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**Frédéric Castaing**

# Hell of a Century

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**BIOGRAPHY** Frédéric Castaing was born in the Tarn region of France in 1944. After studying classics at a lycée in Chartres and then at the Sorbonne, he was a history teacher for 10 years at the renowned Lycée Henry IV before becoming an expert on handwritten and historical documents and opening a gallery in Paris. A specialist in 18th century manuscripts, he has been president of the Syndicat National de la Librairie Ancienne et Moderne (SLAM) since 2004.

**PUBLICATIONS** *Rouge cendres*, Ramsay 2005; *Ça va?—ça va!* Gallimard, collection “Série noire”, 1996; *J’épouserai plutôt la mort*, Gallimard, collection “Série noire”, 1994.



Incarcerated since the age of five in a rehabilitation camp for children who have committed particularly heinous crimes, the hero of *Siècle d'enfer* is freed at 22. This new Candide then discovers the outside world—a world bearing a strange resemblance to ours, or one that could be a direct extension of it: a totalitarian state, with violent and destructive social relationships, and equally violent, soul-destroying human relationships.

He sets off on a voyage of self-discovery, wanting to find out what provokes his bouts of nausea in the presence of certain people, or when faced with certain events. Gradually, as his

exploits and encounters unfold, the mystery lifts surrounding his real identity and past.

This erudite, weighty author, who acknowledges the influence of Céline and Hemingway, has his own lively voice which keeps the reader on tenterhooks while the theme of savagery lies at the heart of his novels—the social savagery of exclusion and unemployment and the political savagery of the totalitarian state, two sides of the same menacing coin. With his fine originality and lively, urbane language, Frédéric Castaing is a superb new addition to Au diable vauvert's catalogue.

*Black moleskin notebook, format 8° (10/16 cm) of around 300 pages. Good condition. Some foxing on pages 27, 47 and 138.*

*327 handwritten pages, of which the first 321 are written in the same hand in black ink, the last ones initially in another hand, in black ink, signed Robert, then in a third hand, in blue ink and signed Rica.*

**Tuesday, 4th February,  
4 a.m.  
Camp hotel**

They came to get me at noon, after our match against C block. A new one his gold buttons gleaming in the dark, and André—I could pick out the sound of his keys anywhere. We had just got into the changing rooms, I was going into the shower and André came up ... We're taking you to the principal, hurry up ... !

He looked at me like he always did. Arthur says that one day he'll punch his face in but so far he hasn't done anything, which really makes me laugh. I put my pants on and slipped on my tracksuit and trainers, taking my time. I was packing my bag when the new one put his truncheon on my stuff and pushed me backwards ... Leave that, you!

People around had stopped in their tracks and you could hear nothing but the TV, an ad for those new pills for depression. The new one was scared and he looked at André who had shoved us into range of the CCTV surveillance area

and the flashing red light on the screens began to whine. Ramdam immediately clapped his hands and quickly pushed the others into the showers.

I barely had time to signal to Kevin for my things before we were off. The new one went on ahead. André held me by the arm and wouldn't let go; I wriggled free and he winked at me. The others were thumping in time on the shower doors, bang, bang, accompanying us for a good while, bang bang, a good while, bang bang.

We got on the new shuttle reserved for teachers and office staff. It was green, very long, with leather seats that had TVs on the back. A brunette was on the screen, her breasts jutting out, her lips kissing a new blood-red Barracuda with its multiple bumpers. André got out a bar of chocolate and offered me a piece. I turned towards the window and he laughed.

To get to the principal's these days, you have to turn in front of the workshop and go alongside the school instead of round by the gym. It's a much shorter route. We went past the teachers' house next to the little gardens and arrived straight at security. While he was frisking me, Manu murmured into my ear ... So, you little bastard, the great day has arrived ...

Afterwards, it's scrubland all the way for a mile or two, before you get to the administrative buildings. Fifteen years ago, they were grey and dirty, and looked huge to me. They have since been repainted blue and flowers have been put in the windows to go with the white curtains. They had stuck a flag on the first floor and the roof was covered with aerials.

They had done up the foyer as well and now it's a spacious room with low tables, several armchairs, screens everywhere and two or three guards around the security door. André made me sit down at the end, next to him, talking to me in a low voice ... I dreamed about you again last night, my love. You had nothing on, you were running across the scrubland ... The new one was reading the newspaper.

