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November  
1986

# Mémoire des Mémoires

Not only did **Marguerite Yourcenar** enchant Mt. Desert, her *Memoirs of Hadrian* has made it to the World Library's pantheon of "The 100 Best Books of All Time." BY JOHN TAYLOR

When in search of instruction in the meaning of patience, apprentice writers would do well to contemplate Marguerite Yourcenar, the French author and academician. Her most important book to date, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, appeared in 1951, the year she turned 48. In the 1963 edition she included some notes, or *Reflections*, to use her title, that tell the story of how *Memoirs* came to be written. According to this account, she was all of 20 when overtaken by the ambition to write a book of some sort about Hadrian, the illustrious Roman emperor. Her choice of subject is less surprising than it might at first seem. Having been trained in Greek and

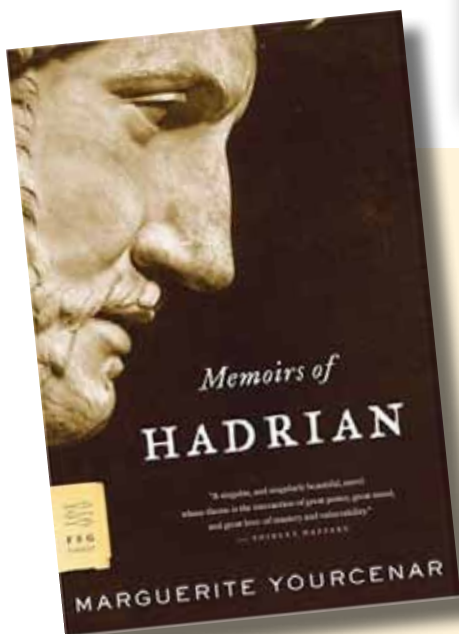


## SALON

Latin by private tutors she felt at home in the classical world and all the more drawn to it by this sentence she found in Flaubert's correspondence: "Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone." Ultimately, Marguerite Yourcenar would "do, from within, the same work of reconstruction which the 19th century archaeologists (had) done from without."

Yet even though author and subject made a good match, 28 years were to pass before her self-assigned task was completed. Throughout this period her readings in the Greek and Roman classics remained nearly continuous, whereas her efforts at the writing table were fitful at best. Because it was her practice to destroy almost everything she wrote just as soon as she found it displeasing, she never had more than a few scraps to build on, or to sustain the hope that she actually did have a book in hand. Though she does not report how many manuscripts, whether partial or complete, she simply threw out, it is clear there must have been a fair number. Nevertheless she found the courage to begin work from scratch over and over again, despite years of blundering down blind alleys. Eventually, though, and perhaps inevitably, she scraped bottom. "From 1939 to 1948 the project was wholly abandoned. I thought of it at times, but with discouragement."

(Continued on page 72)



"Madame Yourcenar and Grace Frick loved going to Jordan Pond House in Acadia National Park for tea and popovers outside on the lawn," says Joan Howard. "They went there often during the summers of 1949 and 1950, when *Hadrian* was a work in progress, taking pages of manuscript with them to read and discuss over tea. When they acquired their first (of three) cocker spaniels in 1955, they named him *Monsieur Popover!*"

**M**arguerite Antoinette Jeanne Marie Ghislaine de Crayencour was born in 1903 to a Belgian mother who died a week later; she was raised by her unpredictable French father, whom she later described as "perpetually absent without leave." But according to her biographer, Josyane Savigneau, it was her father who helped her rearrange the letters of her last name into the pseudonym *Yourcenar*, "that calls to mind faraway unknown places—that strikes one as the very sign of something strange."

As a young, nomadic intellectual, she met Virginia Woolf, whom she described as "at once sparkling and timid." Woolf's own description of Yourcenar: "[S]he wore some nice gold leaves on her black dress; is a woman I suppose with a past; lives half the year in Athens... red-lipped, strenuous; a working Frenchwoman."

Yourcenar's romantic and professional relationship with the American academic Grace Frick began in 1937; Yourcenar emigrated to the U.S. in 1939 and spent the war years and afterward teaching French literature at Sarah Lawrence; she became an American citizen in 1947. In 1950, the pair bought their home in Northeast Harbor; Frick, according to Maria Louise Ascher, writing in

*The New Criterion* in 1993, "managed the details of their shared life... aided with research and proof-reading, and transl[ation]..." The pair traveled often because they "found the gray Maine winters unutterably boring."

