



the complete review - fiction

Monsieur

by
Jean-Philippe Toussaint

[general information](#) | [review summaries](#) | [our review](#) | [links](#) | [about the author](#)



Title: *Monsieur*
Author: Jean-Philippe Toussaint
Genre: Novel
Written: 1986 (Eng. 1991)
Length: 107 pages
Original in: French
Availability: [Monsieur](#) - US
[Monsieur](#) - UK
[Monsieur](#) - Canada (English)
[Monsieur](#) - Canada (French)
[Monsieur](#) - France
[Monsieur](#) - Deutschland

- French title: *Monsieur*
- Translated by John Lambert
- *Monsieur* was made into a movie, directed by Jean-Philippe Toussaint and starring Dominic Gould as Monsieur

- Return to [top](#) of the page -

Our Assessment:

A- : small and odd but successful novella

See [our review](#) for fuller assessment.

Review Summaries

Source	Rating	Date	Reviewer
The NY Times Book Rev.	.	6/10/1991	Ginger Danto
TLS	.	7/8/1987	Dan Gunn
TLS	.	1/11/1991	Piers Burton-Page

From the Reviews:

- "The things that profoundly disturb others, from losing apartments to losing a would-be wife, affect Monsieur rather like mild indigestion. While such immunity to the vicissitudes of modern living is admirable, one begins to wonder what Monsieur gets out of life at all. This is the conundrum that defines the characters created by Mr. Toussaint, who titled his first novel *The Bathroom* after the preferred refuge of a protagonist not unlike Monsieur. Thus *Monsieur*, in this fine translation by John Lambert, may be considered a sequel, in which the same character ultimately abandons the pristine, protective confines of his sanctuary, only to find on his foray into the real world that he wants to return. Failing that, he achieves a detachment that allows him to live in a world of his own." - Ginger Danto, The New York Times Book Review
- "*Monsieur* is a "diary of a nobody" that embraces the banality of a life while highlighting the fact that even a banal life, austere told, can never be truly banal." - Dan Gunn, Times Literary Supplement

Please note that these ratings solely represent the [complete review's](#) biased interpretation and subjective opinion of the actual reviews and do not claim to accurately reflect or represent the views of the reviewers. Similarly the illustrative quotes chosen here are merely those the [complete review](#) subjectively believes represent the tenor and judgment of the review as a whole. We acknowledge (and remind and warn you) that they may, in fact, be entirely unrepresentative of the actual reviews by any other measure.

- Return to [top](#) of the page -

The [complete review's](#) Review:

Monsieur is a short novella, fixated on one man's life. Unlike many of the other figures in the book, whose names are given, the central one is known only as "Monsieur". He does not want to stand out, having perfected the art of staying in the background, of looking unassuming. He doesn't want to be involved, preferring to stand aside with eyes down and hands in pocket.

Monsieur is a surprisingly successful executive, a commercial director at Fiat France, but it is soon clear that his success lies solely in how he has adapted to the company bureaucracy, stepping forward decisively when called upon, but generally doing practically nothing whatsoever (inactivity which others take for a sign of ultra-efficient productivity). He goes with the flow wherever he is. When his fiancée breaks up with

him, he remains in her parents house. When he does get a new apartment and a neighbor imposes on him the only reaction that occurs to him is:

It struck Monsieur that the best solution was to move out.

(Not surprisingly, he is incapable even of doing that.)

Among his many problems is: "Monsieur didn't know how to say no." A neighbor ropes him into helping him type a mineralogical treatise, something for which he is neither qualified, nor has any interest in. Nevertheless, he can't escape it.

The whole book describes Monsieur's aimless, unambitious life. He is more shadow than real person, certainly more two than three dimensional -- the sort of character who, in another novel, a reader might, at best, retain a fuzzy recollection of, but whose name and appearance couldn't be recalled. But Toussaint convincingly makes a central character out of him, and following his almost entirely unremarkable adventures is oddly entertaining (helped, no doubt, by the extreme brevity of the book -- much more of this would have been much harder to pull off). And things do happen to him -- leading even to something of a happy end.

Toussaint's presentation of this unlikely (non-)story and its anti-hero are impressive. A light, humorous touch, a mix of poignancy and absurdity -- and yet all the while some plausibility to it (there really are people like this out there) -- make this an enjoyable little novella.

Unremarkable, but -- like Monsieur -- in the best possible way.

- Return to [top](#) of the page -

Links:

Monsieur:

- [Dalkey Archive Press](#) publicity page
- [Les Éditions de Minuit](#) publicity page

Reviews:

- [Boksidan](#) (Danish)
- [The New York Times Book Review](#)
- [CritiquesLibres.com](#) (French)

Monsieur - the movie:

- [IMDb page](#)

Jean-Philippe Toussaint:

- [Jean-Philippe Toussaint](#) site
- [Reading Jean-Philippe Toussaint](#) by Warren Motte at *Context*
- [Fourteen Questions for Jean-Philippe Toussaint](#) by Martin Riker at *The Quarterly Conversation*

- [Jean-Philippe Toussaint: A deceptive lightness of being](#) by John Taylor at *France Magazine*
- [Bio-bibliographie](#)

Other books by Jean-Philippe Toussaint under review:

- [The Bathroom](#)
- [Camera](#)
- [Making Love](#)
- [Running Away](#)
- [Television](#)

Other books of interest under review:

- See Index of [French](#) literature
 - Other books from [Dalkey Archive Press](#) under review
- Return to [top](#) of the page -
-

About the Author:

Jean-Philippe Toussaint was born in Brussels in 1957.

- Return to [top](#) of the page -
