

ANNIE ERNAUX

Reading Guide





Introduction

Annie Ernaux, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2022, has dedicated her writing to the preservation of specific moments in time—some long, some brief—which at one point were all that mattered. She illuminates the impermanence of even our most intense experiences. She transparently and eloquently recounts these moments in her life, as well as her parents' lives, as a means of remembering them, simultaneously giving insight into the ways that one person's life interacts with so many others and acknowledging the fact that moments that feel never-ending always do end.

A strong feminist voice from the beginning, her books center around the working-class woman's experience in words and phrases that challenge, or perhaps simply ignore, the stigmas and taboos that so often cling to femininity and class. Illegal abortion, shame, passion, motherhood, and death are all present in Ernaux's work, and all are given the space to be complex, confusing, and unavoidably, profoundly emotional.

Before the Nobel announcement there was already a surge in interest since 2018 when we released her masterpiece, *The Years*, that describes the sweeping history that brought us into the 21st century. The Nobel joined this wave rather than initiating it. It really is an honor to have been involved, in any capacity, with bringing such a remarkable body of work into the world.

We have created this reading guide with the hope that it will inspire many discussions and that the four questions allotted to each book we publish will generate many more.

—Seven Stories Press

A Woman's Story

A Man's Place

Simple Passion

A Frozen Woman

Exteriors

Shame

I Remain in Darkness

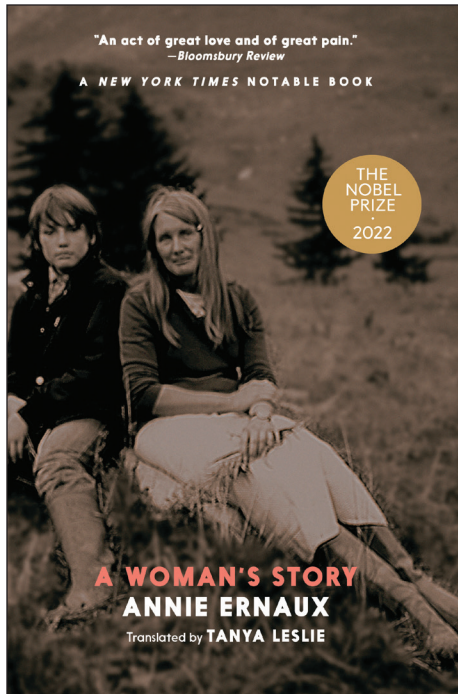
Happening

Possession

The Years

A Girl's Story

Getting Lost



PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-58322-575-2

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-326-1

PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 1988

PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY

SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 1991

\$12.95 US • 96 PAGES

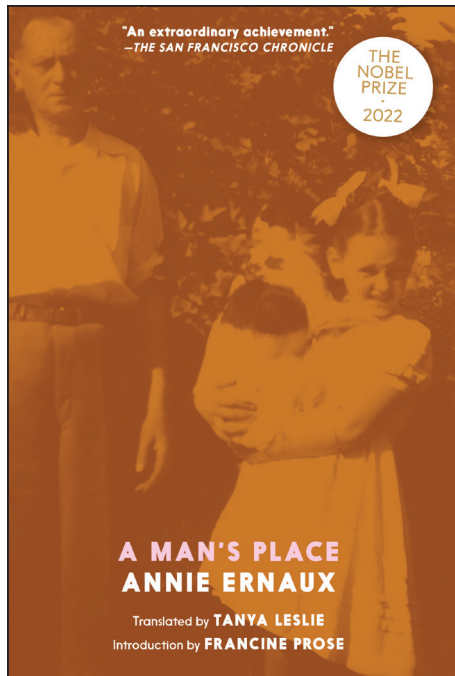
SETTING: 1981-1983

A Woman's Story

TRANSLATED BY TANYA LESLIE

Upon her mother's death from Alzheimer's, Ernaux embarks on a daunting journey back through time in *A Woman's Story*, as she seeks to explore the bond between mother and daughter.