Yourcenar's admission into the *Académie Française* (strictly male since 1635) was controversial. "Claude Levi-Strauss was ardently opposed," writes Ascher, "because 'you don't change the rules of the tribe'... but in 1980... her French citizenship was renewed and she was elected... After the induction ceremony, she never attended another meeting."

Grace Frick died of cancer in 1979. Subsequently, Yourcenar began a tempestuous 5-year relationship and traveled with a young man, Jerry Wilson, until he died of complications related to AIDS in 1986.

Biographer Savigneau calls Yourcenar a woman who "rewrote her life endlessly." She destroyed a great deal of her private letters before her death in 1987; her will stipulates the rest will remain sealed for 50 years. —*Claire Cramer*

Source: "The First Immortelle," a review in *The New Criterion*, October, 1993 by Maria Louise Ascher of Josyane Savigneau's biography, *Marguerite Yourcenar: Inventing a Life*, Joan Howard, trans. (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

## Eavesdropping on an Emperor

—from *Memoirs of Hadrian*

**O**f all the joys which are slowly abandoning me, sleep is one of the most precious, though one of the most common, too. A man who sleeps but little and poorly, and propped on many a cushion, has ample time to meditate upon this particular delight. I grant that the most perfect repose is almost

necessarily a complement to love, that profound rest which is reflected in two bodies. But what interests me here is the specific mystery of sleep partaken of for itself alone, the inevitable plunge risked each night by the naked man, solitary and unarmed, into an ocean where everything changes, the colors, the densities, and even the rhythm of breathing, and where we meet the dead."

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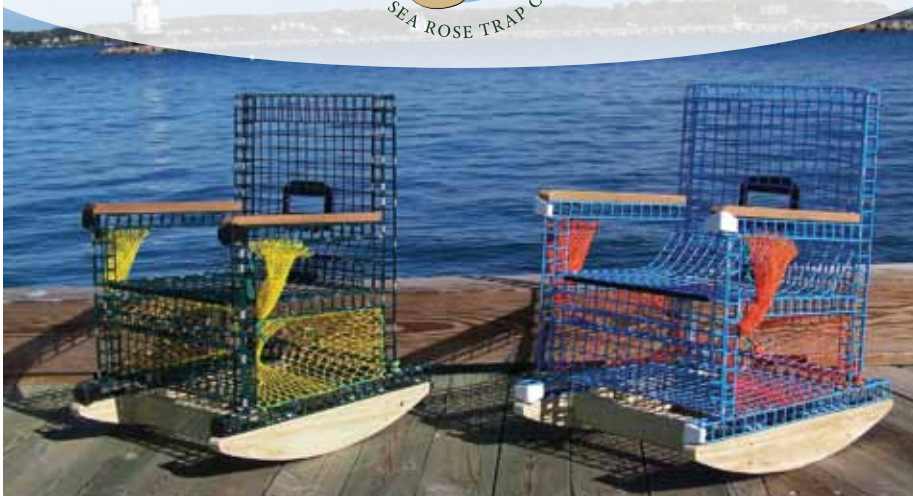


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*Mémoire* (continued from page 52)

ment, and almost indifference, as one thinks of the impossible. And with something like shame for ever having ventured upon such an undertaking (*Reflections*, p. 323).” It was during this period that she went to the length of burning her research notes: “They seemed to have become...completely useless.”

But then by chance this rumor of a would-be book returned to life in December 1948. While rooting about in a trunkful of half-forgotten belongings she hadn’t seen in 10 years, she came upon “four or five typewritten sheets, the paper of which had turned yellow.” Here was a fragment, indeed one of the very few, to have survived her ruthless rejections, and “from that moment there was no question but that this book must be taken up again, whatever the cost.”

How many would dare to resume work at age 45 on a project first conceived at age 20 when repeated efforts during the intervening 25 years had led absolutely nowhere at all?

After nearly 60 years at the typewriter, Marguerite Yourcenar won unforeseen fame when in January 1981 she was elected to the *Académie Française*. She is the first woman to be so honored, and it redounds to the credit of her French peers that in breaking with a tradition of more than 300 years’ standing they could bring themselves to accept as one of their own a candidate who happened also to be an

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American citizen. Madame Yourcenar has lived in this country since the late 1930s, having been stranded here by the war. Though she writes only in French and primarily for a French audience, she has been translated by her companion, the late Grace Frick, so that American readers have ready access to her principal works. It remains for her adopted country to take due notice.

