

Unsolved Mystery



William Gillespie

“53 DAYS”

Georges Perec

Edited by Harry Mathews and Jacques Roubaud

Translated by David Bellos

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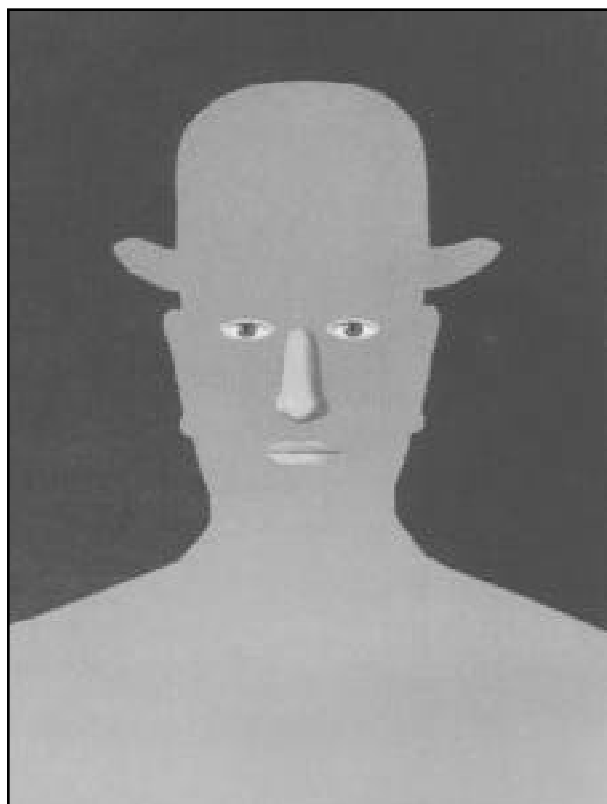
As a fiction writer, Georges Perec will always be celebrated for his elaborately orchestrated and meticulously executed formal designs. It is perhaps an unfortunate aspect for his writing to be remembered by, as, in most cases, such formal devices remain invisible to the reader following the story. For example, it is possible to read, and even to understand, Perec's novel *Life A User's Manual*, without ever detecting that the novel's progression from one scene to the next is based on a series of chess moves. However, one might argue, therein lies Perec's virtuosity—not so much the elaborate orchestration and meticulous execution thereof (and, to an English-reading audience, the meticulous execution of translator David Bellos)—but the degree to which that execution renders that orchestration invisible, even irrelevant, to the reader interested in story. The legend that, when Perec's novel *La Disparition* (a novel somehow written without the use of the letter E, without any obvious concessions in spelling and grammar) was originally published, at least one reviewer failed to notice its arduous alphabetic constraint, is a testament to Perec's ability as an Oulipian. In the words of Italo Calvino, as reproduced in “53 Days,” “an Oulipian writer is like a hurdler sprinter who runs faster when there are hurdles on the track.”

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All of which is likely to make the reader suspicious that, aside from the formal scaffolding, Perec's writing lacks real beauty or interest, like a building with great architecture that isn't any fun to be in. In the case of the book at hand, the unfinished posthumous “53 Days,” all one has of the building is the messy blueprints and the facade of the first 90 pages. “53 Days” is the new English translation of a novel Perec left unfinished when he died. The completed portions have now been translated and published along with 165 of the author's private notes about the novel. It is not clear to me whether an exhaustive study of these notes—essentially Perec's shorthand precomp—would reveal how the novel, whose beginning is quite interesting, will end. It is likewise not clear to me whether such a study would be worth undertaking. The notes were clearly not written with an audience in mind, and the process of reading a dead man's diary is to me as distracting as the notes themselves are difficult to understand.

“53 Days” is, somehow, a real mystery novel about a fictional mystery novel, which fictional mystery novel not only contains, as a fictional device, a mystery novel, but also references several mystery novels, to the extent that it freely borrows ideas and even passages from them. In fact, at least one of the mystery novels this fictional mystery novel references is a real mystery novel—Agatha Christie's *The Magistrate is the Murderer*. And yet, somehow, in the outer story, on the first diagenetic level, everything remains coherent and lapses into nothing resembling the confusing metafiction of Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. “53 Days” is, or would have been, it seems, more of a mystery novel than a comment about them. While clever, it is not a satire, and one is given every expectation that its mystery, which is intriguing, will be solved.

But, somehow, Perec has written a larger mystery that falls outside those frames: the mystery of his own unfinished detective novel. In the story within “53 Days,” after the mysterious disappearance of mystery novelist Robert Serval (alias Stéphane Réal), the manuscript of Serval’s most recent, unpublished work, is thought to hold clues explaining his disappearance, and it is the narrator’s detailed study of this manuscript that provides the motion of the plot. In real life, the manuscript of the unfinished novel “53 Days” by Georges Perec, after its author’s disappearance, is given to his devoted friends and colleagues Jacques Roubaud and Harry Mathews to reconstruct the ending. The fact that this extradiagetic level (real life) seems to parallel the events of the fictional world, almost adds to the intrigue of the unfinished novel. Disappointingly, however, Perec died rather suddenly of lung cancer, leaving, ultimately, little in the way of real mystery.



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Unfortunately, despite the thorough and loving realization of “53 Days” at the hands of Bellos, Mathews, and Roubaud, I can only recommend this book to readers who have not

only not read Perec’s other finished, translated books (*Things: A Story of the Sixties*, *W or the Memory of Childhood*, *A Void*, *Life A User’s Manual*, *Species of Spaces*, *A Winter’s Journey*, *A Man Asleep*, *Three*), but who have also given up trying to learn to read in French.

“53 Days,”

whether despite or because of its elaborate literary ambitions, would have likely succeeded on the level of a mystery novel, had it been finished. Mystery novels, after all, rely heavily on closure. The fact that

the beginning is quite engaging only makes the absence of the ending—and of Georges Perec—all the more regrettable.

William Gillespie’s ridiculous novel Johnny Werd: The Fire Continues was published this year under the pen name Q. Synopsis. A gallery of his on-line literary projects can be found at www.wordwork.org.