
Jean-François Chabas

Rapture

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BIOGRAPHY Jean-François Chabas was born in Paris and now lives in the Drôme. He did many jobs before devoting himself to writing. He is the author of more than fifty novels for children and has won thirty or more prizes, including the Montreuil Festival Prize and the Télévision Suisse Romande Prize. His writings for children are considered likely to become classics in the future. *Les Ivresses* [Rapture] is his second novel aimed at an adult readership.

PUBLICATIONS *Les Violettes*, Calmann-Lévy, 2004. His recent children's titles have been published by L'École des Loisirs.



In a remote house on Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, a French archipelago off the coast of Newfoundland, Jonas, 36, is gravely ill and close to death. Writing a letter a day, he sets about telling his story to a mysterious woman called Ava, whose fleeting importance in his past life becomes clearer as the story unfolds. Jonas has lived many lives and survived much unhappiness. He was born into a wealthy family, but his parents died when he was small. He was taken in by an aunt who was cruel to him. Then he was adopted by Jean and Christine, a loving, upright, proud couple who ran a boxing gym. But misfortune strikes again: finding themselves in the wrong place

at the wrong time, they got caught up in gangland violence and died before Jonas's very eyes. For him a life of wandering now began, punctuated by various encounters and marked by break-ups and loneliness. He is saved by the things that give him pleasure: painting, boxing, the countryside, and the company of women. Fetching up in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, he cultivates an air of harsh unapproachability to shield himself from the pity of his neighbours. But he has lost none of his humanity which, together with his dynamism, he strives to convey to Ava, in letters that are by turn reticent, tender and violent.

Saint-Pierre, 2 November

Ava,

This Saint-Pierre is Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, near Newfoundland. I arrived just over two months ago. The Portuguese discovered these islands in the sixteenth century and called them "The Eleven Thousand Virgins Islands". It was Jacques Cartier who changed the name a few years later. What an idiot.

I'm living in a low-roofed house with thick walls. It's quite old but it does have double glazing. It's draught-proof and is as well insulated as possible against bad weather. That's fortunate: I don't think I need to go into detail about the climatic conditions as the winter draws in. If you want to locate me, borrow an atlas from the library, or request one; I don't know how such things work where you are.

More than the cold, it's the dampness that gets you. And the wind, of course. The winds blow from every quarter. They're making the rafters creak as I write. This house is my prison. You'll curse me as you read this, since I freely admit I'm a prisoner by choice whereas you're being held against your will. But I can hardly move any more, and when it came to choosing the place of my imprisonment, I had only one thing in mind: the house I lived in had to be surrounded by wilderness. As luck would have it, I met an old sailor who'd moved to France having left this archipelago because he'd lost two of his brothers during a deep-sea fishing voyage. I got to know him in a bar called "Le Rêve" at the bottom of Rue Caulaincourt near Montmartre Cemetery. As one glass led to another he

explained that he had a house for sale up here, but I didn't believe him: people make things up when they're drinking with casual acquaintances. A few weeks later, though, this old gentleman and I found ourselves in a notary's office where we clinched the deal. I'd only ever seen a photo of this house; I could have bought a ruin, but I have to admit it's in very good nick. It's situated right at the top of Saint-Pierre, close to the shore, opposite a smaller island, a tiny piece of land called Grand-Colombier Island. What charming names, when you think how hostile the environment is.

It makes me happy, writing to you. If you happen to read this—that's to say, if I manage to reach the goal I've set myself—I hope reading me will be just as much pleasure for you.

In spite of the heating being on at full blast, I'm cold sitting at this desk. I'm going to make a pot of tea.

Jonas

Saint-Pierre, 3 November

Ava,

I thought of you last night, and was cross with myself for not going back to my letter instead of curling up under the duvet: exhaustion makes me shivery. Time is short and I don't want—wait, I'm taking a break to sort out the mess in my mind. It would be silly if you took me for a nutter.

Since I'm embarking on this long text and won't post it until it's finished, and since I lack the talent to organise a coherent autobiography, I may as well explain what I'm doing. I don't like being muddled.

I've decided to write to you every day to talk about what I've lived through and what's brought me here, then to let these letters pile up and send them to you in the form of a sort of manuscript. Not letter by letter, I'd be too afraid of getting a kick in the teeth by return of post, or of being rejected point-blank; afraid, too, that you'd feel obliged to reply, which would be even more humiliating once I managed to understand the implications.

I've got two reasons for writing this account. The first is my total isolation, allied to the prospect of my fairly imminent death. I've no one in my life any longer, no living person I can talk to, write to, even think about. I don't know if it's an acceptance of failure or proof of courage, but the fact is that you are the only one I have in mind, the only one who can vouch for my existence.

The second reason behind this strange journal—but I don't like the word "journal", which is usually something written by people who circle around themselves as though looking at a painting, or who pretend when they take up

writing that they're subject to a disinterested and ascetic discipline, whereas they're set on opening up their private lives to posterity.

The second reason for writing these letters is that I want you to share my experience in the hope that you can derive some benefit from it. You're eighteen, exactly half my age.

When you were in the car with me, no, when you got into the car, I saw how beautiful you were, with a special kind of beauty. I know you've used that like a weapon, probably for years, but I'll never know how a person—man or woman—feels when possessed of such a gift. Is it a blessing or a burden? What's good about my situation, since there have got to be some advantages to it, is that I can write these things to you without your suspecting me of trying to seduce you, or to get something out of you.