Since 1950, Marguerite Yourcenar has lived on Mt. Desert Island on the coast of Maine. For 31 years the local press had left her in peace, but her election to the *Académie* was thought to make good copy. Overnight she's become every editor's first priority for an interview, and, finding myself in Maine, I volunteered... So I've set out for Northeast Harbor.

Of all the villages on the mussel-bound coast of Maine, Northeast Harbor strikes me as being among the least likely to attract a European as cerebral as Marguerite Yourcenar. As summer colonies go, it is one of the most heavily moneyed, which in Maine is saying rather a lot, and during the season it teems with expensive Philadelphians, few of them much inclined toward ideas or books. Yet Northeast Harbor is home to Madame Yourcenar, where she lives in a small white house which she calls *Petite Plaisance*, the name originally given to a nearby island by the French explorer Samuel de Champlain. "You can live your own

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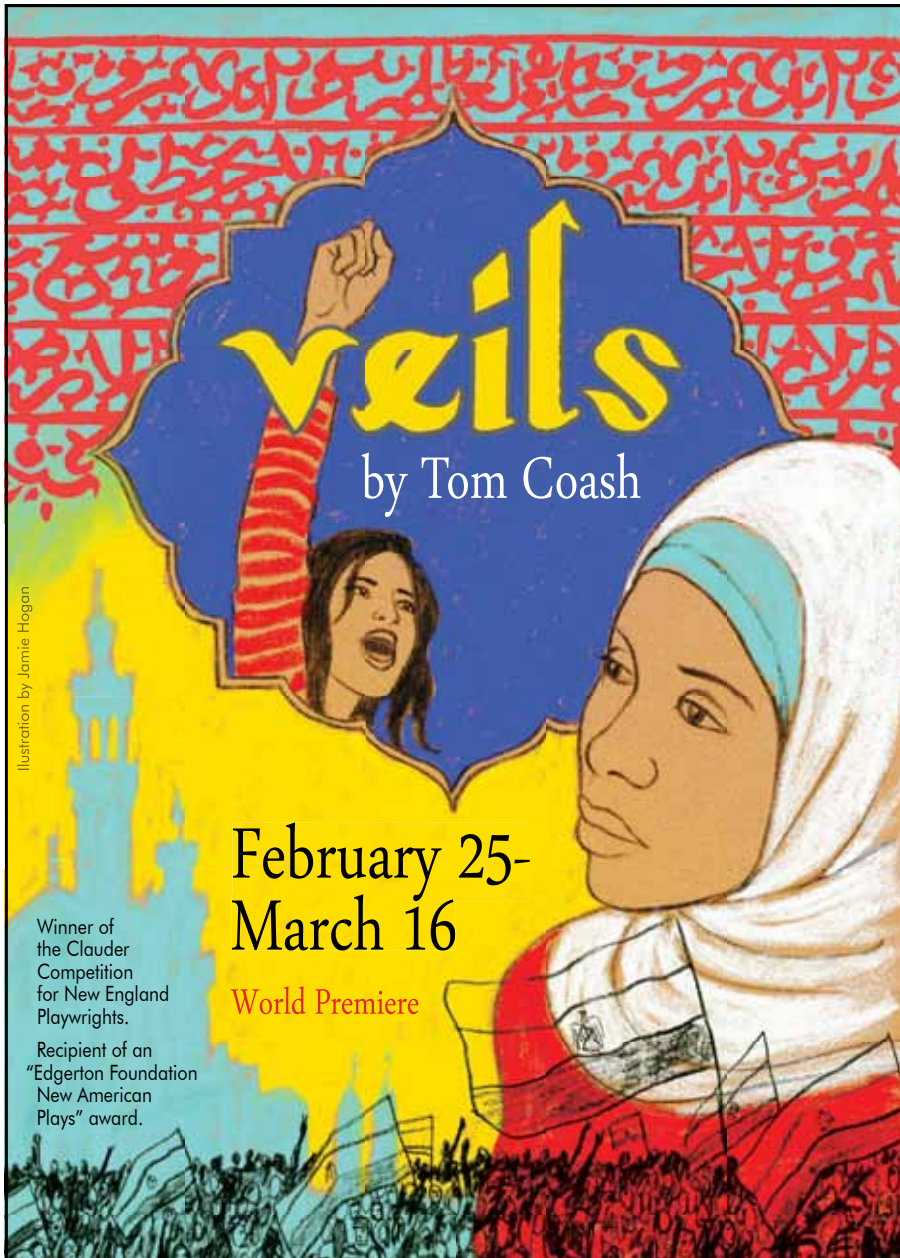



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life here," she tells me, her piercing eyes illuminating a thoroughly French face. "I like the privacy, but I also like living in a village. You can learn so much more about people and human nature here—who's getting married, who's getting divorced, who's going to have a baby—than you can leading an upper-crust existence in some big city." Possibly so, though it comforts me that I am not the only one from away, as the Mainers put it, who finds the natives somewhat baffling. In a neighboring village, Madame was once overheard to sigh, "I have not zee key to zee peepul."

