay attention when crossing the street? This brutal death gives rise to a commentary. Who is Ida really? How did she dare to die? The only offered response: her victorious silence before the impotent cacophony of the powerful.

Le Résumé is Hélène Bessette's literary theory, the conceptualization of her "poetic novel." In a sense, her "*nouveau roman*" or her "*Ère de soupçon*." In 1969, Hélène Bessette published 100 copies of this manifesto at her own expense. A mélange of erudition and dark humor, borne by a voice that resembles no other: resolutely modern, of a delightful sincerity and intelligence, sometimes disquieting, and most often disconcerting, and with a healthy dose of impertinence.