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Submission: A Novel

SUBMISSION

A NOVEL

Michel

HOUELLEBECQ

Author of THE ELEMENTARY PARTICLES



Synopsis

A controversial, intelligent, and mordantly funny new novel from France's most famous literary figure Paris, 2022. François is bored. He's a middle-aged lecturer at the Sorbonne and an expert on J. K. Huysmans, the famous nineteenth-century "decadent" author. But François's own decadence is considerably smaller in scale. He sleeps with his students, eats microwave dinners, reads the classics, queues up YouPorn. Meanwhile, it's election season. And although François feels "about as politicized as a hand towel," things are getting pretty interesting. In an alliance with the socialists, France's new Islamic party sweeps to power. Islamic law comes into force. Women are veiled, polygamy is encouraged, and François is offered an irresistible academic advancement--on condition that he convert to Islam. Adam Gopnik in The New Yorker has said of this novel that "Houellebecq is not merely a satirist but--more unusually--a sincere satirist, genuinely saddened by the absurdities of history and the madnesses of mankind." Michel Houellebecq's Submission may be satirical and melancholic, but it is also hilarious; a comic masterpiece by one of France's great novelists.

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Customer Reviews

This novel is far more a portrait of contemporary society than any inflammatory depiction of Islam. Houellebecq's protagonist, Francois, is the modern human who goes through life devoid of meaning, passion, any cherished human connection or deeply held beliefs. Sex and gourmandise fail to provide even momentary joy. His academic pursuits at least provide diversion and prestige, but they are not particularly fulfilling. This regime, that regime; it's hard to see how it could make any substantive difference to Francois. This is the masterful means by which we come to observe several sociological truths. First, nature abhors a vacuum; ergo those who do believe in something will trump the apathetic, the nihilist, and the anomic. Second, the family is a core unit of society; ergo the fraying of ties accompanied by the increased atomization of the individual poses a threat to the societal tapestry that must be addressed. Religions and other ideologies tend to fill the interstices, the cracks that form, rather effectively in a society. The filler in the 2022 France of Submission is a moderate Islam, a religion that already had traction due to Islamic immigration and a high birth rate. Rest assured that no terrorism is involved; that would be "amateurish" and repugnant. The multiple parties vying for power in France fracture the political system enough to allow the Islamic party to assume power with just 22% of the vote. Those who believe the events described to be totally implausible must not know history. Having lived in places where regime change dramatically transformed societies virtually overnight, I disagree vehemently.

WARNING: Some spoiler material in this review as far as the plot is concerned - but the heart of the matter lies in the arguments involved. The story takes its time to start on its main subject, the rise to power of Islam in France in the presidential elections of 2022. It begins with François, the narrator, in his early forties, a randy Professor of Literature at the Sorbonne and a serial bedder of his female students. He describes his sexual activities with them in explicit detail. But he also talks about his study of the admired but decadent Huysmans, and about other French writers; about his worry about his sexual decline; about his lack of interest in his teaching; and about his lack of interest in political activity: "I was about as political as a bath towel". But he has noted that the worn-out alternation between Center-Right and Center-Left governments in France was quite disconnected from what was happening in France: the growth of the vigorous Front National and of the vigorous Muslim Brotherhood. The media no longer thought, as they had done in earlier days, that the race riots which broke out every now and then in the suburbs were particularly significant. And now, in the first round of the Presidential election the Center-Right and the Center-Left candidates were eliminated, so the second round would be between the Front National and the Muslim Brotherhood. Between the first and the second round, many people are beginning to

panic, fearful of either result or indeed of civil war. Françoisâ€™ Jewish girl friend leaves for Israel.

Houellebecqâ€™s protagonist in this dystopian novel of the decline and fall of France is no right wing prude or bigot. Heâ€™s a burned out, demoralized university professor for whom childless sex with a string of equally demoralized, elite women has led him to an existential precipice as France drowns from the negative consequences of voluntary sterility and multiculturalism. In the face of this decay the fecund energy of the Muslim Brotherhood rises to national electoral victory in an entirely probable political scenario which Houellebecq astutely sketches. Houellebecq excoriates the liberal pieties: contraception and childlessness, open borders, atheism and agnosticism, anti-patriarchy. Violation of sacred liberal dogma to this extent is bound to elicit a censorious reaction from liberal thought cops. My local liberal bookstore, which prides itself on promoting daring tomes wonâ€™t feature it on its display tables, and reviews of the English translation in the mainstream American media have been largely dismissive. I do object to the bookâ€™s smuttiness. Itâ€™s not as intense as in Houellebecqâ€™s other novels; nor is it arousing, since it is written in almost clinical-medical terms more akin to an anatomy class than a scene of seduction. I suppose in France these annoying attempts at erotic description are de rigueur. Houellebecq has been compared to L.F. CÃ©line. His anti-hero possesses the pessimism and self-deprecating humility of CÃ©lineâ€™s Ferdinand character, but not the irreverent humor. I didnâ€™t laugh aloud even once reading Houellebecq, as I do with CÃ©line, who, by the way, would have mocked to the skies Houellebecqâ€™s collaboration with the pompous Zionist fanatic Bernard Henri-Levy.

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