André was on his third bar of chocolate when a tall brunette, new as well, in a yellow suit and flat-heeled shoes, came to get me. The other two got up and were about to follow us, but she motioned them away with her hand and we went up to the third floor. The lift opened straight into a conference room with a lectern and chairs.

She took me into a smaller room, at the back, and sat down behind a desk that looked like an early aeroplane. I stood waiting. She threw some papers in the bin and pushed over a stool on rollers with her feet. It bumped into my legs. I sat down. She typed on her keyboard and turned the screen towards me. My file began running.

It said that during my first year I used to wet the bed, that at nine I broke an arm and two ribs in the shower, that at 15 I gashed open my forehead on a glass

in the refectory, that I got asthma in the spring, that I was semi flat-footed, that I had very good swimming times in the 400 metres freestyle, the best test marks in the camp and record winnings with American clients. Also that I didn't talk much. Finally there were remarks about my left ear with its revolting scars which ooze in summer and hurt in winter. At the end, she looked at me ... Anything to add? I said nothing, she sighed and pointed at my ear.

"What's that?"

"I don't know."

"You got caught in a fire?"

"I don't know."

"You don't remember anything?"

"I've always had it."

"Nothing about it in your case-history when you arrived."

"So?"

"There should be."

She was staring at the screen ... Can I see your buttocks? ... Like the guards when they wanted to mark the occasion ... Get undressed! Bend over! Lower! ... I looked at her and she blushed. I turned round and lowered my trousers. The sound of a chair, she came towards me and then thanked me. I pulled my trousers back up. She went back to her chair and sat down, thinking.

She made me take the corridor leading to the principal's office. I remembered it as being dark and dirty, with black marks on top of the radiators. They had repainted it pink, and added two light fittings. They had also removed the prints—Christopher Columbus with savages on the beach and that guy in underpants, an apple in his hand, in front of a pale fat woman. In their place they had put up photos in a line.

Portraits. Ducrot, the head psychiatrist, who arrived last year, Martial, Maréchal ... And Blanchard, eyes half-closed, cigarette in mouth. He was smiling at a bald man in a double-breasted suit, who was shaking his hand, while the principal applauded in the background. Apparently Blanchard is famous and has written books ... And Dr Boyer, with his pipe. But he must be dead. For the first few months after I got here, he interrogated me for hours about Karen, but I never said a word. In the end he let me watch films while he read the newspaper ... And Carrel who takes us for training sessions every morning in the pool. In competitions he pushes me on with his short whistle blasts which pierce through the din and give me a rhythm. I can still hear him, at the jubilee, during the final of the 200 metres ... And Moreau! Moreau with his ginger mane ...

The girl explained that it was for the 20th anniversary of the camp's foundation. The TV would be there and the press as well as a minister and the top management of Blue, so everything had been done up as good as new.

We stopped at the end of the corridor, in front of a black plexiglass door. She knocked, no answer, we went in, she showed me an armchair and left me there. In the principal's office.

He had added his new bodybuilding equipment from California and changed the carpet. A big photo of the President, in a mauve suit and pearl necklace, flashing her teeth in front of a barrier of TV screens, lit up the back wall. But the flags, one with stars and the other with cicada, were still in place, on either side of his desk.

There was the sound of a toilet flushing and a door slamming. I stood up. He now barely reached my shoulders, but it was the same shaved, dirty grey head, with that white scar above the ear that had scared me out of my wits in the beginning, and that same bundle of nerves squeezed into the same black suit, capable of standing up to a group of a hundred and kicking them back home.

He pushed me back towards the armchair and leant his backside on the desk. He said how proud he was of me ... Your test results are excellent ... He went on again about my jubilee speech concerning Victor Hugo as the father of Europe ... Thanks to you, Brussels doubled its grant ... He talked again about that win in the 200 metres ... without you, Blue would not have paid for our Olympic pool ...

He had always aped those guys from Street on TV Star, but now he had plucked his eyebrows like the rappers of Sixty Two. He had also had a Haka tribal tattoo on his left hand, as a sign of supreme strength; so he must have another on his right calf and around his belly-button ... So you're as chatty as ever? ... I am talking to you ... Why can't you make an effort ... ?

