
Hervé Le Tellier

Enough About Love

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BIOGRAPHY Hervé Le Tellier is a writer, member of the Oulipo and one of the “Papous” of the famous France Culture radio show. His most recent book was a collection of poetry, *Zindien* (Le Castor Astral, 2009).

PUBLICATIONS Among his recent novels and short fiction: *Je m'attache très facilement*, *Mille et une nuits*, 2007 (prix Guanahani du Roman d'amour); *La Chapelle Sextine* [The Sextine Chapel] Estuaire, 2005; *Inukshuk*, Le Castor Astral, 1999. Two of his books, *The Sextine Chapel* and *All our Thoughts*, will shortly be published in the USA by Dalkey Archive.



“That year, the planet experienced its warmest autumn for five centuries. But no more mention will be made of this providentially clement climate, even though it did perhaps play a part. This tale covers a period of three months, or a little more. She—or he—who doesn’t want—or no longer wants—to hear about love should put this book down now.” So begins *Enough About Love*. Anna and Louise could be sisters, but they don’t know each other. They are married, mothers, and happy. On almost the same day, Anna, a psychiatrist, crosses the path of Yves, a writer, while Louise,

the lawyer, runs into Anna’s analyst, Thomas. At forty-something, such a decisive moment in life (although lives are made up entirely of such decisive moments) love at first sight is still possible. But when you have mistakenly thought that your life is already mapped out, desire and freedom come at a high price. Hervé Le Tellier gently follows the curves of their trajectories. With real affection, he has created a gallery of tender yet unflinching portraits of wives, lovers and husbands.

Thomas

Towns should have spacious parks. Parks are the precondition for young people’s lives to change, to take a side alley, or an unexpected direction; so that they can fulfil at least a part of their potentialities. So it was that on a February morning in 1974, a teenager entered the Luxembourg gardens in Paris. He was wearing a woollen scarf, had long hair, and his name was Thomas. Thomas Le Gall.

Thomas was a good pupil. At the age of just sixteen, he was already studying advanced mathematics. He was supposed to fulfill his mother’s ambitions and win a place at a prestigious *grande école*, preferably the *Polytechnique*. But on that February morning, when Thomas left home and took the metro—in the Barbès quarter of the eighteenth *arrondissement* of Paris—he did not get off at the station near his school. He continued on line No 4 to Saint-Michel station, then walked up the boulevard to the park. Then he headed towards the octagonal pool and strolled past the statues of the queens of France, before sitting down on a metal chair. He had prepared his escapade. He had several books in his bag. It wasn’t that cold.

That evening, he went back home. He was hungry. All he had had for lunch was a *baguette* and some fruit.

The next day, the day after that, and then every day, Thomas went back to the Luxembourg gardens. They became his home base. He sometimes met up with fellow Bohemians there: a girl of his age called Manon, a blonde, with a turned-up nose and freckles, even more lost in life than he was—the smell of

patchouli would always remind him of her—and Kader, a tall black man, aged probably about thirty, who played guitar in the metro. When it rained, Thomas would stand under one of the *kiosques*, or warm himself up at *Le Malebranche*, a smoky café where he soon became a regular, with student friends from Lycée Louis-le-Grand. During their discussions of politics, books, their rows about Proust, Althusser, Trotsky and Barthes, his vehemence was in direct proportion to his ignorance of the texts. Later, when he really read them, he blushed at all the nonsense he'd said, amazed at the impunity of imposture.

March arrived, then April. Thomas informed his teachers that he was dropping out. But of course he lied to his parents. He discovered how simple and even exciting lying can be, and how good he was at it. Did he stink of tobacco? He would rant about the students smoking during their exams. Did he need more money for lunch? He would claim that meals now had to be paid for in cash, and that he suspected the manager of lining his pockets. Had he come home too early by mistake? In that case, an oxidation-reduction experiment had gone wrong and—“you're not going to believe this,” the chemistry teacher had burnt himself. He had never talked so much about school before he stopped going there.