What Marguerite Yourcenar has instead is zee key to the world of classical antiquity, and it is her seemingly total embrace of the Graeco-Roman view of life that turns out to be the clue I've been seeking. We talk about her work, her travels, her election to the *Académie*... Early in the interview I ask Madame Yourcenar whether she ever felt surprised at having spent more than half her adult life on the coast of Maine, the only French writer of her generation, or perhaps of any other, to have met with that improbable fate. "Surprised?" she asks. "*Mais non*. We don't like to admit how important it is, but everything is influenced by chance. Getting books written is a matter of chance." It strikes me at first that this is an extraordinary remark for her to make, that her modesty is altogether excessive. But later I realize she means what she says, and not only because it had indeed been a piece of luck that she should have found a fragment of manuscript in a half-forgotten trunk while looking for something else.

I ask her how it happened that the first two or three chapters of *Memoirs* read as if they might have been written by Montaigne... She thereupon proceeds to sling me a lecture on the who and what of Montaigne. [It is clear that she knows the *Essays*.] Yet this familiarity, as it turns out, proves not to be the reason *Memoirs* is redolent of Montaigne. My question has simply been obtuse. In direct answer to it she explains: "We are both immersed in the classical world."

As a thoroughgoing classicist like Montaigne before her, she has taken the Graeco-Roman view of life for her own, and central to that view is a respect for Fortune, or what she chooses to call chance.

As the Roman Empire disintegrated, Fortune became a cult and the mindless, passive

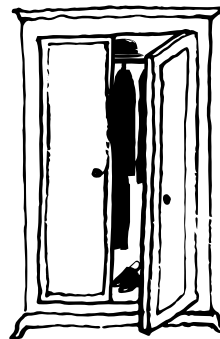
fatalism thus engendered gave her a bad name that was to last a thousand years until she was rehabilitated during the Renaissance. Montaigne and Marguerite Yourcenar concern themselves with a much earlier period of Roman history, a time "when man stood alone," when it was necessary to confront the randomness of life without the comfort of belief in Divine Purpose and ultimate salvation, when the notion of Fate had not yet lapsed into fatalism. The Romans of that era, who were able to accept the demonstrable importance of Fortune without disavowing the individual's responsibility, were fond of the saying: *Each man's character shapes his fortune*. For her part, Madame Yourcenar expresses the same view in her autobiographical ruminations, *With Open Eyes*: "I do not believe in an irrevocable, foreordained destiny: We change our destinies constantly as we make our way through life. Everything that we do affects our fate for better or worse."

For if you alone are to determine the results of your efforts, you would probably be wise to abandon them the first time they fail. "When it comes to making a book," Madame Yourcenar observes, "you've got to know how to wait." The same lesson would apply, to judge from her example, when it comes to making a life. ■

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Marguerite Yourcenar died in December of 1987, 13 months after this story came out. In 2002, *Memoirs of Hadrian* was included in the list of the World Library 100 Best Books of All Time, composed by 100 writers from 54 countries; Yourcenar is one of just 11 women authors on the list. Her remains and Grace Frick's are buried in Brookside Cemetery in Somesville. *Petite Plaisance* is now a museum dedicated to Yourcenar's life and work, open June 15-August 31 (S. Shore Rd., Northeast Harbor, 276-3940).

*Petite Plaisance* museum curator and biographer Joan Howard is just completing *Grace Frick: The Visage of Fidelity*, 12 years in the making. Howard knew both Mme. Yourcenar, as she liked to be called, and Grace Frick during their final years in Maine. "Madame enjoyed tea every day, and she took it between 4:30 and 5 p.m. No matter where she was, she'd take tea. While traveling, she'd stop at a Howard Johnson's and take tea. I think her love for it dated to her family's escape to England during World War I." Just tea? "With Pepperidge Farm cookies. Brussels, Milanos, Veronas." As for Yourcenar the salonista, watch out: "I don't believe they ever met before, but Madame particularly disliked Marguerite Duras." Once she flashed, "Well, if you're going to write a book called *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, why not *Auschwitz, Mon Petit Chou*?"



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