1. Ernaux attempts to view her mother's story in a purely objective context in order "to capture the real woman, the one who existed independently from me . . ." (12) What technique does she use stylistically to accomplish this?
2. Ernaux writes, "I would recognize that tone of conversation between a mother and her daughter anywhere in the world." (64) What are the universal signs of a mother-daughter relationship you find throughout the book? And in your own life?
3. What are some of the idealized misconceptions children have of their parents, sometimes well past the age of childhood? Find examples from the book as well as from personal experience. How does Ernaux react when these illusions are broken?
4. After her mother's funeral, Ernaux writes, "Everything was definitely over." (8) What is over? What now begins? Similarly, what does Ernaux mean when she writes, "Now everything is one"? (87)



PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-60980-403-9

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-255-4

PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 1983

PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY

SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 1992

\$13.95 US • 96 PAGES

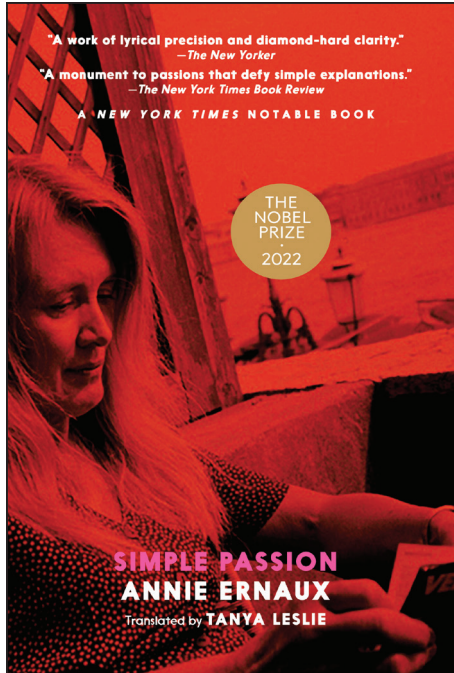
SETTING: 1969–1970

A Man's Place

TRANSLATED BY TANYA LESLIE

A Man's Place is Ernaux's examination of her father's life and their relationship, revealing the shame that haunted her father throughout his life. Barely educated and valued since childhood strictly for his labor, Ernaux's father had grown into a hard, practical man who showed his family little affection.

1. In the description Ernaux gives of her father from page 53, "He was a cheerful man," to page 57, "Really! Some people's manners!" what do we learn? In a slew of small details, we get a very good idea of his personality. What do we learn that is not said?
2. Ernaux strives to ground her account of her father's life in fact. She often describes him through his habits or his beliefs, and through her family's -isms—do you think this is a successful way of remaining objective? Do you think in general her account of his life is completely objective?
3. What do you think of Ernaux's own presence in the story of her father? How does her perspective lend itself to her father's story?
4. How does the final passage in the book relate to the rest of the book? Why do you think Ernaux chose to include it?



PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-58322-574-5

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-091-8

PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 1991

PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY

SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 1993

\$12.95 US • 80 PAGES

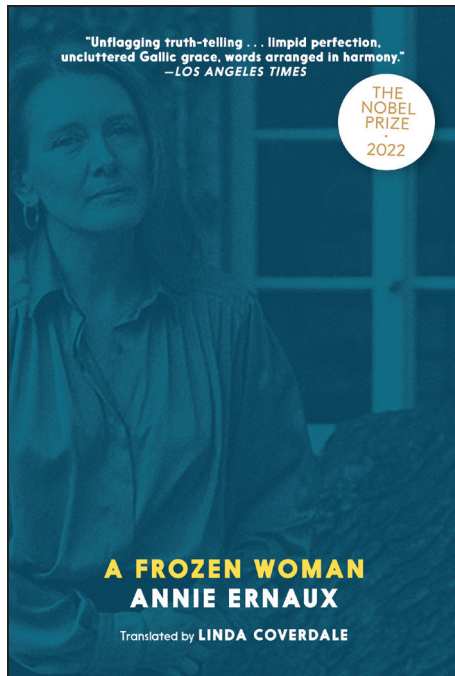
SETTING: 1990

Simple Passion

TRANSLATED BY TANYA LESLIE

Blurring the line between fact and fiction, in *Simple Passion* an unnamed narrator attempts to plot the emotional and physical course of her two-year obsessive love affair with a married man.