One May evening, Thomas had just come home and was spinning that day's tale. His father looked at him in silence. Suddenly his mother erupted. They knew. His school had phoned: he had forgotten to return a library book, even though he'd left three months before. Arguments, rage, rupture. Thomas would never go to a prestigious *grande école*. He left the family home and took refuge with a friend. He survived thanks to odd jobs—still possible thanks to the full employment of the time—while off and on studying psychology and sociology, lengthening his adolescence by another ten years. One May morning, a call from a police station abruptly ended it. Piette, the woman he loved, had just been discharged from the hospital where she was being treated for depression. She had thrown herself under a train. Over the next three days, Thomas took care of the arrangements organised the ceremony and buried his lover. Once they had filled in her grave, he went home. He only came out again a week later, clean-shaven, with his curly black hair shaved down to a crew cut. He started studying again, really studying. At the time this tale begins, a brass plaque beside the entrance to 28 rue Monge, not far from the Luxembourg gardens, summed up his career.

Hervé Le Tellier

Enough About Love

DR THOMAS LE GALL

PSYCHIATRE, PSYCHANALYSTE
ANCIEN INTERNE DES HÔPITAUX
PSYCHIATRIQUES DE PARIS

It portrayed him as extremely professional. But then Thomas Le Gall was now extremely professional.

On the fourth floor, a three-room family flat had been turned into a psychoanalyst's consulting rooms. Thomas had kept the modern, spacious kitchen. He sometimes lunched there off a spring roll bought at the Chinese takeaway. The bedroom, to the left of the front door, was now the waiting room: its waxed floor, two deep armchairs and coffee table made it look vaguely like an English club; the curtain-less window looked out over the street. His thirty-minute sessions were organised once every hour, so his patients never encountered one another. On certain days, Thomas consulted in the large living room: there would have been a clear view of the sky and the plane trees in the courtyard if exotic wooden blinds were not filtering the sunlight. The door was lined with black velvet, while the olive green of the sofa was intended to be relaxing. African masks looked down kindly on the room, like the Moai statues which protect Easter Island while turning their backs on the sea. Behind the Louis-Philippe desk, there was a Stephen Lowry industrial landscape, of a bluish grey. The other wall featured a very small, very dark painting by Bram Van Velde, from the time of his friendship with Matisse. It was the only piece of any real value. Thomas had acquired it at the Drouot Auction Rooms, and had paid rather too much for it—if paying too much for art has any meaning, apart from reminding one to stop going to auctions at Drouot.

Thomas was well aware that what he had was a caricature of a psychoanalyst's study, but at least he'd left out the Dogon statues and nail-filled fetishes. But the expression of decorum is not without importance, and Thomas paid attention to this point.

In the high, long bookcase covering the far wall, literature cohabited with psychoanalysis in easy-going conflict. Joyce rubbed shoulders with Pierre Kahn, Leiris was wedged next to Lacan, a Queneau—not neatly put away, a good sign for a book—leant against a Deleuze. When Queneau died, Thomas had not yet turned fifteen. As for Queneau's famous song performed by Juliette Greco, *Si tu crois xava, xava xava xa, xava durer toujours la saison des za la saison des zamours* ... Thomas Le Gall had not believed in the "season" of *lurve* for a very long time. His wrinkles were more pronounced, his curly hair, now more salt than pepper, was receding up his forehead, his face had widened, becoming a little puffy. From being forty-something, he was now well on the way to being sixty-something, expecting things to go from bad to worse.

The half-moon clock on the mantelpiece showed nine o'clock. Thomas had turned off its chime so as not to be disturbed during his sessions. He was waiting in his desk chair, reading a two day old *Le Monde*, and tidying away a few papers. His first appointment was late. Anna Stein was always late. Two, ten, sometimes fifteen minutes, and always for excellent reasons: the babysitter not turning up, Parisian traffic jams, no place to park. Thomas had suggested

a different time of day, but she had refused. Perhaps she liked making men wait. Thomas believed in the wisdom of popular sayings.