Finally, he announced that the committee had decided to release me ... You'll leave us tomorrow morning, by the seven o'clock bus ... And they had created a new identity to protect me ... The law has taken care of everything, we won't abandon you ... He stared at the tips of his shoes ... You were five years old, a unique case ... With that he got up; it was over.

And then, when I was already out in the corridor ... Come back! Wait! ... He caught up with me ... That habit of writing in secret ... ! They had found my notebooks under my bed ... Instead of communicating, getting completely involved in modern life ... He produced one from his pocket and waved it under my nose ... A solitary habit, negative, dangerous, anti-social ...

He opened it and began flicking through ... Not to mention that crazy plan! ... His dry, nervous fingers crumpled the pages ... No-one wants to become a writer these days ... He stopped, started walking away, came back ... A rapper, model, rugby player, TV presenter—all well and good ... He eventually closed it and sighed. But a writer, a writer ...

He put it back in his pocket and took me by the arm ... You know, you've been incredibly lucky ... He dished up his jubilee speech again ... A model establishment, unique in the world, the best teachers, psychiatrists, everything computerised ... He walked a little way with me ... Everywhere else, you know, they make people glue soles onto trainers all day and shave their heads ...

Just then he spotted a stain on the lapel of his jacket and tried to remove it ... I have looked at your file. All those hours in the library! A waste of time, my lad ... He scratched at his jacket, in annoyance ... And anyway, in six months' time there'll be no more library! I am taking over the building and putting new Blue Nose computers in there! There, I've got a stain! ... So you find that funny, you little bastard!

He took hold of me by the collar and pushed me against the wall, half strangling me ... You stick your finger up at everything, don't you? ... And then he saw the photo of Blanchard and let go of me ... Still, it's not totally your fault ... His watch rang and he shook my hand ... So, off you go, good luck my lad ... He got out my notebook again ... And stop this filth!

The girl in yellow was waiting for me a bit further down the corridor. She gave me an envelope ... Your new identity ... I was going to open it but she stopped me ... Wait until you're outside, by yourself ... then she gave me another envelope ... Your final instructions ... I put it in my pocket with the other one. She smiled ... No, open that one, I have to check it over with you ...

There was a permit for D and F zones with a prohibition against returning to zones A and B, to get my things or see the others again, 300 euros in vouchers for our shop, a coupon for one night with breakfast in a hotel, in the visitors' zone, a bus ticket valid as from tomorrow morning and 1,000 euros in 100 euro notes. I had been expecting 20 times as much.

We went through her office and returned to the big room with its empty chairs, where a man in blue overalls was putting a ladder away while another was piling up pots of paint. The girl in yellow had fat calves. I have already forgotten her face but I think I'll always remember those calves. The lift came and she put her hand on my arm but she said nothing.

I felt her slipping something into my pocket. I looked at her, but she put a finger to her lips and pushed me into the lift. The door closed slowly, the girl in yellow gave me a little wave with her hand. A piece of paper folded in four and some words written in red felt-tip ... Irregularity in your file. Be careful. Good luck ...

André and the new one had long gone. I sat down under the TVs and opened the other envelope. They say that for the names, the principal shuts himself in the room with the deputy, several bottles of booze, tablets and two or three girls. When they are well away, they christen us. Bernard had mentioned Mypussy or Myballs. And Ken says it excites them.

Some nights, it seems that terrible screaming can be heard from D block, near the administrative buildings, like animals having their throats cut, a sound that freezes your blood according to Médine. And Lucas described how, on New Year's Eve on St Rita's night in summer, the principal and the deputy come to get some of the little ones and how they were never seen again.

As for Enzo, he thinks that they traffic organs, eyes, livers, hearts, lungs. It seems they sell them to rich old people who are waiting for them in fancy clinics. For the first few years, on full moon nights, I stayed awake the whole night, in fear that the men in black would come to get me and cut me up into little pieces—and I wasn't the only one.

Meanwhile, my new name was Durand—luckily enough—and I had to get work experience on TV Star in Paris, at least that is what it said on the blue sheet of paper, covered with seals and signed by members of the committee. They had also found me accommodation, on Boulevard Voltaire with a Mr and Mrs Plonk, where I had to be back every evening by eight.

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