

# The Shadow Man

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A WINTER'S JOURNAL

Emmanuel Bove

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“Colette did not know what to make of Bove...but she liked his books, and the way he wrote them amused her. He would choose a title, then he would write his name under the title. If the arrangement amused him, he would move it down to the middle of the page. The next morning, he would think about a story that matched.” I searched but could not find this anecdote in *Emmanuel Bove: La Vie Comme Une Ombre*, the only full-length biography of the writer (and unfortunately only in French), but even if it’s apocryphal or it stopped being true early in Bove’s short but prolific career (born 1898, died 1945, thirty books), it well characterizes his peculiar and endearing side.

In any case, the original name of *A Winter’s Journal* (published in 1931 as *Journal écrit en hiver*) was *Journal d’un homme marie*, a better and truer title. The married man is Louis Grandeville, and his journal begins October 7 and ends February 2.

Bove’s famous (or notorious) narrators are philosophers of everyday domestic life. They notice peculiar details, ruminate upon them, and deliver beautifully clear, slow-motion summations:

There is nothing more distressing than crushing someone’s pride. When, wounded by their indifference, we get carried away, a voice cries out to us, warning that our reserves aren’t going to be enough. Then, in the heat of anger, we acquire the strength we were lacking. But when we suddenly realize that our opponent has capitulated and collapsed miser

ably, we suddenly find ourselves alone with our disproportionate effort, as though we’d used a powerful catapult to launch ourselves across a tiny stream. We feel cruel, wicked, harsh, and ashamed of dominating the situation so totally. Pride won’t allow us to ask for forgiveness; we’re perched atop positions we did everything to capture and which are now meaningless. Only then do we begin to realize how inhuman we were.

Because the plots of Bove’s novels are less interesting or compelling than the nervous, slow-witted genius of a narrator, they start to seem indistinguishable from each other. Even in *Night Departure*, about an escape from a Nazi prison camp, with the Bovian narrator murdering two guards!, what’s most dramatic and impressive are the careful, simple, and unusual observations that the sad sack hero makes: “He took my arm like a woman trying to win back the man who has beaten her. ‘Let’s think about this...,’ he was saying. Now I was convinced that he was trying to hold me back so he could turn me in. Yet I didn’t try to get away; I pretended to believe that this arm in mine was a sign of affection. But I was afraid, more and more afraid.”

Bove never allows the books to become funny—he would sooner we dismiss his characters as pathetic than to laugh at them. And yet all the books are comedies.

The most famous, and his first, is *Mes Amis* (*My Friends*). That is a title right out of a 1920s silent comedy starring, say, Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd. The short novel presents the stories of how the nervous, nagging narrator makes and loses one friend after another, through no fault but his own.

It is hardly any surprise, then, that this “Married Man’s Journal” is the story of how Louis becomes “*un homme non marie*.”

Fascinated by how much knowledge he has accumulated of Madeline's character and habits, Louis never tires of describing them in his journal (though he usually resists pointing them out to her). "To keep from lying, she has this curious habit of feeling obliged to do in reality what she later plans to say she did." "She draws the energy she needs for her unhappiness from the feeling that other people around her don't understand her. She would like others to feel sad when she does, and be happy when she is happy, again at *exactly the same moment.*"

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Though Louis would probably argue that Madeline is unlike any woman in the world, she never becomes distinctly particular, for all his fine observations, the way any Victorian heroine might. She becomes, instead, a canvas for him to express his critical amazement at human beings: "The stirrings of her conscience may make her uncomfortable, but they are never of an intensity sufficient to make her feel guilty."

But where Louis is most "Bovian," most sublime, most fun, most strange, is through his continual use of "we" to pull us into identification with him rather than with Madeline. "When we succeed for months on end in adhering to the course we've set ourselves, when an iron will keeps us from wavering for an entire year and we've already started thinking we're improved, transformed, and then, in a moment of anger, we become worse than ever, the most painful feeling overwhelms us, as though we were a laborer who, after a lifetime of hard work, sees the fruit of his efforts swept away in a night."

The sad comedy of *A Winter's Journal* is how carefully Louis watches Madeline and how poorly he anticipates her actions. "Me! Not know her! Why, there isn't a thought that crosses her mind which I don't divine. And she accuses me of incomprehension!"

Throughout the novels, many of the second bananas renounce the Bovian narrator and deliver devastating assessments of his character. Even if we root for the narrator, we see that his foes are sensible and well-meaning; we never wonder for a second why they might be fed up with him. (In *A Singular Man*, the hero's former brother-in-law, impatient with Jean-Marie Thely for not getting on his feet after years as a widower, slightly disabled though he is, is as obsessed with explaining what's wrong with the very "Singular Man" as Louis is with explaining poor Madeline.)

The problem and the attraction of Bove is the narrator, naive shadow that he is. He is not Dostoyevskian in that he doesn't aggressively engage you in identifying with his worst behavior. He is not Chekhovian in that there seems to be almost no distance between the author and the narrator. If Bove is Kafkaesque it's in his relentless self-analysis. But is Bove "great"? Samuel Beckett and others have thought so. "Emmanuel Bove ought to become the patron-saint of (pure) writers, more so than Kafka, and in the same manner as Anton Chekhov and Francis Scott Fitzgerald," writes Peter Handke (who perhaps never read St. Fitzgerald in English).

But just as Bove's narrators worry about the lesser interest the world has in them than they in it, the author fell out of his post-War French audience's mind as soon as he passed away of what's speculated to have been tuberculosis. It took Jane Kramer's 1985 article in *The New Yorker* about Bove's quiet but chic revival in France to bring him into notice in the US, and there have been eight novels in English since, with at least two more in the translation oven.

The only thing to do with Bove is to read him up before he disappears again.

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