

Speaker's manuscript – Literature prize 2022 Annie Ernaux

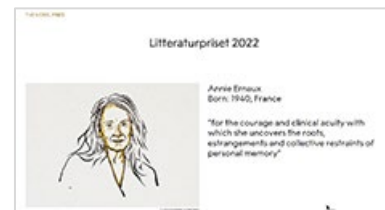
The Nobel Prize in Literature

- The Nobel Prize in Literature is one of the five prizes founded by Alfred Nobel and awarded on 10 December every year.
- Before Nobel died on 10 December 1896, he wrote in his will that the largest part of his fortune should be used to fund a prize to those who "have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind".
- One of the five prizes should go "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction".
- The Nobel Prize in Literature has mainly been awarded to authors who have written works of fiction – such as novels, short stories, poetry collections and theatrical plays. In 2016 the prize went to a musician and songwriter, when Bob Dylan became the literature laureate.



The 2022 literature prize

- Annie Ernaux was born in 1940 and grew up in the little town of Yvetot in Normandy, France.
- Ernaux's childhood home can be described as poor but ambitious, her parents having risen up from the bottom of the working class to attain a somewhat better life. But they never really left behind their memories of poverty, of earthen floors.
- Ernaux's humble childhood often provides the background for her writing, which is therefore usually characterised as autobiographical.



Debut and breakthrough

- Annie Ernaux debuted in 1974 with the novel *Cleaned Out* (*Les Armoires vides*).
- In 1983, she published her fourth novel, *A Man's Place*, which was her literary breakthrough. The work may be described as an exposé of her father and the whole milieu that shaped his underlying character. The novel was soon translated into several languages and established Ernaux's place on the map of world literature.
- Since then, Ernaux has continued publishing novels at regular intervals. Her works are widely read and translated, counting more than twenty published titles in all, most of them relatively short.



Style and narrative point of view

- The quotation comes from an interview Ernaux gave for Swedish Television’s literary programme *Babel*.
- Annie Ernaux’s narrative style is often described as restrained and clinical. In the same interview, she says that “feelings don’t belong in my writing – it’s not a description of feelings.” Instead, Ernaux believes, her books should provoke some feeling in the reader.
- In several of her works, she consciously uses the third person point of view to describe what is happening. We could say that, although the content of her books is highly autobiographical, it is as if she were observing what happens from the outside. She relies on the perspective of the third-person “she” to describe things – even though she’s often writing about real events from her own life.



Excerpt from *Happening*

- “I turned all my intention to sport, hoping that my strenuous efforts or maybe even a fall might dislodge ‘that thing’, making it unnecessary for me to visit the woman in the 17th arrondissement. When Annick left me her skiing gear, which I couldn’t afford to hire, I would repeatedly tumble, imagining each time I did that I was inflicting the fall that would save me.”



From *Happening* (2000),
Seven Stories Press 2021, translated by Tanya Leslie

- The passage is from her novel *Happening*, a work the Swedish Academy describes as “a masterpiece from her production”.
- This book is narrated in the first person – here, for once, Ernaux does not use the third-person voice – with a 23-year-old woman narrator describing with unflinching honesty the unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortion she goes through, which nearly costs her her life.
- It is interesting to connect the excerpted text to her description of how feelings should be provoked in the reader rather than described. Her style is straightforward, and she allows readers to discover on their own that the narrator is noticeably afflicted by her predicament.
- The title of the book is a consciously euphemistic way of referring to the tragedy of becoming pregnant as an unmarried young woman – particularly in 1960s France, when abortion was both taboo and illegal.

Recurring themes in Ernaux’s writing

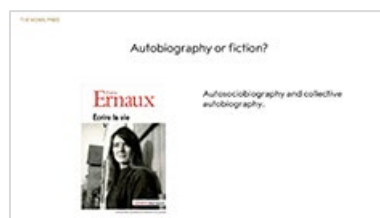
- Ernaux almost always comes back to her own childhood in her writing, and she is not afraid to depict the hardships she went through. One example is the abortion Ernaux herself underwent when she was twenty-three years old – an event she has touched on in several of her books.
- Women’s liberation, the role of mothers, and social disparities are other recurring themes in her work.



- The Swedish Academy’s motivation for the prize highlights the courage that characterises her writing. Anders Olsson, Chair of the Nobel Committee for Literature, explains their assessment, noting that Ernaux is not afraid to portray the difficult subjects that many other authors tend to avoid – and she does so in a way that is straightforward and in many ways self-revelatory.

Autobiography or fiction?

- As already mentioned, Annie Ernaux mines her own life and her childhood in her writing, but she is reluctant to characterise it as autobiographical.
- Instead she calls it autosociobiography. It could be said that she is searching for who she was in her youth. Her personal, fragmented memories are mixed with collective memories from the time she was growing up - everything from war and pop cultural references from that era to random memories of dinners with her extended family. This searching makes it difficult for her to recognise the person she once was.
- This is perhaps most clear in her most comprehensive project, *The Years*, which has been called the first collective autobiography.
- It is interesting to note that many of her books, in keeping with the themes of her work, have pictures of herself in her youth on their covers.



Excerpt from *The Years*

- "Nothing is certain but her desire to be grown-up, and the absence of the following memory: that of the first time they said, before the photo of the baby on the cushion in a nightdress, and others, identical, oval-shaped and sepia, 'That's you', forcing her to see herself in that other, shaped from chubby flesh, who'd lived a mysterious life in a time that no longer existed."



From *The Years* (2008),

Fitzcarraldo Editions 2017, translated by Alison L. Strayer

- The excerpt exemplifies the kind of searching for her former self we find in much of Ernaux’s work. She begins by describing a photograph of herself as an infant and then recalls the moment when she found out that this was a picture of her.
- In the excerpt, she describes herself as someone else – as if she were trying to remember the person she once was. When she does not succeed in this, it’s as though she finds another person instead.
- Here she also relies on her characteristic third-person point of view. Thus, it is herself she’s writing about, but her use of “she” as the subject makes her narrative feel more anonymous or universal. By extension, the reader feels less distanced from the action.

“I think that when we write, what is really important is that we need to read a lot.”

- The quotation comes from a telephone interview Ernaux gave in conjunction with the announcement of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature. During the interview Annie Ernaux gives her advice to young people and speaks about the importance of honesty in writing.
- Ernaux also describes how she found out she was awarded with the Nobel Prize while listening to the radio alone in her kitchen – and how to her it felt like being “in the desert and there is a call that is coming from the sky, that was sort of the feeling I had.”