1. Ernaux writes, “I do not wish to explain my passion—that would imply that it was a mistake or some disorder I need to justify—I just want to describe it.” (21) Did this affect the way you read the book? How? Do you feel that a simple telling evokes emotion as powerfully as contextualizing it?
2. “Once I start typing out the text, once it appears before me in public characters, I shall be through with innocence.” (54) To what extent is this true? How does Ernaux’s definition of innocence compare to your own? Are the innocence and passion she documents necessarily paradoxical?
3. What do you think of Ernaux’s decision to include A’s last visit? How does it affect the story as a whole?
4. In what ways does Ernaux believe her affair has brought her “closer to the world”? (60) Is passion the only means through which this is possible?



PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-88836-338-8

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-220-2

PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 1981

PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY

SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 1995

\$15.95 US • 192 PAGES

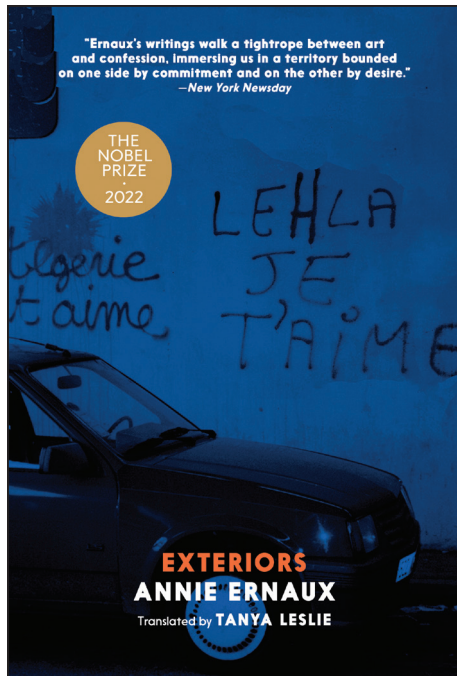
SETTING: 1970

A Frozen Woman

TRANSLATED BY LINDA COVERDALE

A Frozen Woman charts Annie Ernaux's teenage awakening, then jumps forward to when she is thirty years old, a teacher married to an executive, mother of two infant sons, and the painful realization that her career aspirations are being slowly picked apart by reality.

1. When does Ernaux realize that her parents are unconventional in terms of traditional gender roles? For example, her mother ran a grocery store, managed the finances, and did not always clean, often letting dust collect on the furniture. Her father did not go out to a place of employment as the other neighborhood men did, but rather took charge of the café, the cooking, and the gardening. How do you think this influences Ernaux's life and choices?
2. What was your reaction to Ernaux's description of getting engaged and then married? What do you make of her doubts and hesitations?
3. "My whole story as a woman: going down a flight of stairs, and hanging back at each step." (188) What do you think Ernaux means by this?
4. "My years of apprenticeship come to an end without my noticing it. Habit takes over from there. Inside the home, a series of unobtrusive noises—coffee grinder, saucepans—and outside, a teacher, discreet and sensible, an executive's wife who wears Cacharel or Rodier. A frozen woman." (191). What is your understanding of the title of this book?



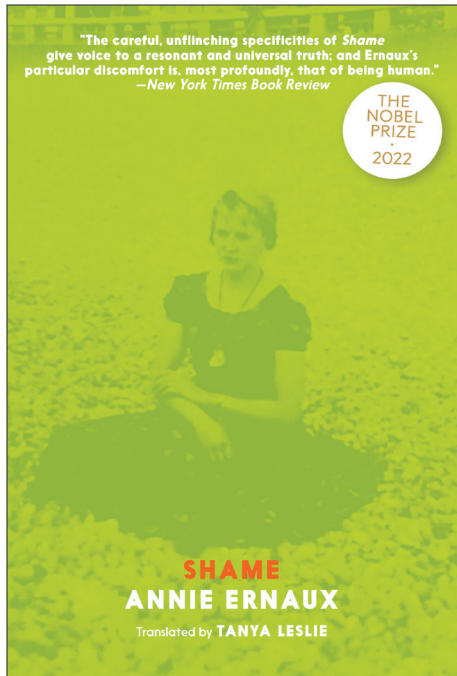
PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-64421-097-0
 EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-210-3
 PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 1993
 PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY
 SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 1996
 \$11.95 US • 96 PAGES
 SETTING: 1985–1992