Anna Stein. A twelve-year analysis that was now coming to an end. For the first few years, like most people, Anna had just talked on. She went through her whole life, then when she'd gone through all her memories, extracted every last crumb, she felt like a dry riverbed, at a loss for words. She then went around in circles for a year, maybe more. It was only when she admitted defeat and finally said in anger: "What else do you expect me to tell you?" that she was at last able to start speaking without thinking and, as Freud put it, say "whatever comes to mind," without trying to create a fiction or construct a logical narrative. Anna was now making associations, discovering connections, recreating meaning. She was making progress.

The day before yesterday, at the very end of her session, she had revealed: "I've just met someone. A man, a writer." On the large notebook devoted to Anna Stein, Thomas slowly jotted down a few words: "met someone"—who else can you meet but someone, he wondered—then "man" and "writer". On the left, he would separate out what seemed to him to be the factual elements of what she had said then, on the right, he would write what he took to be her word game, or formalisation. Anna had added: "It was love at first sight". This clichéd expression had amused him.

Then, in pencil he had drawn a dotted line, at one end of which he had written the letter *X*, then an *A* for Anna. Changing perspective and logic, he had then put the two letters *X* and *A* together in an oval diagram, in a Boolean set. He had not tried to make her say anything else. On his Westminster clock, it was now several minutes past the half hour. He had just said:

— See you Thursday.

Anna

Anna Stein was about to turn forty. She looked ten years younger, while in her comfortable milieu the average is five years. But the imminence of decline and the voodoo of numbers chilled her, even though she still felt as if she was riding the tail of the comet of her adolescence. Forty years ... She imagined that there was a *Before* and an *After*, as in advertisements for hair tonics, already mourning for what once was, and in terror of what was still to come.

A childhood memory: Anna is seven, with a sister and two brothers, the youngest one can barely talk, while she is the oldest. It's not easy being the oldest, the one who gets told off because the others are still too young. But Anna is a charmer, she is still her mother's favourite. Anna has arranged her sister and brothers around her in a semi-circle. The golden light coming through the window is from the setting sun, probably a Sunday in the country.

Standing with a book in her hand, she is reading aloud. But she is also spicing up the story, which is too simple for her taste, with dragons and fairies, ogres and princes. Then things become extremely confusing, she herself occasionally loses the thread. The children listen to their joyous, radiant big sister. They are fascinated, captivated, frightened too. Waving her arms about and with the odd leap, Anna mimes the action, careful to hold her young audience's attention. She's sure of it: she'll be an actress, or a dancer or a singer.

At the age of 15, Anna pinned back her dark hair to reveal the nape of her neck. She triumphantly adopted her brand new woman's body, wearing panther sheath dresses and high heels, with aggressive bras. She dreamed of a life in the limelight, in the public eye, and the names of cities such as New York, Buenos Aires or Shanghai bewitched her. She started a rock group, with her as the singer. She called her band "*Anna and her Three Lovers*". After all, the guitarist, bassist and drummer were all in love with her. But in vain; one slightly less than the others, but only just.

At 20, Anna slipped on the white coat of a medical student. Hers fitted her snugly, more for elegance than comfort, with a low neckline and, as only her shoes peeked out underneath it, she expended a great deal of energy in choosing them. They were often fluorescent. After a few years, she became Doctor Stein. Being an intelligent dilettante, she passed all her exams: she was far too proud to fail, and not yet proud enough to dare to fail. The adventurous life with all of its necessary transgressions drifted away, and she now knew that, despite her long legs and beautiful breasts, she would never dance in a cabaret. Her mother was a doctor, Anna became a psychiatrist. She married a surgeon, also Jewish, and they had two children, Karl, then Lea. "A little Jewish enterprise", she would sometimes say with a laugh. But she still kept the intrepid gait and the gleam in her smile from when she was twenty, her nostalgia for the Bohemian life. It was her delicate way of showing that she had never really given up on being in the limelight.

So, Anna had become Doctor Stein. But did she really believe it herself? One day, when she called the hospital to talk to a colleague, she said sharply:

— Good morning, could I please speak to Doctor Stein?

In a daze, she hung up at once, praying that the operator had not recognised her voice. She waited over an hour before daring to ring back.