When you sat down beside me I noticed how beautiful you were, and it hit me like a blow in the stomach. You must remember how for at least a minute I was incapable of uttering a word. I suppose for you my reaction was nothing out of the ordinary, but the only thought going through my terrified brain was that I'd never in all my life seen such a beautiful girl. So strangely beautiful, as if an unknown creature had emerged from the mists of the world of the imagination and stepped into my car.

Jonas

Saint-Pierre, 4 November

Ava,

I wondered if I wouldn't have done better to stay in France in order to help you. And visit you, since I was led to understand that you were all alone, not perhaps as much as I am, but at least without relations determined to stand by you in this ordeal. I've left a little money with your lawyer, because everything has a price in those hellish prisons where social injustice is even more glaring than it is outside, so that you will be able to meet some essential expenses, but this will do nothing to relieve your loneliness. I hope at least that your cell-mates leave you in peace—I believe, in fact I'm certain, that you're quite capable of defending yourself. Yes, I could have stayed, but I could just see myself, crawling like a slug through a world I detest, surrounded by concrete, bowed and seedy, panting for breath, and I realised not only that I had no wish to show myself to you looking like this, but also how I'd be driven to seek comfort from you rather than offering you any.

I'm much better off here.

And you'll get out. You'll be freed.

Jean-François Chabas

Rapture

When you smile, your whole face changes. Your very serious features light up in a most unusual way, like a fairy's: you turn into an imp.

Jonas

Saint-Pierre, 5 November

Ava,

After writing to you yesterday I went out and was blown away by the wind. Like a dead leaf. Not an experience I'd recommend. As the snow had started falling again, I felt it was a good moment to take a little walk outside. I know nothing about this part of the world and thought those snowflakes would afford nature a sort of brief respite under a snug blanket of cotton wool. I'd hardly taken a few steps when a gust grabbed me and I found myself lifted up as if by a giant hand. I was adrift for an eternity and then came down in a snowdrift that saved my life. A rock would have smashed me to pieces. I remained stretched out on a heap of snow, with the hood of my anorak stuck to my cheek and my legs above my head, so badly stunned that I couldn't get up despite making ludicrous efforts—a bit like a beetle floundering on its back. After thrashing about like that to no avail, I would have let myself die, without a qualm since there was a chance of speedy deliverance, but the grocer, the lad I phoned to have him deliver me food and other supplies, found me as the snow started to cover me up. He's only a kid—I ought to cross that out, he's your age—a young man who's not yet twenty and already married with an eight-month-old baby. His name is Marc. He's well-built, a colossus, and the wind didn't even make him wobble. To my deep shame, he scooped me up in his arms as he would his own child and carried me indoors. Then he made me have a hot bath, but that was quite complicated because of the prosthesis they put in my stomach—I'll spare you the details. When the big lad saw me naked he was so terrified he left in a rush. "I've already seen a willy", he said laughing as he made me take my clothes off. He's not laughing any more. That'll teach him to treat me as if I were his baby.

This evening, I'm fine. I've even got great memories of that unexpected flit. From now on all novel experiences are worth seizing.

Jonas

Saint-Pierre, 7 November

So there we are ...

I was showing off, but yesterday I couldn't get up. I was hurting from head to foot. It's barely a week since I vowed to write to you every day and I'm already going back on it. It wasn't from want of trying. I fell while fetching my pen and a sheet of paper, then fainted. When Marc called by in the early evening to see how I was, he found me on the floor. He fetched the doctor who told me I was mad to live alone in my condition and tried to persuade me to go back to France. But after I talked to him he calmed down because—bloody hell—one has the right to choose where one is going to die. No? And I have enough medicines and various bits and pieces to hold out for one year longer. To cut a long story short, after laying into him I managed to get the crow to leave, but he got his own back by telling the lad that he had to phone me or call by every day. And Marc is not the sort of person you can reason with or drive away. "Yes, yes", he kept saying in response to all my objections, and in the end I got even crosser than I did with the doctor. I shouted: "Fucking jerk, don't talk to me as if I were senile, I'm only thirty-six!" Do you think he was taken aback by that? "It's not only old people who're a pain in the arse", he said, and "I'll be back tomorrow at seven. If you've still been mucking about, you'll soon see that you're not the only one who can let rip." "I won't open the door", I replied. He assured me that a good wack at the door would be enough to let him in, and I'm sure the nitwit's capable of it. A man's home is no longer his castle. I was choking with rage.

But now I've got the table within reach, and my pen, my pencil-case, a pack of paper, and an old red-leather blotter which I found in the house and which I've put on my lap as a kind of *escritoire*. I won't leave you in the lurch again. On one sheet of paper I've done some doodles, of the kid's hands from memory. Huge paws, with thick, stubby fingers like black people sometimes have, you get the idea? Thick and stubby. I've also drawn you. Upstairs I must have about fifty sketches and chalk or charcoal drawings of you. Nothing great, but it keeps my memory busy—I've no photo of you. I had kept the press-cutting in which you are shown getting out of a police van wearing handcuffs beneath your leather jacket, but you have such a look of hate and despair, like a fox caught in a trap, that I threw it away.

I'm beginning to realise that I'm not doing at all what I said I'd do. It really is a journal I'm writing, whereas I intended to explain things to you ... but what?

Trying to get people to know you as you see yourself, or as you would like to be seen, is perhaps monumental vanity. No, it's not. What I want is for you to know that I'm not as different from you as you imagined when you pulled that gun on me. I'll get down to it tomorrow.

Jonas

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