Exteriors

TRANSLATED BY TANYA LESLIE

In *Exteriors*, Ernaux turns conversations overheard and people and places observed into a disturbingly effective documentary record of modern life. She watches people on the streets, in the stores, on the subway. Even the most mundane activities are, for Ernaux, portents of a rapidly changing world increasingly removed from the one she knew as a child and young adult.

1. In the introduction, Ernaux writes that “our experience of the world cannot be subject to classification” (7), and says that places like grocery stores can be just as beautiful as places like museums. How might this be so? Do you find this to be true in your own life?
2. Ernaux says that “I shames the reader,” (17) and implies that first person narration makes the reader complicit in the actions of the narrator. Do you agree that the reader is part of the story when it is told in first person? How does this tie in with the rest of Ernaux’s work, which is almost entirely in first person?
3. She writes that people refer to some artists with whom they share a special relationship by their first names, i.e. “Virginia” for Virginia Woolf, but not “Marcel” for Marcel Proust. What other artists do people refer to by their first names? Is there a gendered element to this phenomenon? Would you refer to Ernaux as “Annie” simply because you have read her journals?
4. On page 71, Ernaux presents two methods of “dealing with real facts.” She states that you can either present facts as they are, drawing no conclusions or narratives from them, or that you can hang on to facts in order to “make use of them” later. Do you agree with her? Is there a narrative arc to a facts-as-they-are book like *Exteriors*?



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EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-302-5

PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 1997

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SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 1998

\$12.95 US • 112 PAGES

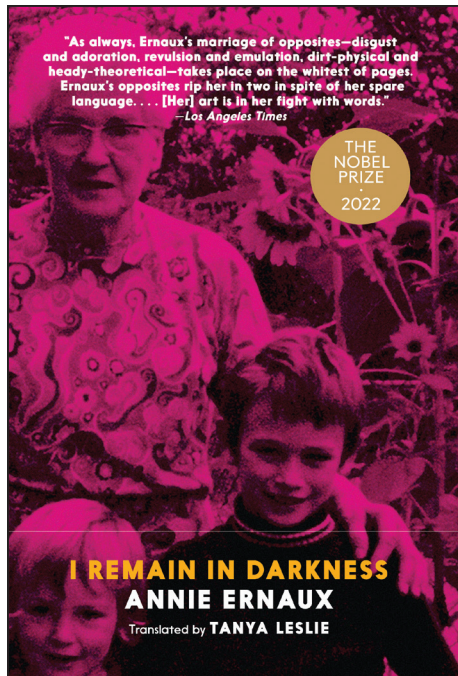
SETTING: 1952

Shame

TRANSLATED BY TANYA LESLIE

In *Shame*, Ernaux reflects on the event that arguably turned her into the writer that she is—the sharp, clear memory of the day that her father attempted to kill her mother. From there she tells the story of her twelve-year-old self and the single traumatic memory that will echo and resonate throughout her life.

1. Ernaux talks about the “unerring accuracy” of her memories. Do some details stick out more than others?
2. Do you think the short length of the book is an advantage or a disadvantage? Could she give a better account of the memories in question had she devoted more pages to them?
3. Ernaux writes that “being excitable” is a disadvantage for storytellers. (54) How does this inform Ernaux’s own writing style?
4. In what ways does the idea of “shame” influence the young Annie Ernaux in her day-to-day life? For example, she claims “As far as I can recall, I didn’t have any friends at school;” (83) could this be related to the memory of that defining encounter between her mother and father?



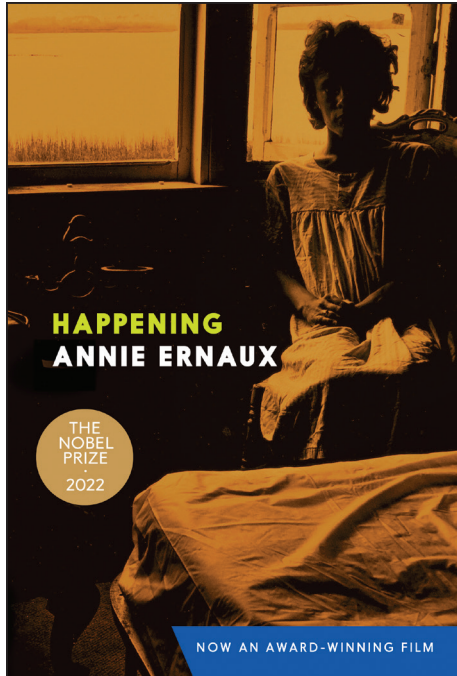
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EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-238-7
PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 1997
PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY
SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 1999
\$11.95 US • 96 PAGES
SETTING: 1983–1986

I Remain in Darkness

TRANSLATED BY TANYA LESLIE

I Remain in Darkness describes Ernaux’s attempt first to help her mother recover from Alzheimer’s disease, and then, when that proves futile, to bear witness to the older woman’s gradual decline and her own experience as a daughter losing a beloved parent.

1. Ernaux often writes that she feels like she can no longer separate herself from her mother, that she feels they are the same person, and as her mother’s health rapidly declines, she realizes that she has begun to take on the motherly role in their relationship. In your opinion, when does motherhood end? Does Ernaux’s experience provide a potential answer to this question?
2. Ernaux writes, “Being alive is being caressed, being touched.” (71) Do you agree with this statement?
3. A theme which remains present throughout the book is the repeated inquiry into what makes a self. What makes someone recognizable to us? What are the parts of Ernaux’s mother that define her, and what are the hardest parts of her to lose, through Ernaux’s eyes?
4. How do you interpret, “At this point, everything gets out of hand: horror has ceased to matter, it has even become necessary”? (82)



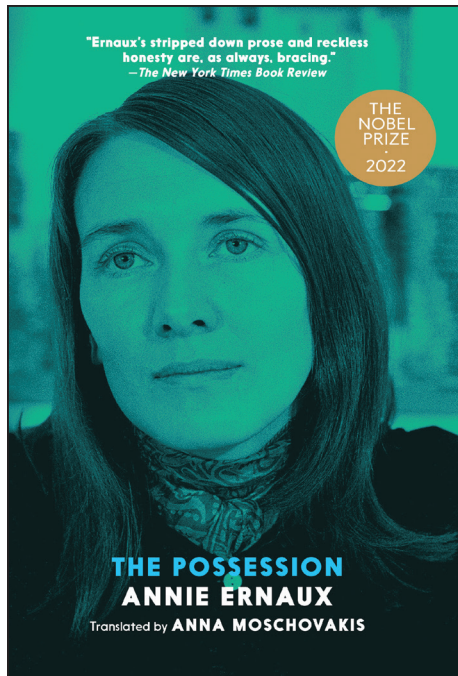
PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-60980-948-5
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-226-4
PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 2000
PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY SEVEN
STORIES PRESS: 2001
\$14.95 US • 96 PAGES
SETTING: 1963

Happening

TRANSLATED BY TANYA LESLIE

Happening describes how Annie Ernaux, at age 23 in 1963, realizes she is pregnant and describes everything she has to go through to obtain an illegal abortion as a college student in France. This book has been made into a highly acclaimed film *Happening* (2022) directed by Audrey Diwan.

1. Examine the Michel Leiris quote that begins the book. What do you think he means by this? Do you think Ernaux utilized this quote in titling the book, and why?
2. Ernaux writes after finding out she's pregnant, "... neither my baccalaureat nor my degree in literature had waived that inescapable fatality of the working-class—the legacy of poverty—embodied by both the pregnant girl and the alcoholic." (24–25) How does her working class background and education intersect later on in the story? Does either hinder or help her in her search for an abortion?
3. When Ernaux finally miscarries she says, "it's here." (75) What is the importance of her word choice?
4. In the last chapter, Ernaux revisits the cafe and church she went to before her abortion. She writes, "I realized that I had gone back to the Passage Cardinet in the hope that something might happen to me." (95) What do you think she wanted to happen to her? What was the importance of revisiting her abortion so many years later?



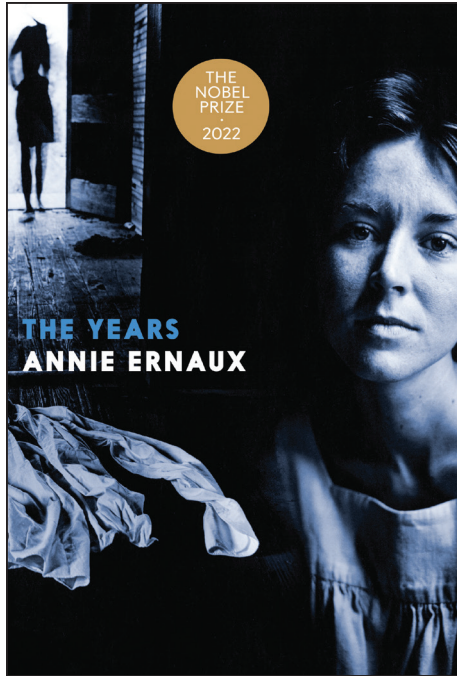
PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-58322-855-5
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-58322-980-4
PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 2002
PUBLISHED IN US BY SSP: 2008
\$11.95 US • 64 PAGES
SETTING: 2000–2001

The Possession

TRANSLATED BY ANNA MOSCHOVAKIS

The Possession is an account of the desire for control and certainty after a love affair has ended. Ernaux pulls the reader through every step of jealousy, of a woman's need to know who has replaced her in a lost beloved's life.

1. On page 20, Ernaux claims that “catharsis only benefits those who are not touched by passion.” Why might she have come to this conclusion, and do you agree?
2. What do you think of the assertion that “Without a doubt the greatest suffering, like the greatest happiness, comes from the Other?” (44)
3. Ernaux writes, “Writing has been a way to save that which is no longer my reality—a sensation seizing me from head to foot, in the street—but has become ‘the possession,’ a period of time circumscribed and completed.” (60–61) What do you think might be the purpose of recording a period of time like this one? Why might Ernaux have wanted to save this reality where jealousy consumed her? Remembering, understanding, or something else?
4. After reading the book, how does the Jean Rhys quote at the beginning resonate with you? What do you think it means to “get to the end of what [one is] feeling”? What is the effect of this line out of context vs. in the context of the book?



PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-60980-787-0

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PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 2008

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SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 2017

\$19.95 US • 240 PAGES

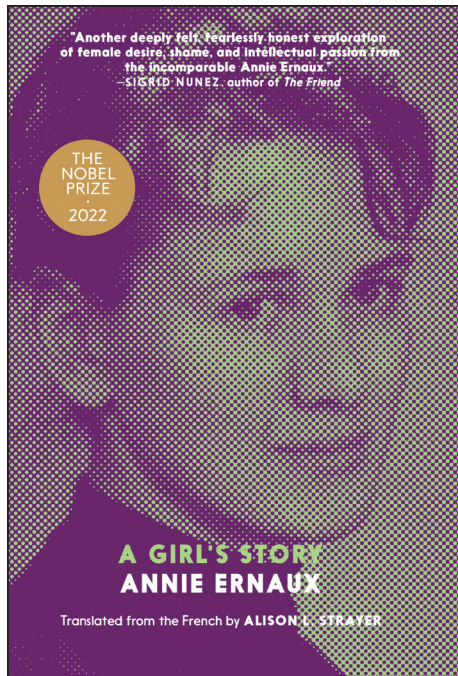
SETTING: 1941–2006

The Years

TRANSLATED BY ALISON L. STRAYER

First published in 2008 in France, *The Years* is considered Ernaux’s masterpiece. It also brought her greater attention internationally with an English translation that was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize. Ernaux uses her life story as a way of mapping the wider postwar generation in France, through the Algerian War, sexual liberation, protests and pop culture of the second half of the 20th century.

1. This is not straightforward autobiography—it is told from the perspective of “we,” which sometimes shifts into the third person, so the author appears as “she.” This has the effect of becoming a biography as well as a biography of her generation—how do these perspectives work together?
2. Ernaux makes numerous cultural references, often in the form of lists. What do you think of how translator Alison L. Strayer dealt with these cultural references and how she occasionally added footnotes? What challenges do you think a translator might face when translating specific cultural references? Is culture translatable?
3. When Ernaux writes, “. . . other people’s memories gave us a place in the world,” (26) what does she mean? Do you think this statement is specific to the time she is writing about or does it speak to a universal experience?
4. How do the quote from José Ortega y Gasset at the beginning of the book and Ernaux’s third-person semi-autobiography interact? What do these two elements say when put together?



PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-60980-951-5
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-60980-952-2
PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 2016
PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY SSP: 2020
\$18.95 US • 160 PAGES
SETTING: 1958

A Girl's Story

TRANSLATED BY ALISON L. STRAYER

In *A Girl's Story* Ernaux looks back at her childhood and first sexual experience. Based on indelible images from her memory, photos and letters written to her friends, she questions this girl and her own experiences.

1. In what ways does Ernaux, as she's writing the book, feel separated from the younger version of herself, the Girl of '58? In what ways is she the same?
2. What reasons might Ernaux have for writing about "the girl of '58" as an entity separate from herself? Why choose to tell an autobiographical story in the third person?
3. In all of Ernaux's work, she weaves the larger forces of the moment into her own story. How do the larger cultural and societal events (for example, French troops attempting to establish "order" in Algeria) relate to Ernaux making sense of her own adolescence?
4. Could this be considered "autofiction?" Annie Ernaux has said that she does not believe the term autofiction should be applied to her work, because, as she writes on her website, she "reject[s] belonging to a specific genre, be it novel or even autobiography." What do you think of this rejection of genre, and specifically the rejection of autofiction as it relates to this book?



PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-64421-219-6

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-64421-220-2

PUBLISHED IN FRANCE: 2001

PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH IN US BY

SEVEN STORIES PRESS: 2022

\$18.95 US • 240 PAGES

SETTING: 1989

Getting Lost

TRANSLATED BY ALISON L. STRAYER

Getting Lost is the diary Annie Ernaux kept during the year and a half she had a secret love affair with a younger, married man, a Russian diplomat. Her book, *Simple Passion*, was based on this affair. In these pages it is 1989 and Annie is divorced with two grown sons, living outside of Paris and nearing fifty.

1. “If one day people read this journal, they’ll see that there was indeed ‘alienation in the work of Annie Ernaux,’ and not only in the work but even more so in her life.” (49) What is the function of the journal form and how does Ernaux (re)structure her life through it?
2. Ernaux writes: “My whole life has been an effort to tear myself away from male desire, in other words, from my own desire” (60), “All that attracts him is my status as a writer” (23) and “I also know it’s because he’s a Soviet that I love him.” (73) What is the relationship between the desirer and the desired? What are the cultural and political forces at play in this affair? How does desire shape the writer’s relationship to writing?
3. “One could not imagine two women more different in terms of height, hair and eye color, body (she’s a little dumpy) and clothing. The mother and the whore” (40) “I’m both mother and whore for him.” (148) How does Ernaux illuminate and subvert the patriarchal dynamics in societal expectations of women?
4. Why does Ernaux reveal the affair in this book even though she promised S not to write about it? What space does writing offer her that she is unable to find elsewhere in life? What is the relationship between writing, desire and time?